

CATHOLIC CHURCH TEACHING ON THE DEATH PENALTY

In 1999, Pope John Paul II made the following appeal:

The new evangelization calls for followers of Christ who are unconditionally pro-life: who will proclaim, celebrate and serve the Gospel of Life in every situation. A sign of hope is the increasing recognition that the dignity of human life must never be taken away, even in the case of someone who has done great evil. Modern society has the means of protecting itself, without definitively denying criminals the chance to reform. I renew the appeal I made most recently at Christmas for a consensus to end the death penalty, which is both cruel and unnecessary. (1)

The Catechism of the Catholic Church states:

"Assuming that the guilty party's identity and responsibility have been fully determined, 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. If however, non-lethal means are sufficient to defend and protect people's safety from the aggressor, authority will limit itself to such means, as these are more in keeping with the concrete conditions of the common good and more in conformity with the dignity of the human person." (2)

This teaching is not new. St. Augustine recognized the need for capital punishment in the 5th century, but warned against vengeance, saying "our desire is rather that justice be satisfied without the taking of their lives or the maiming of their bodies in any part..."(3)

St. Thomas Aquinas defended the death penalty as a means of protecting the whole body of society in the 13th century, relation the state's role in execution to that of a physician who "cuts off a decayed limb" in order to "care for the health of the whole body." however, he also proposed as a working norm that "in this life, penalties should be remedial rather than retributive." (4)

Contrary to the abilities of the penal system of the 5th and 13th centuries, Pope John Paul II points out that we can protect the whole body of society today, and the cases warranting the death penalty now are "very rare if not practically nonexistent." (5)

The Papal Commission on Justice and Peace expressed opposition to the death penalty as early as 1976. Over the last three decades, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops has issued statements against it four different times, and the Florida Bishops six times.

The Bishops of Florida said in 1990:

The abolition of the death penalty would help to break the cycle of violence. It would manifest belief in the unique dignity of every individual and the sacredness of human life. It would acknowledge God as the Lord of life and it would be more consonant with the spirit of the Gospel. (6)

In their 1994 statement, *Confronting a Culture of Violence*, the United States Catholic Bishops said:

Increasingly, our society looks to violent measures to deal with some of our most difficult social problems-millions of abortions to address problem pregnancies, advocacy of euthanasia and assisted suicide to cope with the burdens of age and illness, and increased reliance on the death penalty to deal with crime. We are tragically turning to violence in the search for quick and easy answers to complex human problems...we are losing our respect for human life...we cannot teach that killing is wrong by killing. (7)

And in 1998, the U.S. Bishops said:

Our witness to respect for life shines most brightly when we demand respect for each and every human life, including the lives of those who fail to show that respect for others. The antidote to violence is love, not more violence. (8)

Grant, therefore, that we may listen with open and generous hearts to every word which proceeds from the mouth of God. Thus we shall learn not only to obey the commandment not to kill human life, but also to revere life, to love it and to foster it. (9)



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Footnotes:

1. Pope John Paul II, Mass in St. Louis, MO, 1-27-99
2. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2nd Ed., 2267
3. St. Augustine, Epistle 133, No. 1
4. St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, 2a2ae. 66.6
5. Pope John Paul II, Encyclical, Evangelium Vitae, The Gospel of Life, No. 56 (1995)
6. Bishops of Florida, Pastoral Statement, Protection, Punishment, But Not Death (1990)
7. U.S. Bishops, Pastoral Statement, Confronting A Culture of Violence: A Catholic Framework for Action (1994)
8. U.S. Catholic Conference, Living the Gospel of Life: A Challenge to American Catholics, NO. 22 (1998)
9. Evangelium Vitae, The Gospel of Life, No. 51 (1995)