

Knowledge without Love is Sterile: The Death Penalty

What does it mean to be fully human and to whom is this “right” extended? From whom do we receive our humanity? Who or what is responsible for recognizing this humanity? Exploring these questions in relation to capital punishment does not give easy answers, but reveals interesting truths about America.

The Catholic Church declares that human dignity means recognizing the “incomparable worth of a human person.”<sup>1</sup> This concept surpasses political boundaries as well as ethnic and racial lines. It is common Christian understanding that life is a gift, and because it is a gift, humanity has a moral responsibility to maintain and respect it. In November 2005, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) reaffirmed the “judgment that use of the death penalty is unnecessary and unjustified in our time and circumstances” on the basis that state-sanctioned killing diminishes the dignity of the whole human race. Additionally, capital punishment is needless because there are other ways to punish criminals and protect society. The Church further argues that the application of the death penalty is deeply flawed and irreversibly erroneous and demographically biased.<sup>2</sup> Through an analysis based on Catholic social teaching embedded in USCCB documents, this paper will investigate how the application of the death penalty in the United States’ legal system uniquely impacts the African American community, and, in particular, how systems of race, poverty and criminal justice cause family deterioration and ultimately lead to the degradation of African American culture.

The method employed here will take three major movements, referencing important Catholic Social teaching on each:

- Exposing the statistics and history of inequalities in criminal justice, race and poverty as they relate to the death penalty.
- Examining the impact of these injustices on the families and cultural institutions of Black communities and showing that they weaken their ability to empower positive change.

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Paul VI, Evangelium Vitae, 1967, 2.

<sup>2</sup> Bishops, A Culture of Life and Penalty of Death, 2005, p. 3.

- Providing a final analysis in the voice of an insider perspective on this reality in hope of providing insight to challenge the Church to go beyond *seeing* and *judging* to *acting* in solidarity.<sup>3</sup> “Knowledge without love is sterile,” and truly applying Catholic social teaching requires deep engagement with the realities of the people.

### **Overview of Catholic Social Teaching, the Death Penalty, and Minorities**

Catholic social teaching challenges the use of capital punishment on two fronts: the basic morality of capital punishment in and of itself and the justice in its application. In secular America, the debate on capital punishment has recently shifted its focus from “inherent questioning of morality to the justness of the administration [of the death penalty].”<sup>4</sup> This paper will also be focusing on this second front and its racist dimensions, but begins by clearly addressing the Catholic framework of the morality of capital punishment itself.

In *A Culture of Life and Penalty of Death*, the members of the USCCB “seek to help build a culture of life in which our nation will no longer try to teach that killing is wrong by killing those who kill.”<sup>5</sup> The Bishops’ rebuke of the use of the death penalty argues that contemporary society, in contrast to times past, now has the means to govern itself without resorting to lethal force.

Maintaining this unnecessary cycle of violence by use of the death penalty perpetuates further violence and diminishes the human race. Sister Helen Prejean has this to say about the death penalty:

The execution of a human being is ugly. An execution is ugly because the premeditated killing of a human being is ugly...And hiding the ugliness from view and rationalizing it numbs our minds to the horror of what we are doing. This is what truly ‘coarsens’ us.<sup>6</sup>

If the world accepts the notion, “to do unto others as we would do unto ourselves,”<sup>7</sup> the ugliness Sister Prejean describes is not a situation that society should want to perpetuate.

Recognizing, however, that recently opposition to the death penalty is based on its unjust application, I will focus on this argument, as it can be informed more fully by the Catholic tradition.

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<sup>3</sup> ‘See, judge, act’ is tool of review formed by Cardinal Joseph Cardijn.

<sup>4</sup> M. Cholbi, *Race, Capital Punishment, and the Cost of Murder*, 2006, p. 255.

<sup>5</sup> Bishops, “A Culture of Life and Penalty of Death,” p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Helen Prejean, *Dead Man Walking*, (Vintage, 1994), p. 216.

