

Capital Punishment

Here in the United States we still practice Capital Punishment. We are one of the few countries around the world that still uses the death penalty.

In our country there is a great debate as regards its justification. There are strong voices for and strong voices against. Along with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) I raise my voice as one against the practice and acceptance of Capital Punishment.

The penalty of death for the taking of life serves no logical purpose. The death penalty cannot, and does not return the life of a murdered victim nor does it serve any purpose other than revenge following the Old Testament precept of an “eye for an eye”, which Christ has abrogated in the New Testament.

In Jackson this past June, James Anderson was beaten and then murdered by being run over by a pickup truck. This brutal and senseless taking of a life was met with outcries from all over the community. In her letter to the Hinds County District Attorney, Mr. Anderson's sister has asked that he not seek the death penalty.

"Those responsible for James' death not only ended the life of a talented and wonderful man; they also have caused our family unspeakable pain and grief, but our loss will not be lessened by the state taking the life of another," wrote Barbara Anderson Young in her letter. Mrs. Young further explained that her family's opposition to the death penalty is rooted in their Christian faith. "Our Savior Jesus Christ rejected the old way of an eye for an eye and taught us instead to turn the other cheek," she continues. "Executing James' killers may not balance the scales. But sparing them may help to spark a dialogue that one day will lead to the elimination of capital punishment," she added.

What more powerful witness of justice tempered by mercy do we need as human beings and as a civilized society in the face of such evil and heinous acts?

As a deterrent, Capital Punishment does not prevent violent crimes. As a means to satisfy a desire for vengeance or alleviate a family's grief, Mary Bosco Van Valkenburg, whose brother and sister-in-law were murdered has written, "Hatred doesn't heal. Every time the state kills a person, human society moves in the direction of its lowest, most base urges."

Catholic teaching offers a unique position on crime and Capital Punishment. The dignity of the human person applies to victims and offenders. Catholic teaching recognizes the dignity of every human person even those who may be the cause of great harm and injustice. Catholic teaching stems from the belief that all life is a gift from God and as such is to be preserved and defended from conception until natural death with no exception.

Our late Holy Father, Blessed John Paul II in his encyclical *The Gospel of Life* emphatically states: "The dignity of human life must never be taken away." Recourse to the death penalty as the only means to defend life against an unjust aggressor is no longer tenable.

The **Catechism of the Catholic Church** states: cases in which the execution of an offender is an absolute necessity are very rare, if not practically non-existent. (CCC, 2267)

In 2005, the USCCB in a document entitled, *A Culture of Life and the Penalty of Death*, stated that sentences such as "life in prison without parole" offer a humane and just alternative to the practice of the death penalty in our country. In union with Blessed John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI, who have called for the end of capital punishment, the U.S. Bishops wrote: *Even when people deny the dignity of others, we must still recognize that their dignity is a gift from God and is not something that is earned or lost through their behavior. Respect for life applies*

to all, even the perpetrators of terrible acts. Punishment should be consistent with the demands of justice and with respect for human life and dignity.

Recognizing that we may not be able to fully understand or appreciate the pain and suffering caused to the victims and their families still now is the time for us as a nation to repudiate the belief and culture that life can only be protected by the taking of life. (USCCB 2005). As Christians who believe that life, all life, is sacred we cannot but speak out against a penal code that is flawed.

In Saint Paul's letter to the Romans, he admonishes us, "Do not repay anyone evil for evil, be concerned for what is noble in the sight of all. If possible, on your part live at peace with all. Beloved, do not look for revenge but leave room for the wrath; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord'." (Romans 12:17-19)

Prayer for Life from Blessed John Paul II's *The Gospel of Life*

O Mary,
bright dawn of the new world,
Mother of the living,
to you do we entrust the cause of life
Look down, O Mother,
upon the vast numbers
of babies not allowed to be born,
of the poor whose lives are made difficult,
of men and women
who are victims of brutal violence,
of the elderly and the sick killed
by indifference or out of misguided mercy.

Grant that all who believe in your Son
may proclaim the Gospel of life
with honesty and love
to the people of our time.

Obtain for them the grace
to accept that Gospel
as a gift ever new,
the joy of celebrating it with gratitude
throughout their lives
and the courage to bear witness to it
resolutely, in order to build,
together with all people of good will,
the civilization of truth and love,
to the praise and glory of God,
the Creator and lover of life.