

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 clear. 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 never fully "makes 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 always wrong?

As the *Catechism* states, “the traditional teaching of the Church does not exclude recourse to the death penalty, if this is the only possible way of effectively defending human lives against the unjust aggressor.”² However, it also recognizes that today, “cases in which the execution of the offender is an absolute necessity ‘are very rare, if not practically non-existent.’”³

Therefore, while capital punishment is not forbidden, it can rarely be justified in this modern age—if at all. Non-lethal means are in better keeping with the sanctity of every human life and the common good, and must be used unless public safety cannot be achieved otherwise.

What is the position of the United States bishops on 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 Catholic teaching affirms the authority of a government in rare (if practically nonexistent) cases to execute criminals, 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

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.”⁵

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.”⁶ 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.

³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2267, citing John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae* 56.

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, “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>.

⁶ 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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