<sup>7</sup> Luke 6:31.

Ignoring the issue of whether execution can ever be morally justified and focusing only on its application reveals an aspect of underlying racism to the application of to the death penalty.<sup>8</sup> A study conducted in Georgia found that “African Americans were 1.1 times as likely as defendants of other races to be sentenced to death for murder, while defendants of all races are 4.3 times more likely to be sentenced to death when the victim is white than when the victim is of another race.”<sup>9</sup> Translating this information into the “cost of murder,” statistics show that the value of a human life declines significantly if the person is Black,<sup>10</sup> a clear violation of the principle of the “incomparable worth of the human person” addressed in *Evangelium Vitae*.

To understand this problem more generally, it helps to briefly look at how race affects the broader administration of criminal justice. Compared to other American ethnic groups, African and Hispanic Americans are victims of crime at higher rates, and they are incarcerated at higher rates as well.<sup>11</sup> In 2010, African Americans made up 12.6 percent of the U.S. population, but composed more than 40 percent of the population in state and federal prisons. One in ten African American males are in prison, on probation, or on parole.<sup>12</sup> Discrimination against Blacks as a class of citizens within the criminal justice system takes place even before a defendant enters a courtroom.<sup>13</sup> These issues can include, but are not limited to, prosecutors opting to prosecute Blacks for first degree murder rather than making a plea bargain and police who more aggressively pursue crimes in predominately Black neighborhoods than in white neighborhoods.<sup>14</sup> Such attitudes are contrary to America’s founding principles of equality before the law.

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<sup>8</sup> Note: This is a 2010 analysis of data from 1976-2009. This is the most recent information available.

<sup>9</sup> Cholbi, *Race, Capital Punishment, and the Cost of Murder*, p. 267.

<sup>10</sup> Cholbi, “Race, Capital Punishment, and the Cost of Murder,” 2006, p. 257.

<sup>11</sup> Bishops, *Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice*, 2000.

<sup>12</sup> Bishops, “Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice.”

<sup>13</sup> Cholbi, “Race, Capital Punishment, and the Cost of Murder”, 2006, p. 257.

<sup>14</sup> Cholbi, “Race, Capital Punishment, and the Cost of Murder,” 2006, p. 257.

Figure 1

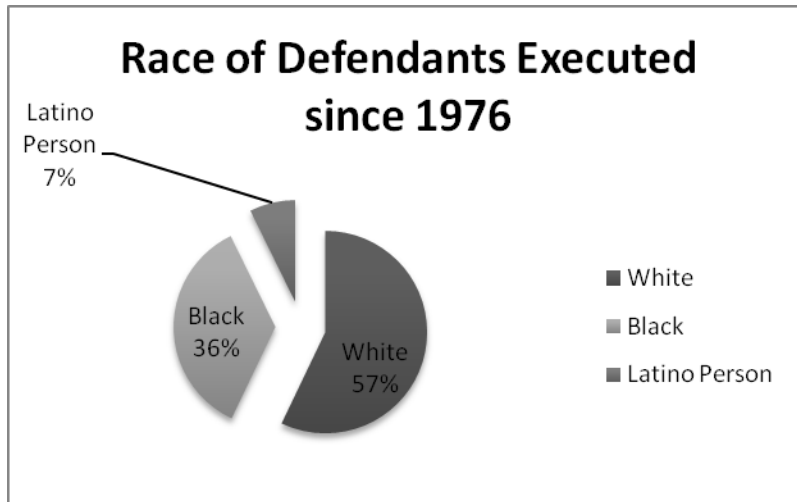


Table 1 Defendant-Victim Race Combinations of Executed since 1976

	Black Defendants	White	Latino(a) Defendants
Black Victims	133	15	3
White Victims	246	625	39
Latino person Victims	17	13	38
Total out of 1,188:	396	653	80

