

CULTURE OF LIFE AND OREGON'S DEATH PENALTY



Embracing a culture of life is an intentional response to the prevalent culture of death. A passive, reactive response places us on the spectrum between these two cultures, susceptible to the winds of politics and relative morality. An intentional response buffets these cultural forces and gives us the freedom to choose using our faith to guide us.

The Catholic Church embraces the culture of life. "Human life is sacred. The dignity of the human person is the foundation of a moral vision for society. Direct attacks on innocent persons are never morally acceptable, at any stage or in any condition" *Faithful Citizenship*, 44.

Embracing the culture of life means that we oppose abortion. We oppose unjust war and attacks against noncombatants. We oppose physician-assisted suicide.

Embracing the culture of life means that we oppose the death penalty.

"Ending the death penalty would be one important step away from a culture of death and toward building a culture of life." *A Culture of Life and the Penalty of Death*, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005

On August 16th, twice-convicted killer Gary Haugen is scheduled to be executed at the Oregon State Penitentiary in Salem. Is this justice? Rather, is the imposition of a life sentence any more of a redress— better justice—than life without parole?

Does the culture of life embrace the death penalty when execution is *not* an absolute necessity? The Catholic Church allows some, but very very little freedom on this issue. Here's the exact teaching from the Catechism:

"Today, in fact, as a consequence of the possibilities which the state has for effectively preventing crime, by rendering one who has committed an offense incapable of doing harm without definitively taking away from him the possibility of redeeming himself - **the cases in which the execution of the offender is an absolute necessity are very rare, if not practically nonexistent** (emphasis added)" (2267).

In *The Gospel of Life (Evangelium Vitae)* Pope John Paul II stated, "The nature and extent of the punishment "for capital crimes" 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 to the organization of the penal system, such cases are very rare, if not practically non-existent."

Archbishop Charles Chaput of Denver wrote "In the wake of the bloodiest century in history, the Church invites us to recover our own humanity, choosing God's higher road of restraint and mercy instead of state-sanctioned killing that implicates all of us as citizens."
<http://www.usccb.org/prolife/programs/rlp/Chaput05web.shtml>

While yes, it is fair to point out the Catholic Church's lack of absolute prohibition against the death penalty, the rarity where execution is justifiable makes anything more than a passing mention of this exception a specious argument.

As residents of Oregon, one of the least churched states, we have an opportunity to raise our collective voices, to let our faith guide our politics, to seize the opportunity to embrace the culture of life, intentionally, and oppose the use of the death penalty as punishment for even abhorrent crimes. We have the opportunity to oppose the execution of Gary Haugen on August 16th.



ARCHDIOCESE
OF PORTLAND
IN OREGON

Office of Life, Justice, and Peace