



Texas Catholic Conference of Bishops

THE PUBLIC POLICY VOICE OF THE CHURCH

Capital Punishment

The death penalty does not fulfill justice.

Pastoral Letter from the Texas Catholic Conference of Bishops

God “takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live...”
- Ezekiel 33:11

Dear Brothers and Sisters in the Lord,

Each year during October the Church observes Respect Life Month. During this time, we pray and reflect on the precious gift of life and recommit ourselves to working toward a culture that truly welcomes and protects human life in our society, from conception to natural death. Catholic teaching on abortion and euthanasia is very clear, as is our commitment to the ongoing work of improving living conditions, education, and health-care access for all, especially the poor and those without resources.

This year we bishops draw particular attention to our consistent call for the abolition of the death penalty in Texas, as we recognize this is undeniably a pro-life issue.

Catholic Social Teaching is a distinct body of Church doctrine and an essential part of Catholic faith (*Sharing Catholic Social Teaching, Challenges & Directions, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*). Rooted in the Scriptures, our Church's teaching develops over centuries as the Church encounters new social realities and challenges. The same Holy Spirit who inspired the Scriptures is with the Church as we “read the signs of the times” in each new culture and age (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 4). Today, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* provides a

comprehensive summary of Catholic doctrine.

Catholic teaching unequivocally states that “if non-lethal means are sufficient to defend and protect people's safety from the aggressor, authority will limit itself to such means ...” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2267). This simply means if alternatives to the death penalty exist that serve to protect society from violent criminals, society “must limit itself” to these other means. There can be no doubt such means exist today in the United States, including in the State of Texas.

Pope Saint John Paul II wrote that conditions suggesting the legitimate use of capital punishment are “very rare, if not practically non-existent” (*Evangelium Vitae*, no. 56). Pope Francis has stated that “it is impossible to imagine that states today cannot make use of another means than capital punishment to defend people's lives from an unjust aggressor” (Address to Delegates of the International Association of Penal Law, Vatican City, October 24, 2014).

In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Church teaches that these non-violent ways of preserving public order “are more in keeping with the concrete conditions of the common good and more in conformity with the dignity of the human person” (no. 2267). In fact, in our country and

in the State of Texas the death penalty not only does not correspond to the common good, it actually does great harm to it.

First, the death penalty is disproportionately used on the poor, racial minorities and the vulnerable. The death penalty in and of itself perpetuates the notion that life is in some instances disposable, or can be judged of no worth. It is well documented that those who can least afford a defense are most likely to receive a death penalty; more than 90% of those on death row cannot afford an attorney. In 1990, the U.S. General Accounting Office reported “a pattern of evidence indicating racial disparities in charging, sentencing and imposition of the death penalty.” Furthermore, the death penalty has been applied to persons of limited mental capacity. These realities contribute to a callous disregard for the dignity of human life. The death penalty negatively influences our children’s moral formation and our culture as it fails to allow for mercy and redemption.

Secondly, scarce public resources are devoted to the death penalty, thus injuring the common good. The cost of housing and feeding a prisoner for a life sentence is three times lower than the court costs incurred by a lengthy appeals process for a prisoner on death row (Death Penalty Information Center, deathpenaltyinfo.org).

Thirdly, innocent people are killed by the government on our behalf. There are at least 23 documented cases of innocent people who were executed in the United States in this century for capital crimes. The American Bar Association has concluded that administration of the death penalty is “a haphazard maze of unfair practices with no internal consistency” and has called for a moratorium on executions.

The *Catechism* does not recognize the prospect of deterrence as justification for the death penalty. But even if it did, states without the death penalty have either similar or lower crime rates than Texas (Death Penalty Information Center). The notion that the death penalty deters crime is false. It also feeds into the false belief that violence is the only remedy for violence.

As a Church we accompany our brothers and sisters, children,

I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live, by loving the Lord, your God, obeying his voice, and holding fast to him.

Deuteronomy 30:19-20



parents and loved ones as we see them suffer from the heinous and violent actions of others. Only God can console them, yet we offer what comfort we can with our presence and prayer. The healing that comes from forgiveness has been a powerful force in the lives of many families who have experienced violence. Through our varied ministries, we offer counseling, personal support, and the grace of the sacraments to assist in the healing process. Our ministry of healing and forgiveness is rooted in Jesus’ command to “be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36).

Our call to abolish the death penalty is not a call to deny justice. On the contrary, it is a call to the whole community to recognize that the death penalty does not fulfill justice, nor does it console the inconsolable. Rather than seeking vengeance, forgiveness offers a victim’s family and the accused true healing that comes through restorative justice.

Capital punishment vitiates our hearts’ capacity for mercy and love. Due process for the accused, the incarceration of the guilty, and the protection of the community serve justice and mercy. As a Church, we strive to walk with those who have time to repent. As Scripture says, God “takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live” (Ezekiel 33:11). Our prison ministries are founded on the mission given to us by the Lord to offer a call to repentance to those who have lost hope, or whom the world has given up for lost.

May God give us the grace to witness to the dignity of human life. May the Lord console the suffering, protect our community, and grant conversion to those responsible for the inflicting of death and violence upon others. In this Year of Mercy, may we be stewards of mercy to all.

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