

2. Can we ever be sufficiently certain that a person condemned to death is really guilty, even if he or she has confessed to the crime (there are many cases of false confessions)? Can we furthermore stand in God's place and judge that that person is worthy of death? Can we be confident that that person has not been the victim of disadvantages before the crime took place and during the legal process, which make it unfair to execute him or her and not execute someone who is richer, more popular or luckier in life or at trial?



**WE ARE CALLED TO END THE CYCLE OF VIOLENCE**

**Teaching:** "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."

(THE BISHOPS OF FLORIDA, 1990)

"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 for 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."

(CONFRONTING THE CULTURE OF VIOLENCE, United States Catholic Bishops, 1994)

**TALKING ABOUT THE DEATH PENALTY**  
**Video Study Guide**



Developed by the  
**FLORIDA CATHOLIC CONFERENCE**  
**COMMITTEE AGAINST THE DEATH PENALTY**

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**“HUMAN LIFE BELONGS TO GOD”**

**STUDY GUIDE**

“Born in the midst of difficulties and uncertainties, every person sincerely open to truth and goodness can, by the light of reason and the hidden action of grace, come to recognize, in the natural law written in the heart, the sacred value of human life from its very beginning until its end, and confirm the right of every human being to have this primary good respected to the highest degree. In a special way, believers in Christ must defend and promote this right. Life, especially human life, belongs only to God: For this reason, whoever attacks human life in some way attacks God Himself. Not even a murderer loses his personal dignity, and God Himself pledges to guarantee this.”



**GOSPEL OF LIFE**  
Pope John Paul II



## WE ARE CALLED TO MOVE BEYOND VENGEANCE

**Scripture Study:** “Vengeance is mine, says the Lord” (Deut 32:35), quoted by Paul in Rom 12:19, followed by a call to seek the *conversion* of the evildoer (such is the sense of his quote from Prov 25:21-22). Jesus specifically called his followers to a deeper level (Exod 21:23-25; Lev 24:19-20; Deut 19:21) in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:38-39). Christians take no vengeance, but wait for God to do justice (Rev 6:9-11; Matt 13:47-50).

### Reflection Questions:

1. If we eliminated the vengeance motive from the death penalty, would there be strong enough reasons to keep the death penalty? **Do studies show** that the death penalty is truly a deterrent to murders and other serious crimes, including crimes of passion?
2. **What kinds of reasons** must we have in order to take the life of another human being? Do we feel entitled to execute another human being? Do we erroneously equate vengeance with justice?
3. **How does the teaching** and example of Jesus and other saints of the New Testament affect our position on the death penalty? Do we believe that even hardened sinners can have a conversion experience and turn to God? When are we entitled to deprive someone of this opportunity?



## WE ARE CALLED TO LIVE BY “JUSTICE” (RIGHTEOUSNESS)

**Scripture Study:** The word often translated as “justice” in the Bible is more correctly translated as “righteousness,” the *right* way to act, because it is God’s own way.

Thus, God showed himself to be righteous when he “justified” us (made us righteous), overlooking our prior sins (Rom 3:21-26; see also 2 Cor 5:16-21). Jesus found a way to avoid the death penalty required by the Law (Torah) in the case of the adulteress, John 8:1-11. Joseph the just man would not apply this rigorous Law to Mary (Matt 1:18-19), who like Jesus (John 19:7), Stephen (Acts 7), James (Acts 12:2) and Paul, could have been unjustly executed.

### Reflection Questions:

1. Rom 3:21-26 says that God showed his “justice” or righteousness by giving us a chance to live by faith in his Son Jesus, who died for our sins, instead of punishing us “eye for eye and tooth for tooth.” **How does this affect our attitude** toward guilty criminals?
2. The Law of Moses (Lev 20:10; Deut 22:22) called for the death of the woman caught in adultery. Jesus found a way around this by making the would-be executioners realize that they were sinners also, perhaps liable to the death penalty “but for the grace of God.” **What does this Scripture teach us?** Are our laws, and how they are applied, necessarily better, holier or more just than the Law of Moses? Why isn’t the man that was with the adulteress mentioned in John 8? Was that Law being applied fairly?
3. Surveys show an overwhelming majority of people believe that innocent people, especially if they were poor or had ineffective lawyers, or a biased jury, have been executed. **What effect does** this have on our position on the death penalty?



## WE ARE CALLED TO FORGIVENESS

**Scripture Study:** Our own forgiveness by God requires us to forgive others (the Lord’s Prayer, Matt 6:12; Luke 11:4; see also Mark 11:25, and Jesus’ own example in Luke 23:34).

Matt 18:21-35 vividly illustrates how God views the person whom he has forgiven but who will not forgive his fellow human being. God does not desire the sinner’s death, but that the sinner changes his or her ways, Ezek 18:23; 33:10-11.

### Reflection Questions:

1. The Lord’s Prayer (Our Father), and the teaching of the New Testament, seem clearly to make our forgiveness by God *conditional* on our forgiving others. Society has to be protected from dangerous people, but is their execution the only way to achieve this? **What light does** our daily prayer and Scripture reflection shed on this issue?
2. The Bible shows a development from a cruder, more “primitive” ethic to a higher ethic, culminating for Christians with the teaching and example of Christ. Compare Exod 34:6-7 with Deut 7:9-10, and then read Matt 5:43-48. **How are we called** to live God’s message and final revelation (see Heb 1:1-4) to us today?



## WE ARE CALLED TO LIVE BY A CONSISTENT ETHIC OF LIFE

**Scripture Study:** Each human life belongs to God alone (Ezek 18:4<sup>a</sup>), and has a sacred value (cf. 1 Cor 3:16-17), since humans are made in God’s image and likeness (Gen 1:27; cf. Matt 10:28-31; Luke 12:4-5). The Old Testament, which allowed and even mandated the death penalty for many trespasses, recognized the uniqueness of human life (Gen 9; Ps 8:5-7). Nothing, including money, can substitute for human life: Num 35:31; Ps 49:8-9; Matt 16:26<sup>b</sup>.

### Reflection Questions:

1. If we believe that each human life is sacred, can we take someone’s life without sufficient reason? **What would be reasons** sufficient to execute someone?