

Death Penalty: Catholic Q & A

For people committed to upholding the sanctity of human life, the need to respect and protect innocent human life is apparent. For some, however, issues like the death penalty may seem less clear.

Although nothing can substitute for thorough catechesis, the following may be helpful as a starting point for considering the death penalty within the context of respect for God's gift of human life.

Who are we?

The essence of our identity and worth as human beings, the source of our dignity, is that we are loved by God and made in his image and likeness. God's love doesn't change; even sin cannot diminish God's love for each person. As we are reminded in Sacred Scripture, "Can a mother forget her infant...? Even should she forget, I will never forget you" (Isaiah 49:15).

What is the purpose of punishment?

Although "legitimate public authority has the right and the duty to inflict punishment proportionate to the gravity of the offense," it is not for the sake of vengeance. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* goes on to say, "in addition to defending public order and protecting people's safety, [punishment] has a medicinal purpose: as far as possible, it must contribute to the correction of the guilty party."¹

Aren't some crimes so evil the offender deserves to die?

Consider how God responded when Cain took the life of his brother, Abel. God punished Cain greatly, but also mercifully spared and protected his life by marking him "so that no one would kill him at sight" (Genesis 4:15). No sin is a barrier to God's immense and merciful love, and nothing diminishes how much God cherishes each person and his or her life. As God's people, we are called to follow his example, drawing from the grace of Christ's Redemption.

Didn't the Old Testament Law allow the punishment of death?

For Israelites in the Old Testament, legal punishment of personal injury did allow "life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth" (Exodus 21:23-24). However, when Jesus came, he fulfilled the Old Testament Law and deepened our understanding of both justice and mercy: "I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another" (John 13:34).

We see the fulfilled law every time we participate in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. In justice, after confessing our sins, we receive a penance to complete. Yet any penance we could do would never fully "make up" for the ways we turn away from God. That is precisely why Jesus came to redeem us, and took our rightful punishment upon himself. Although justice does require some action of reparation on our part, at the same time, because of God's mercy, our penance is medicinal, helping to restore us to union with God.

So, is the death penalty wrong?

The *Catechism* teaches, “in the light of the Gospel, that ‘the death penalty is inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person.’”²

While the death penalty “was long considered an appropriate response to the gravity of certain crimes,” its use is no longer necessary to safeguard the common good. The *Catechism* notes that in our modern world, “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.”³ No sin or crime is greater than God’s mercy. The sacrifice of the Cross reveals that Christ’s greatest desire is to forgive those with a repentant heart.

What do the United States bishops say about the death penalty?

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has long opposed the use of the death penalty in our country. While recognizing that the Church has previously permitted its use in extreme circumstances, the bishops have said that in the United States, there are other, non-lethal means of defense against unjust aggressors that should be used instead.

In 2015, the tenth anniversary year of the bishops’ Campaign to End the Use of the Death Penalty, a letter reaffirming the bishops’ opposition to the death penalty offered a reflection on our justice system: “Our faith tradition offers a unique perspective on crime and punishment, one grounded in mercy and healing, not punishment for its own sake. No matter how heinous the crime, if society can protect itself without ending a human life, it should do so. Today, we have this capability.”⁴

What about victims of violent crime?

The victims and families of violent crimes face unimaginable pain, and the effects extend well beyond the initial shock and trauma. As Catholics we are all “called to stand with victims in their hurt and in their search for healing and genuine justice.”⁵ Victims and their families often have spiritual, physical and emotional needs that are not simply satisfied by the criminal justice system. Christ Himself “was delivered into the hands of the wicked, yet he prayed for his persecutors and overcame hatred with the blood of the cross.”⁶ Following the example of our Lord, we pray that God would relieve the suffering of all victims, grant them peace, and renew their faith in His protection and care.⁷

Is discussion of the death penalty a Catholic, pro-life matter?

Earlier in 2015, the chairmen of the bishops’ Committee on Pro-Life Activities and Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development responded to a Supreme Court decision related to the death penalty: “We bishops continue to say, we cannot teach killing is wrong by killing. . . . Institutionalized practices of violence against any person erode reverence for the sanctity of every human life.”⁸

Christ came to liberate us from the cycle of violence by showing us how to love and be merciful. As reflected in his life and teaching, as well as in saints’ lives throughout history, “the antidote to violence is love, not more violence.”⁹ As the culture of death threatens to electively select who does and who does not deserve life, we must uphold that *all* human life has invaluable dignity and worth.

When we feel that sin and evil are overwhelming, we must not be afraid. Jesus Christ has already conquered sin and death, and we know that his is the ultimate victory. Let us work to defend the dignity of all human life, made in the image and likeness of God, through prayer, education, and advocacy. Be not afraid; God is with us.

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed., 2266.

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2267, citing Francis, *Address to Participants in the Meeting organized by the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization*, 11 October 2017: *L'Osservatore Romano*, 13 October 2017, 5.

³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2267.

⁴ Most Reverend Thomas G. Wenski and Seán Cardinal O'Malley (July 16, 2015), <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/criminal-justice-restorative-justice/upload/joint-dp-message-dsd-pro-life-2015-07-16.pdf>.

⁵ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice*, (Washington: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, November 15, 2000).

⁶ Book of Blessings, *Order for the Blessing of a Victim of Crime or Oppression*, no. 443.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Cardinal O'Malley and Archbishop Wenski Welcome Supreme Court Decision to Review Protocols for Use of Lethal Injection," News release, January 17, 2015, <http://www.usccb.org/news/2015/15-019.cfm>.

⁹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Living the Gospel of Life: A Challenge to American Catholics*, (Washington: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1998), 21.

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