

Racism and the Death Penalty:

Compounding Systems of Dehumanization

Overview

Over the last decade, Catholic Mobilizing Network's (CMN's) advocacy toward ending the death penalty has revealed the institutionalized racism and discrimination rampant in the U.S. criminal legal system, which has resulted in the overincarceration of Black and Brown people — particularly on death row. Misuse and abuse of power perpetuate racial injustice and deny human beings of their God-given dignity.

As a community of believers, we are called to engage in racial justice work by dismantling broken systems — including that of capital punishment in the U.S. — and building up approaches to justice that are equitable, restorative, and life-affirming.

The Church Speaks

Against the Death Penalty

"The Church teaches, in the light of the Gospel, that 'the death penalty is inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person,' and she works with determination for its abolition worldwide." (*Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2267*)

Against Racism

"We cannot tolerate or turn a blind eye to racism and exclusion in any form and yet claim to defend the sacredness of every human life." (*Pope Francis*)¹

"Racism is a life issue... [it] directly places brother and sister against each other, violating the dignity inherent in each person." (*U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops [USCCB]*)²

"The roots of racism have extended deeply into the soil of our society. Racism can only end if we contend with the policies and institutional barriers that perpetuate and preserve the inequality — economic and social — that we still see all around us." (*USCCB*)²

"The death penalty damages our culture and turns our government into a system of retribution, when it should be a system of support and service to its people."

-Cardinal Wilton D. Gregory, Archbishop of Washington, DC, Statement for CMN's Virtual Prayer Vigil for Christopher Vialva (Sept. 26, 2020)

The Racist Roots of Capital Punishment

Capital punishment in the U.S. has its origins in slavery, lynching, and Jim Crow segregation. The practice has historically been used as an instrument of racial control, particularly among Black populations.

Once functioning as a tool to deter slave revolts, capital punishment evolved in the post-Civil War era alongside a surge in racial terror lynchings and extrajudicial violence. Although public officials often implicitly or explicitly condoned lynchings, they also promoted the death penalty as a more acceptable alternative. As lynchings became less common, the criminal legal system took over with show trials in which Black defendants were quickly sentenced to death and executed, in effect replacing lynchings with state-sanctioned executions.³

The death penalty's inextricable roots in centuries of systemic racism in the U.S. magnify the ways in which the practice devalues human dignity. The eradication of capital punishment and all forms of institutional racism is an essential part of the church's call to build a culture of life.

Racial Bias in the Modern System

Today, capital punishment works in tandem with other hallmark practices of extreme punishment and mass incarceration to feed and perpetuate racial discrimination within the U.S. criminal legal system. Race plays a role at every stage of a modern capital case, including the following:

Prosecutorial Charging: Prosecutors are more likely to seek a death sentence in cases where a victim is white than where a victim is a person of color. Since 1976, more than 75% of murder victims in cases resulting in an execution were white, even though nationally only 50% of murder victims generally are white.⁴

Jury Selection: U.S. courts have a long history of excluding people of color from jury service. Many of those on death row today were tried and sentenced by all-white or nearly all-white juries.³

Wrongful Convictions and Exonerations: Defendants of color are overrepresented among those wrongly convicted of capital murder. On average, they spend four years longer on death row than white defendants before being exonerated.³

Further Learning and Action Steps

Learn

- Read "Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love," the USCCB's 2018 pastoral letter against racism.
- Watch CMN's video, "Top 5 Lessons from the Pastoral Letter Against Racism" (catholicismobilizing.org/pastoral-letter-video).
- Read "Enduring Injustice: The Persistence of Racial Discrimination in the U.S. Death Penalty," the 2020 report by the Death Penalty Information Center.
- Watch the film, *Just Mercy*, and utilize CMN's accompanying Catholic Study Guide (catholicismobilizing.org/just-mercy-guide).
- Read CMN's resource, "Restorative Approaches in a Time of Racial Reckoning" (catholicismobilizing.org/race-and-rj).

Act

- Sign up for CMN's Mercy in Action Project to receive monthly execution alerts and advocacy actions (catholicismobilizing.org/mercy-in-action).
- Add your name to CMN's petition urging President Joe Biden to prioritize the abolition of the federal death penalty (catholicismobilizing.org/biden).

Pray

- RSVP to attend a Virtual Prayer Vigil, hosted by CMN on the First Friday of every month (catholicismobilizing.org/first-friday-vigils).

1. Pope Francis, General Audience (6 March 2020), at Library of the Vatican Apostolic Palace, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2020/06/03/200603a.html>
2. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love. Nov. 2018. Committee on Cultural Diversity in the Church. Web. 23 Feb. 2021.
3. Ndulue, Ngozi and Robert Dunham. Death Penalty Information Center, 2020, pp. 3–54, Enduring Injustice: The Persistence of Racial Discrimination in the U.S. Death Penalty.
4. "Facts About the Death Penalty." Death Penalty Information Center, 18 Feb. 2021, documents.deathpenaltyinfo.org/pdf/FactSheet.pdf.