**\*Note: Other ethnic Americans not included. Each person is counted as one. Defendants executed for the murders of multiple victims of different races are not included.<sup>15</sup>**

This data suggests that a Black defendant, regardless of the race of the victim, is more likely to be given the death penalty (See Figure 1). The same cannot be said about any other race in the United States. The killing of a Black or Latino person by a White defendant ties as the least represented of the 1,188 executed. Black victims account for 15 executions of those executed and Latino victims account for 13 persons executed (See Table 1). To summarize, not only are Blacks being targeted for murder as well as conviction, but Black victims of first degree murder are significantly underrepresented from the total executed population of convicted murderers.

Legally, African Americans should not be seen as second class citizens. After assessing the death penalty in Texas, a study called The Rope, the Chair, and the Needle: Capital Punishment in Texas, illustrated that the current capital punishment system is an outgrowth of racism and a "legacy of

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 12. [http://naacpldf.org/files/publications/DRUSA\\_Winter\\_2010.pdf](http://naacpldf.org/files/publications/DRUSA_Winter_2010.pdf)

slavery."<sup>16</sup> The next section will examine how the legacy of racism and cultures of poverty impact how people experience capital punishment.

### **Historical Overview of Racism and Slavery**

Racism was the backdrop for the formation of America, but in particular, it involved the enslavement of Africans. Those who were European, or could pass as such, considered themselves superior to Blacks. Racism also found root in the political system. Even though slaves could not vote, the "Three-fifths Compromise"<sup>17</sup> was created with slave-holding states who wanted political clout from the numbers of their slaves. Even before they could vote, African Americans were not considered a whole person.

After slavery, this concept that Blacks were less than whole humans was expressed in 1876 Jim Crow laws, enacted to prevent the integration of Black people. Eventually Jim Crow laws were mandated state-wide and locally and required public facilities to be segregated. These laws were supposed to maintain facilities that were "separate, but equal," but more often than not, separate meant they were mediocre or less, thus limiting Black people's progress and access to means of economic empowerment.

Ironically, racial politics continued through the Civil Rights movement. Ronald Reagan, the 40<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, implemented a "tough on crime policy" which resulted in even more inequities in the justice system. During his presidency, he inherited a country with high levels of drug-

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<sup>16</sup> American Civil Liberties Union, The Case Against the Death Penalty, 1997. 2011 <http://www.aclu.org/capital-punishment/case-against-death-penalty>

<sup>17</sup> Three-fifths Compromise-in the counting of "all other persons," meaning non-whites; those individuals would only be worth three-fifths of what the population actually represented.

related crime, especially in inner city neighborhoods. The “law and order” slogan gave birth to “three strikes and you’re out” laws,<sup>18</sup> including the criminalization of nonviolent offenses. These laws require third time offenders to be permanently incarcerated. Many of these high-crime communities, however, had their origins in systems of racism and poverty. Jim Crow laws were outlawed 46 years ago today but assumed a new host to work through: The United States legal system. This claim is substantiated by Petersilia who “found that Blacks and Hispanics are less likely to be given probation, more likely to receive prison sentences, more likely to receive longer sentences and more likely to serve a greater portion of their original time.”<sup>19</sup>

In 1979, the Bishops declared an official position on racism in a Pastoral Letter entitled *Brothers and Sisters to Us*. In this letter, racism is denounced and deemed a sin that not only denies the teachings of Jesus, but “is a denial of the truth of the dignity of each human being revealed by the mystery of the Incarnation.”<sup>20</sup> Scripture tells us that in Jesus Christ “there does not exist among [the human race a] Jew or Greek, slave or freedom, male or female. All are one in Christ Jesus.”<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, scripture declares that society cannot allow fear of the “other” to create a situation where one stereotypes or scoffs at those whose ancestors originate from a different area than ours.

