



Resolutions To Action

LCWR Global Concerns Committee

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Opposition to the Death Penalty

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“Our witness to respect for life shines most brightly when we demand respect for each and every human life, including the lives of those who fail to show that respect for others.

The antidote to violence is love, not more violence.”

—USCCB, *Living the Gospel of Life: A Challenge to American Catholics*
(Washington, DC: USCCB, 1998, no. 22)

EXPERIENCE

It is March 1, 2006. We write from Detroit, Michigan on the 159th anniversary of the state of Michigan becoming the first English-speaking territory in the world to abolish the death penalty. This first official act of Michigan’s legislature resulted because the state had witnessed the public executions of a mistaken perpetrator and the misapplication of “justice” in the case of a mentally incompetent criminal.

Why then does the United States still rigorously cling to this practice, even as most of the world is moving swiftly toward the complete rejection of state-sanctioned killing; and why after nearly every large religious body in the United States has made a strong statement condemning the death penalty, do states and the federal government justify its appropriateness on moral grounds?

SOCIAL ANALYSIS

As seen in Michigan’s case, there are good reasons to support alternatives to the death penalty. Over time it has become clear that the death penalty is applied in ways that are racist, that discriminate against people who are poor, that do not deter crime, and that are cruel and unusual, allowing for the execution of minors and mentally-challenged individuals. (<http://www.nodeathpenalty.org/fiveRs.html>)

Further, critics argue that the penalty is unethical because a government’s act to execute is a violation of human rights, especially if there remains a possibility that the individual is innocent. The development of DNA testing has exonerated a number of convicted criminals, including some on death row.

The high reversal rate in death penalty cases illustrates the fallibility of the criminal justice process. A full 65% of convictions

in capital cases are overturned according to one study.

A growing number of legal professionals have begun to oppose the death penalty for economic reasons, arguing that the costs of trial and appeals for a capital case are greater than would be the case if the death penalty were not sought. In addition, the average amount of time between the date of conviction

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and the date of execution is 10 years.

Finally, many death penalty opponents are concerned that the United States is out of step with other industrialized countries in its practice of the death penalty. The only other OECD country that permits the death penalty is Japan, and executions there are infrequent.

REFLECTION

Building on ethical, moral, and philosophical objections to the implementation of death penalty, leaders from many faith traditions go a step further, arguing that the penalty itself is immoral. The US Catholic bishops in their 1980 "Statement on Capital Punishment" write that "there

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are serious considerations which should prompt Christians and all Americans to support the abolition of capital punishment. Some of these reasons have to do with evils that are present in the practice of capital punishment itself, while others involve important values that would be promoted by abolition of this practice."

They identified four of these significant values that are important to citizens and Christians: "First, abolition sends a message that we can break the cycle of violence, that we need not take life for life, that we can envisage more humane and more hopeful and effective responses to the growth of violent crime."

"Second, abolition of capital punishment is also a manifestation of our

belief in the unique worth and dignity of each person from the moment of conception, a creature made in the image and likeness of God . . . even in the case of those who by their actions have failed to respect the dignity and rights of others."

"Third, abolition of the death penalty is further testimony to our conviction, a conviction that we share with the Judaic and Islamic traditions, that God is indeed the Lord of life. It is a testimony, which removes a certain ambiguity that might otherwise affect the witness that we wish to give to the sanctity of human life in all its stages."

"Fourth, we believe that abolition of the death penalty is most consonant with the example of Jesus, who both taught and practiced the forgiveness of injustice and who came "to give his life as ransom for many." (Mark 10:45)

ACTION

The US bishops continued to develop their position in their November 2005 pastoral statement, "A Culture of Life and the Death Penalty," where they offer Catholics and other people of good will ways to campaign for the abolition of the death penalty:

Pray for victims of crime and their loved ones, for those awaiting execution and their families, for our leaders, for those who work in the criminal justice system.

Reach out to the families of those whose lives have been taken away through violence, and assure them of churches' support, compassion, and care.

Advocate for public policies that better protect society from perpetrators of violence and do not resort to the death penalty.

Learn more about Catholic and other religious teachings on the death penalty, and seriously reflect on and re-examine our own attitudes and positions on the death penalty.

Educate people in parishes, schools,

religious education programs, universities, and seminaries about religious teaching on the death penalty and the criminal justice system.

Act by continuing to advocate in state legislatures, in the Congress, in the courts, and in the public square.

Urge public officials to support measures that restrict the death penalty or provide alternatives.

Change the debate and decisions on the use of the death penalty by building a constituency for life, not death, and by calling on lawmakers to lead, not follow—to defend life, not take it away. Urge reform of the criminal justice system to offer swift, sure, fair, and effective justice that respects the rights of victims and their families and those accused of crime . . . without the illusion of vengeance or the search for simple answers. Our prisons must be transformed from warehouses of human failure and seedbeds of violence to places of responsibility, rehabilitation, and restoration.

Culture of Life and the Penalty of Death approved by the USCCB at its November 2005 General Meeting.

Additional actions:

Read: One way of changing the debate and building a constituency for life can be found in Jürgen Moltmann's article "The Crucified God." <http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/apr1974/v31-1-article1.htm>.

Become involved in Catholic and other religious campaigns to end the use of the death penalty. Visit these websites: www.ccedp.org and <http://www.deathpenaltyreligious.org/>

Learn more about the death penalty in the United States:

- National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty (www.ncadp.org)
- Death Penalty Information Center (www.deathpenaltyinfo.org)
- Amnesty International (www.amnestyusa.org/abolish/index.do)