



FLORIDA CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

The nonpartisan public policy voice of the Catholic Church in Florida

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Death Penalty Position Paper September 13, 2019

The Catholic bishops of Florida continue to urge our state leaders to reconsider the contradictory practice of state sanctioned murder to punish and deter murder. The death penalty contributes to a growing disrespect for the sacredness of all human life. It feeds on an underlying sense of vengeance in our culture and adds to a callousness or coarseness towards one another. State-sanctioned killing does not deter or end violence, but instead it perpetuates a cycle of violence.

The state of Florida is a national outlier in its use of capital punishment. In 2018, we tied with Texas in imposing the highest number of death sentences and were one of only eight states that carried out an execution. We have the second most populous death row in the U.S. and lead the nation in the number of death row exonerees.¹ The large numbers of death row exonerations in our state and in our country prompt us to question how many other innocents remain on death row, how many have already been executed, and the very real possibility of executing an innocent person in the future.

The Catholic Church firmly believes and teaches that all human life is sacred. We stand in solidarity with victims' families in grieving precious lives that were taken too soon through heinous offenses. We pray for the peaceful repose of the victims and for the healing of those they leave behind. While we uphold the state's significant responsibility to protect its citizens and punish criminal activity, we maintain the God-given, inherent dignity of all human life, even of those who have caused great harm. Therefore, we support the alternative of life imprisonment without the possibility of parole, a severe punishment that keeps society safe without taking an additional life.

Recent popes, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and the U.S. Catholic bishops have made it clear that our society has other ways to protect itself from those who commit terrible crimes and ought to forgo the use of the death penalty. Until very recently, the Church held that executions would only be acceptable in the rare case that it would be the only manner in which to keep society safe. However, in August 2018, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* was revised to instruct the Church that, since modern penal systems have made executions unnecessary to protect society, the death penalty is inadmissible:

"Recourse to the death penalty on the part of legitimate authority, following a fair trial, was long considered an appropriate response to the gravity of certain crimes and an acceptable, albeit extreme, means of safeguarding the common good.

"Today, however, there is an increasing awareness that the dignity of the person is not lost even after the commission of very serious crimes. In addition, a new understanding has emerged of the significance of penal sanctions imposed by the state. Lastly, 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.

"Consequently, the Church 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', and she works with determination for its abolition worldwide." (no. 2267)

Guided by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' statement, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, that notes, "...incremental improvements in the law are acceptable as steps toward

the full restoration of justice” (no. 32), the Catholic bishops of Florida support efforts to reduce death sentences and executions in Florida. These include exempting the severely mentally ill from death sentences and securing a more transparent clemency process for those sentenced to death.

Twenty-one states and the District of Columbia have discontinued their use of the death penalty and four others have declared gubernatorial moratoria. We look forward to the forthcoming date when we can consider Florida aligned with these states.

¹The Death Penalty in 2017: Year End Report. (n.d.). Retrieved November 6, 2018, from <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/documents/2017YrEnd.pdf>.