

Cardinal's statement on federal executions. Published 1/8/2021

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The following statement was issued by Cardinal Seán P. O'Malley Dec. 24, 2020.

As 2020 comes to a close, the United States has implemented the most aggressive federal execution policy in 124 years. Ten inmates have been executed in 2020, the most since the administration of President Grover Cleveland, with additional federal executions scheduled over the next month. This is an acceleration of a punishment that had been paused the previous sixteen years. At the same time, states have executed fewer numbers of inmates than at any time since 1983.

There is no doubt that crimes of immense depravity and evil have been committed and require serious sentences. No words or expressions of sorrow can alleviate the pain and anger that families and friends of victims experience. Too many lives have been lost to senseless acts of violence.

This level of suffering is not lost on the Church. However, capital punishment is not a deterrent to serious crimes such as homicides, a majority of Americans would choose non-lethal forms of punishment and people of color make up a majority of inmates executed. Furthermore, hundreds of people on death row have been exonerated since 1973. Our criminal justice system is deeply flawed and requires reform. Recognizing this, however, the Church embraces a culture of life from conception to natural death. We have long considered that capital punishment is incompatible with the pro-life ministry of the Church.

As I stated previously, legitimizing the death penalty fails to recognize that our nation has the means and capacity to provide safety and security for all without eroding the respect for life that is essential for a morally sound society. We must share the pain, anguish, and suffering of those whose family, loved ones, and friends have been the victims of murder and other violent crimes. Rejection of the death penalty calls us to implement alternatives that acknowledge the victims' suffering and assure our citizens of justice and their safety.

Responding to a question about the death penalty in 1957, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. stated, "Capital punishment is against the better judgment of modern criminology, and, above all, against the highest expression of love in the nature of God."

Pope Francis formalized Church opposition to capital punishment when he decreed the death penalty "inadmissible." The revision to Church teaching states that "there is an increasing awareness that the dignity of the person is not lost even after the commission of very serious crimes ... more effective systems of detention have been developed, which ensure the due protection of citizens but, at the same time, do not definitively deprive the guilty of the possibility of redemption."

In the past twelve months, our nation has been grappling with a global pandemic that has seen more than 300,000 people die of COVID, a financial system under immense stress with job loss at historic numbers, food insecurity surging, and foreclosures and evictions soaring. Our society is reaching a breaking point on so many levels.

We can and must embrace a policy of justice through law, respect for the dignity of every human life and as articulated by the USCCB in 1980 and still relevant today that our challenge is "to find ways of dealing with criminals that manifest intelligence and compassion rather than power and vengeance. We should feel such confidence in our civic order that we use no more force against those who violate it than is actually required."