



TIPS FOR PREACHING ABOUT THE DEATH PENALTY

A resource for bishops, priests, and deacons.

ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

What is the need?

It can be difficult to know exactly how to preach about the death penalty.

However, Church teaching makes it clear that all humans have an inherent, God-given dignity that cannot be taken away – including those on death row.

How then, do we craft this tenet of our faith into a message that Catholics in the United States will receive with an open heart?

Who is this resource intended for?

This resource is designed for bishops, priests, and deacons who want to identify opportunities to connect the Church's teaching against the death penalty to scripture.

Whether you are a clergy member yourself or a parishioner looking to share this resource with your pastor, we hope you will find value in this resource.

What is included?

In this resource you will find:

- A selection of Scripture passages and liturgical feasts and other observances that lend themselves towards preaching about the death penalty
- Core Church teachings on the death penalty from various resources including: the Catholic Catechism, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, and Pope Francis' papal encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*
- Basic facts about capital punishment in the U.S.

LITURGICAL FEASTS AND OTHER OBSERVANCES

Specific Opportunities to Include the Death Penalty in Your Homily

- **Palm Sunday**
 - Begins the Passion story of Jesus' execution
- **Good Friday**
 - Honors the day which Jesus was put to death on the cross
- **Sanctity of Human Life Day (January 22)**
 - Commemorates the passing of Roe v. Wade and reminds Catholics of the call to a consistent ethic of life
- **Juneteenth (June 19)**
 - Celebrates the emancipation of Black enslaved individuals in the United States
- **The Feast of St. Maximilian Kolbe (August 14)**
 - Patron saint of prisoners, families, and the pro-life movement who was put to death by lethal injection in Auschwitz in 1941
- **International Day of Peace (September 21)**
 - Promotes world wide peace and the end of violence
- **Respect Life Month (October)**
 - Celebrates all pro-life initiatives
- **World Day Against the Death Penalty (October 10)**
 - Promotes messages of death penalty abolition and raises awareness to the cruelties of capital punishment
- **Human Rights Day (December 10)**
 - Commemorates the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights

SCRIPTURE PASSAGES

Particular Readings Which Offer Opportunities to Reflect on the Death Penalty

- **Palm Sunday, Year A: Jesus' Crucifixion**
 - Christ himself was a victim of capital punishment. How are we called to see the face of Jesus in those on death row, today?
- **Palm Sunday, Year C; Feast of Christ the King, Year C: The Story of the Good Thief**
 - Through Jesus's sacrifice, we are all granted the gift of redemption. This gift is revealed through the story of the Good Thief. The death penalty, in killing an individual, restricts their ability to seek out redemption in their own time and way.
- **24th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A: "Forgive seventy times seven"**
 - The death penalty is motivated by vengeance. Jesus invites us to forgive and encourages us to repair relationships, rather than seek retribution. Guided by mercy, this approach offers opportunities for healing – for all of those involved – in a way that capital punishment does not.
- **3rd Sunday of Lent, Year B: The Commandments**
 - "Thou shalt not kill" is a definitive, not conditional, statement. The right to life is not determined based on the harm one has suffered or caused, but is inherent to the dignity of all.
- **7th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A: "An Eye for An Eye"**
 - This often misunderstood statement has long been a defense of the death penalty. Jesus breaks open this Old Testament belief in this reading, calling us to "turn the other cheek" when harm is done to us, rather than inflict that harm on others.
- **5th Sunday of Lent, Year C: The Woman Caught in Adultery**
 - None of us is without sin, and therefore, we are not given the authority to judge one another; rather, that judgment rests in God alone. Additionally, read through a historical lens, this story offers insights into the inequity laden in the application of the death penalty, which continues to exist today.

THE CATHOLIC POSITION ON THE DEATH PENALTY

An Evolution of Church Teaching

For much of its history, the Church held the position that the death penalty was permissible *only* in the rare circumstances where there was no other way to safeguard the common good. With the development of modern prisons, it became clear over time that there were no longer any situations in which imprisonment would not be an adequate way to maintain safety.

