



Catholic Social Thought and the Death Penalty

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The U.S. Catholic Bishops, in their 2005 pastoral letter *A Culture of Life and the Death Penalty*, reaffirm the teaching of Pope John Paul II, of the Roman Catholic magisterium, and of U.S. Catholic Bishops since 1979, that “the death penalty is unnecessary and unjustified in our time and circumstances.” Four fundamental points inform their judgment:

- The death penalty violates human dignity especially when—in our contemporary context—it is unnecessary to protect society.
- State-sanctioned death penalty “in our name” diminishes all of us.
- The application of the death penalty is deeply flawed, is irreversibly wrong, highly prone to errors, and biased by race, the quality of legal representation, and location of the crime.
- We know alternatives both to punish criminals and protect society.

In his encyclical *The Gospel of Life*, Pope John Paul II challenged followers of Christ to be “unconditionally pro-life.” He reminds us the “dignity of 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.” Since God’s love and mercy is unconditional, human beings neither earn nor lose human dignity.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains that “the traditional teaching of the Church does not exclude recourse to the death penalty, if this is the only possible way of effectively defending

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human lives against an unjust aggressor. If, instead, bloodless means are sufficient to defend against the aggressor and to protect the safety of persons, public authority should limit itself to such means, because they better correspond to the concrete conditions of the common good and are more in conformity to the dignity of the human person” (#2267). The test of whether the death penalty can be used is not the gravity of the offense, but whether it is absolutely necessary to protect society. The *Catechism* stresses that “the cases in which the execution of the offender is absolute necessity are very rare, if not practically non-existent,” (#2267) quoting Pope John Paul II.

Louisiana Catholic Bishops on the Death Penalty

In *Violence in Our Society: Death is Not the Answer* (1994), the Louisiana Catholic Bishops underscore the teaching of Pope John Paul II to promote a consistent culture of life. While the bishops recognize the anger, fear, and frustration that may lead some people to promote the death penalty in Louisiana, the fact is that the death penalty has neither deterred nor decreased homicides; “violence only begets violence, death begets death.”

In their more recent pastoral letter addressing the criminal justice system and the death penalty, *Let Justice and Mercy Meet* (2002), the Louisiana bishops stress the biblical message of God’s mercy, compassion, and justice. The bishops emphasize restorative justice, “the return to right order, effected through the acceptance of responsibility, the assignment of appropriate punishment and the return or restoration of as many as possible to the human community. The appropriate punishment redresses harm done to the victims, their families and the wider society and both rehabilitates offenders and restores them to their families. Hence the title of our national document *Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration*.” Addressing the death penalty in *Let Justice and Mercy Meet*, the Louisiana bishops state:

Restorative justice also calls us to reject capital punishment as an effective and moral means of confronting crime. Death does not restore, heal, or make whole what was lost. Death only causes more death. When the state imposes death as a sentence, a further insensitivity to the loss of life is the result. The death penalty makes it easy to give up on others and neglect the underlying causes which yield violence and death. As a people of the Gospel of Life, we are called to build a civilization of life and love.