The Bishops stated:

Today in our country men, women, and children are being denied opportunities for full participation and advancement in our society because of their race. The educational, legal, and financial systems, along with other structures and sectors of our society, impede people's progress and narrow their access because they are Black [or] Hispanic... The structures of our society are subtly racist, for these structures reflect the values which society upholds. They are geared to the success of the majority and the failure of the minority.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Robert DeFina and Lance Hannon, Cruel & Unusual The True Costs of our Prison System, 2011, p. 11.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 520.

<sup>20</sup> Bishops, Brothers and Sisters to Us, 1979. <http://www.nccbuscc.org/saac/bishopspastoral.shtml>

<sup>21</sup> Galatians 3:28.

<sup>22</sup> Bishops, “Brothers and Sisters to Us,” 1979. <http://www.nccbuscc.org/saac/bishopspastoral.shtml>

The document refers to racism in the different settings of social structures. It highlights the large number of Blacks on welfare, housing patterns in inner cities, and current make-up of the prison population of the prison system. In the words of the Bishops:

Racism is apparent when [society notes] that the population in our prisons consists disproportionately of minorities; that violent crime is the daily companion of a life of poverty and deprivation; and that the victims of such crimes are also disproportionately nonwhite and poor.<sup>23</sup>

Racism, on the personal level, affects attitudes and judgments and prevents us from being open and present to others in a time of need. While not ignoring individual responsibility of those who commit crimes, it is clear the unjust conditions of racism create environments of desperation for whole communities. A society that kills criminals [disproportionately Black criminals] while ignoring the underlying roots of crime creates a culture of self-perpetuating death. The following section will unravel the role of conditions of poverty in capital punishment.

*My experience has been that the poor know violence more intimately than most people because it has been a part of their lives, whether the violence of the gun, or the violence of want and need.*<sup>24</sup>

- César Chávez

Analyzing poverty and race one must see the interrelatedness of the two concepts to avoid error of segregation. Catholic social teaching not only condemns racism, but links it to cultures of poverty and limitation of human potential—the very cultures that produce more crime as well as limited legal options. The USCCB has made a number of statements of conscience concerning poverty. In 1986, the Bishops produced a statement on the status of economic development. According to the government's definition of "poor," over 33 million Americans, or one out of seven people in our nation, fall into this category.<sup>25</sup> Poverty should command a large amount of time and resources—it is not to be taken

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<sup>23</sup> Bishops, "Brothers and Sisters to Us." <http://www.nccbuscc.org/saac/bishopspastoral.shtml>

<sup>24</sup> César Chávez, *An Organizer's Tale*, (Penguin Classics 1969), p.64.

<sup>25</sup> Bishops, "Brothers and Sisters to Us." <http://www.nccbuscc.org/saac/bishopspastoral.shtml>

lightly, “rather, it is a moral imperative of the highest priority.”<sup>26</sup> External circumstances should not be allowed to impede on the seriousness of this affair.

Fighting against poverty and unmerited conditions not only promotes human well-being but also contribute to human moral and spiritual development. Thus, the fight against poverty benefits all of humanity because a virtuous person creates a virtuous society, and evaluates society against a moral measuring stick. In other words, economic poverty is not only a lack of material goods, but essentially a deprivation of what it means to be fully alive. To be prosperous in the fullest capacity includes material sufficiency. The Catholic Church calls this concept “full bodied humanism,” which is the ultimate goal of man. God has created humanity and the world in abundance. As God’s charges, society is called to live a life in which social conditions are consistent to that of the divine order. Substandard human conditions are an absence of the necessities of life.<sup>27</sup> Being unable to meet the daily necessities of life creates an unwelcoming environment for moral uprightness.

The depravation of material goods and opportunity may result in another kind of poverty-moral poverty, characterized as an incumbent love of self expressed as oppressive structures that abuse power and exploit those under its authority. “When whole populations destitute of necessities live in a state of dependence barring them from all initiative and responsibility, and all opportunity to advance culturally and share in social and political life” human dignity is disturbed.<sup>28</sup> It should be emphasized that human dignity refers to our communal body as well as each individual. Therefore, policies that ignore the deprived or powerless in our society create conditions of crime and violence that wound America as a whole.

