

The Roman Catholic Church Calls for an End to the Death Penalty

(Adapted from an essay in the February 2002 edition of *The Common Good*, the newsletter of the Office of Justice and Peace, Catholic Social Services, Diocese of Charlotte, NC.)

How we choose to respond to perpetrators of great violence, who have been successfully subdued and separated from society, presents our society with a tremendous challenge. Over the past several years, North Carolina has been one of the top five states placing criminals on death row and conducting executions. Through statements and letters, both Catholic dioceses in the state have taken a strong position against the death penalty, pleading that, “we stop the cycle of violence, break the culture of death and seek justice without vengeance.” (2000 *Good Friday Statement* by Bishops William G. Curlin and F. Joseph Gossman).

Those who have had loved ones tragically taken from their arms, homes and lives have every right to see those guilty of such violent acts brought to justice, and our faith calls us to assist the victims of violence as they attempt to heal from their terrible loss. Society too has the right to seek and demand justice when laws have been broken, human dignity has been violated, and the peaceful fabric of life has been torn apart by the evil acts of others. The Catholic Church’s position on the death penalty has evolved over the past several decades in calling us to see that the justice we seek is not vengeance, and that ending another life does not restore lives already taken. Pope John Paul II has tirelessly called for an end to capital punishment, issuing numerous appeals for clemency for death row inmates facing execution in nations around the globe. The U.S. Bishops also present a unified voice in calling for an end to the death penalty.

The Catholic Church’s position against the use of capital punishment is founded on the same principle as its position against abortion, euthanasia, torture, and slavery - all human life is sacred, deserving of dignity and created in the image of God. Does killing a murderer, who is in custody and separated from society, enhance our respect for human dignity and the sacredness of human life? The Church says no. The Catholic Church teaches that reasonable force, even deadly force, may be used by legitimate authority to the ends of self-defense and protection of the innocent. Once the violent offender is in custody, however, separated from society and incapable of inflicting further harm, the Church seriously questions whether killing the offender can ever be justified. Section 2267 on capital punishment in the 1997 *Revised Catechism of the Catholic Church* is presented below in its entirety:

Assuming that the guilty party’s identity and responsibility have been fully determined, the traditional teaching of the Church does not exclude recourse to the death penalty, if this is the only possible way of effectively defending human lives against the unjust aggressor. If however, non-lethal means are sufficient to defend and protect people’s safety from the aggressor, authority will limit itself to such means, as these are more in keeping with the concrete conditions of the common good and more in conformity with the dignity of the human person. Today, in fact, as a consequence of the possibilities which the state has for effectively preventing crime, by rendering one who has committed an offense incapable of doing harm – without definitely taking away from him the possibility of redeeming himself – cases in which the execution of the offender is an absolute necessity “are very rare, if not practically non-existent.”

A brief summary of the death penalty moratorium movement, excerpts from statements by Roman Catholic Church leaders on the death penalty, and web resources are offered on the reverse side.



The Death Penalty Moratorium Movement

Two basic arguments support a death penalty moratorium. First, numerous studies indicate that bias exists in the application of the death penalty - race, income, location of crime, and procedural errors within the criminal justice system play a role in deciding when capital charges are levied and sentencing is imposed. Second, as the year 2003 closes, 112 people have been released from death row in the U.S. since 1973 due to findings of new evidence. This raises the possibility that other innocent people are on death row, and quite possibly, that some innocent people have been executed. These two arguments add weight to the Church's call to end the death penalty and they compound the moral gravity of this mode of punishment.

Many people, who otherwise might favor the application of the death penalty in certain circumstances, are joining those opposed to the death penalty in calling for a death penalty moratorium. If this most final of punishments is to be applied, then society must ensure it is applied without bias and only upon those truly guilty of capital crimes. The Catholic Church supports actions that would impose a death penalty moratorium as an interim step to the eventual end of capital punishment. The Church also supports: 1) state-funded DNA testing to assess the culpability of those accused of capital crimes and those already on death row; 2) providing competent counsel to those charged with capital crimes and those facing the death penalty; and 3) informing juries of all punishment options available, including life without parole.

Selected Excerpts from Statements by Roman Catholic Church Leaders on the Death Penalty

Increasing reliance on the death penalty diminishes us and is a sign of growing disrespect for human life. We cannot overcome crime by simply executing criminals, nor can we restore the lives of the innocent by ending the lives of those convicted of their murders. The death penalty offers the tragic illusion that we can defend life by taking it. (From the April 1999 statement by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) A Good Friday Appeal to End the Death Penalty. Entire letter can be read at www.usccb.org/sdwp/national/criminal/appeal.htm).

We join with Pope John Paul II in renewing our strong and principled opposition to the death penalty. We oppose capital punishment not just for what it does to those guilty of horrible crimes, but for how it affects society; Moreover, we have alternative means today to protect society from violent people. (From the November 2000 USCCB pastoral letter Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice. Entire letter can be read at www.usccb.org/sdwp/criminal.htm).

Nowadays, in America as elsewhere in the world, a model of society appears to be emerging in which the powerful predominate, setting aside and even eliminating the powerless: I am thinking here of unborn children, helpless victims of abortion; the elderly and incurably ill, subjected at times to euthanasia; and the many other people relegated to the margins of society by consumerism and materialism. Nor can I fail to mention the unnecessary recourse to the death penalty when other bloodless means are sufficient to defend human lives against an aggressor and to protect public order and the safety of persons. Today, given the means at the State's disposal to deal with crime and control those who commit it, without abandoning all hope of their redemption, the cases where it is absolutely necessary to do away with an offender are now very rare, even non-existent practically. This model of society bears the stamp of the culture of death, and is therefore in opposition to the Gospel message. Faced with this distressing reality, the Church community intends to commit itself all the more to the defense of the culture of life. (From Pope John Paul II's Ecclesia in America, January 25, 1999, issued in Mexico City. Entire address can be read at www.usccb.org/pope/exhortations/12299.htm).

A sign of hope is the increasing recognition that the dignity of human life must never be taken away, even in the case of someone who has done great evil. Modern society has the means of protecting itself, without definitively denying criminals the chance to reform. I renew the appeal I made most recently at Christmas for a consensus to end the death penalty, which is both cruel and unnecessary. (From Pope John Paul II's homily at the Papal Mass in St. Louis, Missouri, January 27, 1999. Entire homily can be read at www.usccb.org/pope/mass.htm).

Go to: <http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/national/dea.htm> for resources on the Church's position on the death penalty. Catholics Against Capital Punishment (CACP), www.cacp.org, also offers many similar resources. For moratorium information in NC contact Ted Frazer with the Charlotte Coalition for a Moratorium Now, 704-532-6854.