

## The Death Penalty: A Most Barbaric Response to Crime

*“All Christians and men of good will are thus called to fight not only for the abolition of the death penalty, whether legal or illegal, and in all its forms, but also to improve prison conditions, with respect for the human dignity of the people deprived of their freedom.”*

—Pope Francis, October 23, 2014

There are many reasons to oppose the death penalty. It is applied disproportionately to minorities, and there are more white prosecutors to seek the death penalty than black. The process demeans us as a people. Seldom do John Donne’s words, “Any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind . . .” ring so true. The death penalty is a statement of hopelessness, perhaps the ultimate sin for Christians since it denies that people can be redeemed.

But the number one reason is simply that we can be wrong.

The number of persons from death row who have been exonerated shows how easy it is for our society to be wrong. One estimate puts the number at 158<sup>1</sup> exonerations since 1973. We’ve had so-called eye-witnesses, who are absolutely sure a man committed a crime—until DNA evidence proves them wrong. They weren’t liars. They just remembered wrong, something we all do all the time, though in less serious matters. Sadly, “Oops, we made a mistake. Sorry,” is pretty inadequate in this instance and cannot undo a mistaken execution.

At times, gripping witnesses and zealous prosecutors have convinced people to believe beyond a

reasonable doubt that a crime was committed. Some of the witnesses turned out to be wrong. Some prosecutors did not play by the rules. Some judges were swayed by political pressure. All of which is to be expected in our fallible world and all of which ought to put the death penalty off the table because the result of mistakes and weakness of character can result in the taking of God-given life. The fact that we are all fallible human beings should outlaw the death penalty. There have been 1,451 executions since the US Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty in 1976. Can anyone say the years since then have been made safer? Nor has America’s spirit been especially uplifted. As of October 1, 2016, there were some 2,902<sup>2</sup> inmates on death row.

Contemporary Catholic teaching opposes the death penalty. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* finds it acceptable only when there is no other way to protect society from a dangerous criminal. With the invention of prisons that moment arrived. Digging a tunnel through a cell wall is the stuff of “Shawshank Redemption,” a movie about a prisoner’s escape from a corrupt warden, not the stuff of today’s supermax prisons.

The death penalty is vengeance and a penalty to be reserved to the One who doesn’t make mistakes. Those of us who make mistakes big and small have no right to decide on ultimate penalties.

Some argue that the death penalty is allowed by the Catholic Church. That may be right in theory but not in contemporary practice. Some argue that abortion is

1 Catholic Mobilizing Network

2 Death Penalty Information Center

verboden because it is the taking of innocent life but the death penalty is acceptable because it is the taking of life deemed non innocent. Yet how can they be absolutely sure?

Some criminals inspire a lock 'em up and throw away the key approach. Some crimes are so horrific as

to require it. Some persons are so damaged as to put all of us at risk. Thus the need for prisons.

The death penalty, however, is a step too far.

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