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<sup>26</sup> Bishops, Economic Justice for All, 1986, p. 170. [http://www.osjspm.org/economic\\_justice\\_for\\_all.aspx](http://www.osjspm.org/economic_justice_for_all.aspx)

<sup>27</sup> Bishops, “Brothers and Sisters to Us.” <http://www.nccbuscc.org/saac/bishopspastoral.shtml>

<sup>28</sup> Pope Paul VI, “Populorum Progressio,” v. 30. [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/paul\\_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_enc\\_26031967\\_populorum\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum_en.html)

Liberation from poverty does not simply help people attain what they need to live but creates the authentic grounds for true peace. The USCCB believes that society needs to recognize that:

Peace is not simply the absence of warfare, based on a precarious balance of power; it is fashioned by efforts directed day after day toward the establishment of the ordered universe willed by God, with a more perfect form of justice among men.<sup>29</sup>

If you grow up in an experience of poverty and violence, you are going to express what you know—violence. Ironically the state seeks to create peace by taking this person’s life violently, instead of addressing the root causes of poverty that shaped this individual throughout their life.

The root causes of poverty in the United States are indirectly expressed in the administration of criminal justice. Our justice system, which is supposed to be impartial, is administered in an economically and racially discriminatory way. In particular, Blacks are three times as likely to be poor as Whites.<sup>30</sup> Many argue that this state of affairs can be attributed to the enslavement of a people for over 300 years and the effect of enslavement and legal prejudice and racism on the development of African American culture and daily life. To examine a very technical aspect of this, during slavery the plantation owner and his beneficiaries had the ability to multiply or quadruple their assets off the backs of slave labor.<sup>31</sup> Thus, it seems reasonable that “race could serve to measure the impact of poverty on criminal charges, convictions, and sentencing.”<sup>32</sup> Colleen and Jeffery Johnson found:

In 1978, 53 percent of black jail inmates had pre-arrest incomes below \$3,000 compared with 44 percent of whites. In 1983, the median pre-arrest income of black jail inmates was \$4,067 [while] that of white jail inmates was \$6,312. Approximately half of the blacks in jail were unemployed before arrest and 44 percent of whites were.<sup>33</sup>

Some might consider this an out dated statistical figure, but it confirms that although thirty-three years have elapsed, not much has changed. Terence Thornberry found that juveniles from lower class

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<sup>29</sup> Bishops, “Economic Justice for All,” p. 65. [http://www.osjspm.org/economic\\_justice\\_for\\_all.aspx](http://www.osjspm.org/economic_justice_for_all.aspx)

<sup>30</sup> Johnson and Johnson, “Poverty and the Death Penalty,” p. 519.

<sup>31</sup> For information on the topic refer to this site: <http://www.measuringworth.com/slavery.php>

<sup>32</sup> Colleen Johnson and Jeffery Johnson, Poverty and the Death Penalty, 2001, p. 519.

<sup>33</sup> Johnson and Johnson, “Poverty and the Death Penalty,” p. 519.

families were more likely to be sent to juvenile court and less likely to receive probation than those from affluent homes.<sup>34</sup>

Furthermore, a poor person is more likely to be found guilty than a wealthier defendant. In part this is because the poor are less likely to make bail and more likely to be represented by a public defender.<sup>35</sup> The consequence of being “unable to post bail may bias the verdict toward guilty because the defendant is unable to substantially assist in his or her own defense.”<sup>36</sup> Similar outcomes occur for those who rely on an appointed representative. Public defenders characteristically have large case loads and are salaried employees; consequently, there is less monetary incentive to devote time to research and pretrial motion activities that increase the likelihood that the charges will be dismissed.

