



Sample Bulletin Articles: Catholic Social Teaching and the Death Penalty

Sample 1: Life and Dignity of the Human Person

Catholic Social Teaching is rooted in a belief in the inherent dignity of the human person and the sanctity of all life. Made in the image and likeness of God, the human person is the foundation of a moral vision for society and stands at the heart of the Church's understanding of justice. As Catholics, we also believe in a consistent ethic of life, which extends from conception to natural death. Capital punishment contradicts this ethic. By allowing the state to end a life before natural death, the death penalty does not conform to our pro-life teaching.

Not only does the death penalty violate the sanctity of human life, it also threatens innocent life. Despite our best efforts, our criminal justice system is imperfect. According to a 2014 study, an estimated 4% of those sentenced to death in the U.S. are actually innocent. More than 165 people have been exonerated from death row since 1973. Put another way, for every nine people who have been executed since the death penalty was reinstated in 1976, one has been proven innocent.

For more information on how the death penalty violates the dignity of the human person, please visit: catholicismobilizing.org

Sample 2: Preferential Option for the Poor and Vulnerable I

The death penalty not only violates our call to uphold the life and dignity of the human person, but also stands in opposition to our call to care for the vulnerable in our midst. Society is to be judged by how we care for the most vulnerable among us. While each human person has dignity and value, the marginalized among us demand special attention.

When it comes to the death penalty, we must ask ourselves: who are we executing?

More than half of the people on death row in this country are people of color. Black or Latino defendants are significantly more likely to get the death penalty than their white counterparts. Additionally, the race of the victim of a crime is a major predictor for whether a trial will result in a death sentence. Nationally, almost half (47%) of all murder victims since the 1970s have been black. Yet, for cases ending in a death sentence, only 17% of murder victims have been black.

Even more unsettling is the fact that at least 60% of the more than 165 people exonerated from death row since 1973 are either black or Latino. The death penalty unjustly targets people of color and denies our responsibility to vulnerable populations.

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Sample 3: Preferential Option for the Poor and Vulnerable II

The right to a fair trial is one of the foundations of our justice system, yet it often proves meaningless to the poor and vulnerable in our midst. Nearly all inmates currently on death row in the United States were unable to afford their own attorneys at the times of their trials. Instead, they were assigned court-appointed attorneys, who often lack the experience necessary for capital cases and are overworked and underpaid. This combination of factors often results in poorly-handled cases where mitigating factors (e.g. intellectual disability or severe mental illness) and tools like DNA evidence are never mentioned at trial.

It is not uncommon for individuals with intellectual disability or severe mental illness to go undiagnosed and untreated, particularly if those individuals are living in poverty. Such conditions elevate the likelihood of these individuals receiving death sentences in capital cases, as well as compounding their risk of wrongful conviction. They are also more likely to become victims of violent crime themselves.

In 2017 alone, at least 20 of the 23 people executed (87%) showed evidence of severe mental illness, intellectual disability, brain damage, or severe trauma. The death penalty denies our responsibility to care for this often poor and vulnerable population.

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Sample 4: Call to Family, Community, and Participation I

We encounter God in our encounters with one another. How we organize our society — in economics, politics, law, and policy — directly affects human dignity and the capacity of individuals to grow in community. All people have a right and a duty to participate in society, and we are all responsible for working together as one for the common good and well-being of all. The death penalty, on the other hand, sacrifices the good of the community to serve the needs of vengeance and retribution.

Over 85% of the nation's top criminologists believe the death penalty is not a deterrent to violent crime. In fact, in many states where the death penalty has been abolished, the murder rate has dropped significantly. Many law enforcement officials agree that the death penalty does not serve as a deterrent and only serves to redirect vital resources away from addressing the real root causes of crime.

What's more, studies conducted by more than a dozen states have found that death penalty cases are up to 10 times more expensive than non-capital cases. These taxpayer dollars would be much better spent attending to the needs of crime victims and addressing the system issues that lead people to commit crimes in the first place. The death penalty does not make society safer or stronger; it must end.

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Sample 5: Call to Family, Community, and Participation II

The death penalty denies our call to foster communities of mercy and justice. Roughly 2% of U.S. counties have produced the majority of all executions imposed since 1976 (52%), as well as inmates awaiting execution on death row (56%). In 2017, just four states (Texas, Arkansas, Florida, and Alabama) carried out 74% of the 23 executions held that year. The determination of a death sentence can be as arbitrary as the county in which you commit a crime. The death penalty has been equated to a geographical lottery.

As a part of our system of law, the death penalty is something we, as community members, must work to end. The principle of subsidiarity reminds us that functions of government should be performed at the lowest level possible, as long as they can be performed adequately. Catholic Social Teaching calls us all to take active and responsible participation in the way our communities function. The laws, systems, and processes of government should reflect our call to live justly and uphold the dignity of all people. It is our responsibility to speak out for the inherent value of all life to our elected officials and demand an end to the death penalty.

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Sample 6: Solidarity

We are one human family — whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences — and are called to be our sisters' and brothers' keepers. This means that no matter what wrongs a person may commit or what experiences their lives bring, we are called to live in a pursuit of justice and peace.

The death penalty denies our call to solidarity by ignoring the pain and harm caused by violence. The necessarily long, complex death penalty trial process too often forces the families of murder victims to relive their trauma and pain. This costly process diverts money and resources away from the much-needed services for victims' families.

For many victims' families, the taking of another life is not the answer: "Pursuing the death penalty would not be the way we would want to honor our daughter's life, nor would that decision have helped us deal with the painful reminders of her unfulfilled hopes and dreams," said Vicki Schieber, whose daughter Shannon was murdered in 1998. Vicki has since become a outspoken opponent of the death penalty, even advocating against capital punishment in her daughter's case.

As Catholics, we are called to care for these victims' families, to bear witness to their experiences, and allow them to heal from the harm they have experienced.

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