



## Catholic Campaign to End the Death Penalty.

This Spring, the US Bishops Conference launched a campaign to end the use of the death penalty in the United States. They believe that it is time for US Catholics to come together to make this a reality.

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"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 a chance to reform. **I renew the appeal ... for a consensus to end the death penalty, which is both cruel and unnecessary.**"

- Pope John Paul II, St. Louis, MO, 1999

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## Why a Campaign Now?

- Pope John Paul II clearly asked us to end the use of the death penalty.
- Catholic teaching makes it clear that the use of the death penalty cannot be justified when the state has other ways to protect society.
- The death penalty as applied in the US is deeply flawed.
- Catholics are re-examining and changing their minds about the use of the death penalty. According to a recent poll, less than half of all Catholics now support the use of the death penalty.
- The death penalty diminishes us all. We cannot teach respect for life by taking life.

## Facts About the Death Penalty

- The US is the only Western democracy that continues to use the death penalty.
- The US, China, Iran and Saudi Arabia account for over 80% of executions worldwide.
- Approximately 3,500 inmates are on death row in 38 state and federal prisons.
- Since 1973 more than 100 death row inmates have been exonerated.
- Since 1973 at least 23 innocent people have been mistakenly executed, and later proven innocent.
- Recent Supreme Court decisions have limited the use of the death penalty against persons with mental retardation and juveniles under age 18.



## Catholic Teaching and the Death Penalty.

Catholic teaching offers a unique perspective on crime and punishment. It begins with the recognition that the dignity of the human person applies to both victims *and* offenders. It affirms our commitment to comfort and support victims and their families, while acknowledging the God-given dignity of every human life, even those who do great harm.

Catholic teaching on human life begins with the belief that life is a gift from God that is not for us to take away. As it is applied to the death penalty, this teaching is both complicated and clear. The Church has long acknowledged the right of the state to use the death penalty in order to protect society. However, the Church has more and more clearly insisted the state should forgo this right if it has other means to protect society.

Pope John Paul II, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the *Vatican Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, and statements from US Bishops are all clear and consistent on this issue. They argue that the death penalty should be abandoned in our nation because we have alternative ways to protect society.

## What Catholics Are Thinking About the Death Penalty.

Many Catholic have reconsidered their position on the death penalty. In a recent survey, less than half (48%) of Catholics interviewed expressed support for the use of the death penalty. This is a marked shift from past polls, in which Catholic support mirrored that of the general American public at close to 70%.

A majority of Catholics (54%) indicate that Church teaching impacts their position on the death penalty. Catholics who attend Mass regularly are more likely to oppose the death penalty (56% opposed) than those who never attend Mass (26% opposed). An overwhelming percentage of Catholics (79%) believe that opposition to the death penalty is "consistent with the defense of human life." (Zogby International Poll for USCCB, December, 2004)





**What You Can Do.** Our parish Peace & Justice Commission has decided to join the efforts of the Bishops by participating in the Campaign to End the Use of the Death Penalty. We will continue to research this issue and will offer opportunities for further education and advocacy in coming months.

In the meantime, we ask that parishioners prayerfully consider the material in this newsletter. You can:

- **Pray** for victims of crime and their families, those who have been wrongly convicted, and those awaiting execution.
- **Learn** about Catholic social teaching and criminal justice policies. Visit the campaign website at <http://www.ccedp.org>.
- **Educate** friends and family about Catholic social teaching and the criminal justice system. The campaign website includes links to Vatican and US Bishops' statements on the death penalty.
- **Advocate** by contacting your elected officials. Discuss Catholic teaching on the death penalty and what steps could be taken at the state and national level to curtail or end its use.

### Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. How does the death penalty deny a person's inherent dignity?
2. How does the death penalty deny a person's ability to repent? What other methods are available for punishing criminals?
3. Why is it difficult to recognize the worth of those on death row?
4. How can we as individuals, families, and communities live out our call to promote human dignity in the face of the death penalty? Brainstorm, create a list, and discuss the options.

### Actions to Consider

1. Watch the movie *Dead Man Walking*.
2. Discuss the death penalty with friends & family.
3. Write to your representatives asking them to end the death penalty.
4. Think of someone in your own life you are having difficulty forgiving. Remember that Christ forgave even those who nailed him to the cross. Pray, think and reflect so that your heart may be open to this kind of divine love and forgiveness.



### Prayer to Abolish the Death Penalty

*by Sister Helen Prejean, CSJ*

God of Compassion,  
 You let your rain fall on the just and the unjust.  
 Expand and deepen our hearts  
 so that we may love as You love,  
 even those among us who have caused  
 the greatest pain by taking life.  
 For there is in our land  
 a great cry to take vengeance  
 as we fill up death rows  
 and kill the killers in the name of justice,  
 in the name of peace.  
 Jesus, our brother,  
 you suffered execution at the hands of the state  
 but you did not let hatred overcome you.  
 Help us to reach out to victims of violence  
 so that our enduring love may help them heal.  
 Holy Spirit of God,  
 You strengthen us in the struggle for justice.  
 Help us to work tirelessly for the abolition  
 of state-sanctioned death  
 and to renew our society in its very heart  
 so that violence will be no more.  
 Amen.

### Closing Prayer

For our social order, that it may show love, mercy,  
 justice and peace, we pray. ... *God Hear Our Prayer*

For all elected officials, that they may govern with  
 compassion, we pray ...

For all prisons, that they may be places of restoration  
 & healing we pray ...

For all prisoners, that they may have the courage not  
 to become embittered or hopeless we pray ...

For all on death row, that their lives may be spared,  
 and that they may walk in newness of life we pray ...

That all may be saved from cruel and unusual  
 punishment, we pray ...

That the death penalty may be seen as incompatible  
 with the dignity of the human person and destructive  
 to the common good, we pray ...

Amen.

Sources: Educating for Justice Website, Center of Concern  
 Social Development & World Peace Website, USCCB