Our nation prides itself on the wisdom of the following proverb: “Money makes the world go round,” and that is precisely what the individuals who are at the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy discover: they get what they can pay for.<sup>37</sup> The attitude because a person can only pay a little, they should receive a little is ridiculous. This attitude shifts the value of a person from inherent dignity to dignity based on money. The harshest penalties are reserved for the poor. Finally, these contingent realities should be addressed not in the individual realm, but in terms of the overall equality of the institution of capital punishment.<sup>38</sup>

### **Death Penalty’s Impact on Broken Families and Cultures of Death**

The effects of race and poverty have perhaps their most painful impact on the structure of the African American family. The family is at the foundation of how people learn to be in relationship and

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 519.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 519.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 519.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 520.

<sup>38</sup> The United States puts more people in prison than China. And China is four times the size of the United States, and China is under an authoritarian regime. Yet, our crime rate is extremely high compared to other “civilized” nations. We currently have over 2 million people behind bars of which over 60 percent of those imprisoned are either Black or Hispanic.

fathers are essential to this. The absence of many Black fathers extends across generations. Family teaches us how to care for and be concerned with the well-being of others. The interdependence of family and community is one reason the Catholic Church asserts that the “future of humanity passes by way of the family.”<sup>39</sup> Pope John Paul II stated that the family serves the general functions of developing a community of persons, serving life, and partaking in the society. The social dynamic of scripture commands that the family continues to be “promoted by society as its fundamental cell.”<sup>40</sup> The Catholic Church recognizes the indivisible link between the family as a “living reflection of ... God's love for humanity and the love of Christ the Lord for the Church His bride.”<sup>41</sup> The high death penalty rate of African Americans negatively impacts the family because it undermines the ability of the family to stay together.

In *Familiaris Consortio* the irrevocable rights of the family include:

- The right to exist and progress as a family, that is to say, the right of every human being, even if he or she is poor, to [find] a family and to have adequate means to support it;
- The right to the stability of the bond and of the institution of marriage;
- The right to bring up children in accordance with the family's own traditions and religious and cultural values, with the necessary instruments, means and institutions;
- The right to housing suitable for living family life in a proper way;
- The right to expression and to representation, either directly or through associations, before the economic, social and cultural public authorities and lower authorities;
- The right to form associations with other families and institutions, in order to fulfill the family's role suitably and expeditiously;
- The right to wholesome recreation of a kind that also fosters family values.<sup>42</sup>

Consider the interrelatedness of rights like the ability to exist and progress and the right to stability.

These “uncontestable” rights are not lived by those who have a parent on death row.

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<sup>39</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, 1981, v. 86.

[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_19811122\\_familiaris-consortio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio_en.html)

<sup>40</sup> Catholic News Agency, “The Family: A Good for Humanity.” <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/resource.php?n=954>

<sup>41</sup> Pope John Paul II, “*Familiaris Consortio*,” v. 17.

[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_19811122\\_familiaris-consortio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio_en.html)

<sup>42</sup> Pope John Paul II, “*Familiaris Consortio*,” v. 17.

[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_19811122\\_familiaris-consortio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio_en.html)

The family has an uncontested “mission to guard, reveal and communicate love” through the components of a mother, father, and children.<sup>43</sup> In this community “the man is called upon to live his gift and role as husband and father.”<sup>44</sup> There is little to no opportunity in the ability to be a father to children while on death row. In 1952, 94 percent of Black families were “whole.” Yet in 2011, 70 percent of Black children were born out of wedlock. In 1952, the world had not experienced what we know to be the civil rights movement, redlining<sup>45</sup> was legal, and nuclear testing became extensive. However, families were complete: father, mother and children. According to the 2010 census, nearly one out of every three Black households (29 percent) is headed by a single woman, the highest percentage of female-headed households in the U.S. The absence of a father or father figure “causes psychological and moral imbalance and notable difficulties in family relationships” in a myriad of ways.<sup>46</sup>

