

CATHOLIC CAMPAIGN TO END THE DEATH PENALTY

(US Conference of Catholic Bishops)

Some Facts About the Death Penalty

- 36 states have the death penalty; 14 do not.
- Recent Supreme Court decisions have limited the use of the death penalty by declaring it unconstitutional to execute persons with mental retardation and juveniles under the age of 18, or to impose the death penalty when no murder occurred or was intended. The court has also ruled that defendants are entitled to have a jury decide whether to impose the death penalty.
- Approximately 3300 inmates are on death row in 35 state, military and federal prisons.
- Since 1973, there have been 130 exonerations of death row inmates.
- Since 1976, there have been a total of 1138 executions in the United States, including two in 2009.
- The California death penalty system costs taxpayers \$114 million per year beyond the costs of keeping convicts locked up for life (L.A. Times, March 6, 2005). In Indiana, the total costs of the death penalty exceed the complete costs of life without parole by about 38 percent, assuming that 20 percent of death sentences are overturned and reduced to life (Indiana Criminal Law Study Commission, January 10, 2002).

**Source: Death Penalty Information Center*

Questions and Answers

What is the Catholic Church's position on the use of the death penalty?

At the heart of Catholic teaching on the death penalty is the belief that “*Human life is sacred* because from its beginning it involves the creative action of God and it remains for ever in a special relationship with the Creator, who is its sole end...” (*Catechism*, No. 2258).

Regarding the death penalty, 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.

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 non-existent" (#2267).

Catholic teaching says that the situations in which the death penalty can be used are "rare, if not practically non-existent." Wouldn't cases of heinous crimes, such as 9/11, be examples of the "rare" cases?

The test of whether the death penalty can be used is whether society has alternative ways to protect itself, not how terrible the crime was. Life in prison without parole provides a non-lethal alternative to the death penalty. We can't know whether God has a purpose for a person's life, even one who has committed a terrible crime and must spend his or her life behind bars.

Does life in prison without parole really work or are those convicted sometimes released?

Life in prison without parole means that the convicted person is not eligible for parole and cannot be released.

I understand that in the past innocent people were sentenced to death, but now that DNA is available, isn't this avoidable?

DNA evidence only exists in about 5-10% of criminal cases (10-15% of death penalty cases). Where it is available, it is still subject to contamination and human error. The risk of an erroneous conviction is still significant.