

Life Matters: The Death Penalty

We live in a culture of death: a culture torn by abortion and euthanasia, by wanton violence, war, murder, and hatred. Life is treated as if it were cheap, and many are the threats to the dignity of human life. Yet we believe that all human life is from God, and he alone is the master of life and of death. Blessed John Paul II made the defense of the dignity of all human life the centerpiece of his pontificate.

The death penalty presents itself as a complex moral issue because of the apparently conflicting demands of justice on one hand and charity on the other. Some crimes are so serious and so heinous that they seem to cry out for the ultimate punishment of death. And yet the Gospel message is forever one of forgiveness, of reconciliation, of committed charity toward all without exceptions.

Christian teaching since the time of Christ has never considered the death penalty in itself intrinsically evil. The Fifth Commandment which instructs us “*thou shall not kill,*” has always been understood to refer to innocent human life, and not to those guilty of the most terrible crimes.



Christians have always believed in the right of *self-defense* because every person has an obligation to guard his own life as a gift from God. And society clearly has a right to defend itself from aggressors, both external (by means of war *as a last resort*) and internal (such as murderers, serial killers, terrorists, and those guilty of treason). The question for a Christian is not so much whether there has been

validity for the death penalty, but *whether it should or should not be imposed today.*

And today it is clear that the death penalty no longer serves a useful purpose in protecting the sanctity of human life. Perhaps once it was the only way society could protect itself from those who would destroy the life of others, but today in most modern nations, judicial and penal systems have improved so much that they effectively remove further danger to innocent people by incarcerating the perpetrators of criminal violence. Imprisonment is effective in removing the offender from society. Importantly, it allows time for repentance and rehabilitation. And the one sure result of executing prisoners is to make us as a people more vengeful—seeking retribution and satisfying our outrage at the violent crime by more violence.

“If bloodless means are sufficient to defend human lives against an aggressor and to protect public order and the safety of persons, public authority must 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.”

(Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 2267)

As Christians we are asked to visit the imprisoned, minister to their needs, and encourage them to repent and change. We should never lose our conviction that even the worst offenders are our brothers and sisters in Christ, who offers forgiveness and eternal life to all. That process of reform takes time, often quite a long time. The death penalty takes that opportunity for conversion away.

One noteworthy example of a delayed conversion began with a rapist’s brutal attack on an eleven-year-old girl. When she resisted him, the twenty-year-old assailant stabbed her fourteen times and left her to die. Had he not been a minor himself, he would have received the death penalty for his heinous crime. Instead, his sentence was 30 years’ imprisonment. During his first three years behind bars, the murderer remained unrepentant and even hostile to a visiting priest. But after a visit from the local bishop and a dream in which his victim forgave him, he repented and resolved to lead an exemplary life. After serving his full sentence, he sought the forgiveness of his victim’s family and the parish community before becoming a lay brother of the Order of Capuchin Franciscans. By now you may have guessed that his victim was St. Maria Goretti, and his name was Alessandro Serenelli. He later had the unique honor of attending the canonization of the child saint whom he had martyred. Had Alessandro been executed, the story would have had a tragically different ending.

Today, thanks to the ministry in prisons by Catholics and other Christians, countless inmates serving life sentences have allowed God to transform their lives. They lead Bible study groups, pray with fellow inmates, and counsel them to lead lives of virtue, placing all their trust in the Lord’s merciful love.

The death penalty may make us think that we have eliminated a problem—but a person, even a criminal, is never a problem to be destroyed. It lulls us into thinking we have addressed the problem, but we have not really dealt with the deeper issues of what has gone wrong in society when violent crime is so widespread. Death is an all too simple “solution” for a much more complex set of problems we need to face as a society. There are as many

degrees of guilt and culpability as there are crimes, yet the death penalty imposes one definitive, final, indiscriminate punishment on all, halting the action of the Holy Spirit on the condemned person's soul for eternity.

The nature and extent of the punishment must be carefully evaluated and decided upon, and ought not go to the extreme of executing the offender except *in cases of absolute necessity*: In other words, when it would not be possible otherwise to defend society. Today however, as a result of steady improvements in the organization of the penal system, *such cases are very rare if not practically nonexistent*.
(Blessed John Paul II, *The Gospel of Life*, no. 56).

We know all too well the inadequacies of our society. In a real sense our society's dysfunctions breed our criminals through poverty, fatherlessness, discrimination, injustice, lack of opportunity, and hopelessness. How much of the gang violence linked to the drug trade is occasioned by the addiction of the whole society to illegal drugs we use to escape reality? And many of our social pathologies make us more prone to crime and violence. We don't fix those problems by executing people. The death penalty just aggravates the injustices we have not yet been able to overcome.

Despite the virtues of our justice system, we have to honestly admit it also has serious limitations. With scandalous frequency, people on death row have later been shown to be innocent of the crime for which they were convicted. DNA testing and other conclusive forms of evidence have resulted in the exoneration of well over 100 death row inmates. Nor can we overlook the fact that persons with mental illness or intellectual disabilities are put to death, despite their lesser degrees of culpability. But the death penalty once applied is irrevocable, and human life cannot be given back once eliminated.

As time goes on our society seems increasingly reluctant to impose the death penalty, as it is imposed far less frequently now. There seems to be a growing consciousness that there is something wrong about using violence to discourage violence, that it serves no good purpose. We would be better as a people if we were to end it altogether. Many families of victims, too, are hopeful of seeing an end to the death penalty, feeling that no punishment can bring back their loved one and that it is better to forgive and hope for a change on the part of the criminal.

People instinctively know it is better to let the offender remain in prison and, hopefully over time, repent of his crime and change his life. To that end, the goal of Christian prison ministry was beautifully expressed by Pope Benedict XVI:

"Chaplains and their collaborators are called to be heralds of God's infinite compassion and forgiveness. ... They are entrusted with the weighty task of helping the incarcerated rediscover a sense of purpose so that, with God's grace, they can reform their lives, be reconciled with their families and friends, and, insofar as possible, assume the responsibilities and duties which will enable them to conduct upright and honest lives" (Address to the International Commission of Catholic Prison Pastoral Care, Sept. 6, 2007).

This is the way of Christian mercy and reconciliation, and a challenge to all who call themselves Christian.