Fatherlessness has been linked to a significant increase in criminal activity, suicide, behavioral problems, chemical substance abuse, dropping out of high school, and being a victim of abuse, especially when the child lives with a mother who has a new man in the house.<sup>47</sup> Over half of all adolescent murderers and long-term prison inmates grew up without fathers in their home.<sup>48</sup> Life in prison and the death penalty both contribute to fatherlessness, but the death penalty is irreversible. The nonprofit National Fatherhood Initiative’s answer to the question of how society can “[reduce] crime, child poverty, teen pregnancy, and [require] no new taxes [is] Good Fathers.” The personal lives

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., v. 17. [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_19811122\\_familiaris-consortio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio_en.html)

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., v. 25. [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_19811122\\_familiaris-consortio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio_en.html)

<sup>45</sup> Redlining-a government mandate that prevented the integration of neighborhoods.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., v. 72. [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_19811122\\_familiaris-consortio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio_en.html)

<sup>47</sup> Ronald Rychlak, *Fathers and Families*, 2008. <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/resource.php?n=515>

<sup>48</sup> Ronald Rychlak, “Fathers and Families.” <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/resource.php?n=515>

of others are important because people operate within a personal and social context. Society cannot value peace, education, and meaningful life while concurrently passively accepting fatherlessness. Unfortunately, men who father illegitimate children disproportionately turn to crime, use drugs, and suffer premature death.<sup>49</sup>

Many scholars agree that “today both men and women are equally busy with the realization of their professional potential, and both have to bear the burden of financial responsibility for the family.”<sup>50</sup> One of the evils of a system of oppression is that it may damage people in ways that may not be able to be undone. An imprisoned father is not able to contribute to the household financially, virtuously, or in any other manner. Again, the birth of the family is intentional and not consequential. The mother has a role as does the father. Separating what was meant to be whole goes against Catholic social tradition.

### **Final Analysis: An Insider’s Perspective**

The disproportionate numbers of Blacks on death row symbolizes the fatherlessness of Black homes which eventually degrades the African American culture. First and foremost, the components of the family are significantly devastated by the lack of male presence in the intermediate realm of family. In my own experience, I can count at least three generations that have been raised without a father: my grandmother, my mother, and me. There are no words or social analysis that could accurately portray what a caring father would have meant in any of our lives.

In *Populorum Progressio*, the Bishops describe cultural development and its importance on cultural institutions:

Every country, rich or poor, has a cultural tradition handed down from past generations. This tradition includes institutions required by life in the world, and higher manifestations— artistic, intellectual and religious—of the life of the spirit. When the latter embody truly human values, it would be a great mistake to sacrifice them for the sake of the former. Any group of people who would consent to let this

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<sup>49</sup> Ronald Rychlak, “Fathers and Families.” <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/resource.php?n=515>

<sup>50</sup> Catholic News Agency, “The Family: A Good for Humanity.” <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/resource.php?n=954>

happen, would be giving up the better portion of their heritage; in order to live, they would be giving up their reason for living.<sup>51</sup>

The Bishop's words are quintessential. The cultural tradition in this context would be encompassed in the African proverb "It takes a village to raise a child." The village essentially was something African Americans were robbed of and now male influences in this realm are missing.

The lack of fathers creates a culture of systemic depravity, causing a culture to warp and convert itself into something as it grows accustomed to being without. For example, male and female gender roles have been stressed. Formerly, a society existed in which the male was the head and the woman the neck that turns the body. Now, the woman fulfills both parts. The new gender role leads to the construct of the strong, resilient, bold Black woman who bears the weight of the world on her shoulders. Consequently, a woman no longer needs nor looks for a man to complete her because anything she wants she could get for herself.