In 1999 Saint John Paul II said during his homily in St. Louis, MO while on a papal visit to the U.S.:

"I renew the appeal [...] for a consensus to end the death penalty, which is both cruel and unnecessary."

In 2011 Pope Benedict XVI wrote in his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Africae Munus*:

"Society's leaders should make every effort to eliminate the death penalty."

In 2018 Pope Francis shepherded a historical revision to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, formally stating the Church's position on the death penalty:

"The Church teaches, in 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."

Various Church Resources

Catechism of the Catholic Church, #2267

https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20180801_catechismo-penadimorte_en.html

"Today, however, there is an increasing awareness that the dignity of the person is not lost even after the commission of very serious crimes. In

addition, a new understanding has emerged of the significance of penal sanctions imposed by the state. Lastly, more effective systems of detention have been developed, which ensure the due protection of citizens but, at the same time, do not definitively deprive the guilty of the possibility of redemption.”

Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti* of the Holy Father, Pope Francis: On Fraternity and Social Friendship

https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html

“All Christians and people of good will are today called to work not only for the abolition of the death penalty, legal or illegal, in all its forms, but also to work for the improvement of prison conditions, out of respect for the human dignity of persons deprived of their freedom. I would link this to life imprisonment...A life sentence is a secret death penalty”

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Letter to Congress Regarding the Federal Death Penalty Prohibition Act”

<https://www.usccb.org/resources/letter-congress-regarding-federal-death-penalty-prohibition-act>

“The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has also long called for an end to the death penalty because it is an affront to human dignity, is racially and economically biased, and is often arbitrary based on location. Perhaps worst of all, more than 170 people have been wrongfully convicted and sentenced to death only later to be exonerated.”

Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*: To the Bishops, Priests and Deacons, Men and Women religious, lay Faithful, and all People of Good Will on the Value and Inviolability of Human Life

https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html

“This situation, with its lights and shadows, ought to make us all fully aware that we are facing an enormous and dramatic clash between good and evil, death and life, the “culture of death” and the “culture of life”. We find ourselves not only “faced with” but necessarily “in the midst of” this conflict: we are all involved and we all share in it, with the inescapable responsibility of choosing to be unconditionally pro-life.”

BASIC FACTS ABOUT THE DEATH PENALTY IN THE UNITED STATES

Status of the Death Penalty in the U.S. as of Sept. 2022

- 23 states have abolished the death penalty
 - Most recently Virginia in 2021, the first southern state to successfully pass abolition
- 27 states still retain the death penalty, but 3 of those states have an execution moratorium in place
 - California, Oregon, and Pennsylvania have a governor-imposed moratorium on executions
 - Texas, Oklahoma, Florida, and Missouri currently lead the country in executions
- Catholic President Joe Biden initiated a federal moratorium on executions when he took office in 2020. While a positive measure, this moratorium is reversible and there is still much to be done.

Death Penalty by the Numbers

- As of Sept. 2022, there are more than 2,400 people on death row
- As of Sept. 2022, 190 people have been exonerated from death row since 1973
- Over 1,400 people have been executed in the U.S. since the death penalty was reinstated in 1976

The Injustice of Capital Punishment

- The death penalty has its origins in slavery and racial terror lynchings
- The death penalty is largely applied to poor people of color, especially in instances where the victim is white

- Many individuals on death row struggle with mental health issues, substance abuse, and a history of trauma
 - Currently only two states, Ohio and Kentucky, have passed laws to preclude those with serious mental illnesses from being executed
- Many individuals who receive death sentences do not have access to adequate counsel
- It is more expensive to execute someone than it is to keep someone in prison for the rest of their life

Source: Death Penalty Information Center, [deathpenaltyinfo.org](https://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org)

SAMPLE HOMILY

Good Friday of the Lord's Passion 2022 | Cardinal Gregory | Washington, DC

<https://youtu.be/2wPw4h6JRzs> [go to timestamp 1:41:00 for the homily]