The African American culture not only suffers from the deprivation of father figures, but also the economic capital associated with the role. Living on one parent's income hurts the child in many ways. The growing cost of living is hard for two parents to manage, so imagine trying to live on just one income. By not having the means to expose the child to those opportunities, that would build profitable skills, the single parent comes up undeniably short.

Visual signs of the decay of people silently but forcefully convey messages about the value of the people living inside Black neighborhoods. If someone grows up in a community seeing people who look like him or her fail most of their lives, notions of cultural inferiority are unconsciously easily absorbed. Because Black culture is all encompassing, criminals and citizens alike ascribe to its social norms. Hip-Hop, urban couture, Ebonics and braided hairstyles are profoundly Black. A high

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<sup>51</sup> Pope Paul VI, "Populorum Progressio," v. 41. [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/paul\\_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_enc\\_26031967\\_populorum\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum_en.html)

incarceration of Black people who appear Afro-centric is in truth an incarceration of Blackness because Blackness is closely associated with crime. Blackness and crime have merged, becoming synonymous. When this happens the projected image of what is Black is demonized, and bias is created which contributes to the trivialization of anything Black or African.

This trivialization can be perpetuated by those who are Black. I feel that this is the worst kind of oppression because the oppressed become their own oppressors. Ironically, in an effort to find an identity which the world encourages, there is a current denial of personal dignity to those who find their identity in African ancestry. An example of this can be found in pop culture today. Artists who embrace their heritage through their natural visual presentation are shunned by contemporary society, but those artists that trade in their God-given appearance for European personas make covers of magazines, a simultaneous glorification of Whiteness and degradation of Blackness. Black identity has become rooted in Whiteness has replaced moral character as the key to success. Internalized oppression generates an atmosphere where one is not able to reach his or her full potential.

Ultimately, the reality of Black poverty does not set the stage for the building of a family. The collapse of the Black family by the criminalization of culture and the means by which the death penalty is administered all contribute to the degradation of the Black culture. This system of bias finds its origins not just in poverty, but in other structures as well. Society needs to shift its focus away from punishment of violence to how legislation impacts the African American community and promotes poverty leading to response of violence and ending in a structure of fatherless families.

### **Conclusion**

The moral test of any society is "how it treats its most vulnerable members. The poor have the most

urgent moral claim on the conscience of the nation. [People] are called to look at public policy decisions in terms of how they affect the poor."<sup>52</sup>

The state has the responsibility to *properly* serve and protect, but the Church is a structure that is equally accountable. I would argue that this liability originates in the claim "every human person is created in the image and likeness of God and has an inviolable dignity, value, and worth, regardless of race, gender, class, or other human characteristics."<sup>53</sup> The church, the representative and agent of Christ, has outwardly shown its disapproval of the death penalty, but this is not enough. Knowledge without love is sterile. The church must interject itself in solidarity with African American communities and in so doing liberate the Image of God in Black communities and create a culture of peace and universal change that recognizes the humanity in others. The Bishops affirm "a renewed call" to unite with Jewish, Protestant, and other communities of faith and:

[To encourage their congregations] to transform our society and achieve justice for all. [Humanity] must fight for the dual goals of racial and economic justice with determination and creativity. Domestically, justice demands that [society] strives for authentic full employment, recognizing the special need for employment of those who, whether men or women, carry the principal responsibility for support of a family. Justice also demands that [humanity] strives for decent working conditions, adequate income, housing, education, and health care for all.<sup>54</sup>

As a society we are called to do as Jesus, who has absolute authority, says "Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me."<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Catholic Charities of Saint Paul and Minneapolis, Option for the Poor, 2011.

<http://web.archive.org/web/20060216183419/http://www.osjspm.org/cst/themes.htm>

<sup>53</sup> Bishops, "Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice," 2000.

<sup>54</sup> Bishops, "Brothers and Sisters to Us." <http://www.nccbuscc.org/saac/bishopspastoral.shtml>

<sup>55</sup> Matthew 25:40.

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