

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND **THE DEATH PENALTY**

“The new evangelization calls for followers of Christ who are unconditionally pro-life: who will proclaim, celebrate and serve the Gospel of life in every situation. A sign of hope is the increasing recognition that the dignity of human life must never be taken away... I renew the appeal I made most recently at Christmas for a consensus to end the death penalty, which is both cruel and unnecessary.”

-Pope John Paul II, St. Louis, Missouri, January 1999

Where does the Catholic Church stand?

- The Catholic Church opposes the death penalty except, according to the late Pope John Paul II, “in cases of absolute necessity: in other words, when it would not be possible otherwise to defend society. Today however, as a result of steady improvements in the organization of the penal system, such cases are very rare, if not practically non-existent.”¹
- The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, “If...non-lethal means are sufficient to defend and protect people’s safety from the aggressor, authority will limit itself to such means, as these are more in keeping with the concrete conditions of the common good and more in conformity with the dignity of the human person.”² This teaching is clarified by Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, where he states, “No matter how heinous the crime, if society can protect itself without ending a human life, it should do so.”
- When he was prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Pope Benedict XVI explained that in modern society it would be "practically impossible" to fulfill the Catechism's criteria for a death sentence.³
- The Catholic Bishops of Connecticut have called for an end to capital punishment, most recently in 2005, when Bishop Macaluso wrote, “I am here representing the eight Roman Catholic Bishops of Connecticut, to express our one united voice in support of the abolition of the death penalty in Connecticut. The Gospel mandates us to respect all human life from conception to natural death....The death penalty offers the tragic illusion that we can defend life only by taking life.”⁴
- On Holy Thursday of 2005, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops launched a new campaign to end capital punishment in the United States, stating, “The death penalty diminishes all of us. Its use ought to be abandoned not only for what it does to those who are executed, but what it does to us as a society. We cannot teach respect for life by taking life.”⁵

¹ *Evangelium Vitae*, encyclical letter. March 2005.

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2267.

³ “What the Vatican Has Said.” See <http://www.cacp.org>.

⁴ Statement of the Roman Catholic Bishops of Connecticut, Jan. 12, 2005

⁵ See <http://www.usccb.org/deathpenalty/>

How do most Catholics feel about the death penalty?

- Support for the death penalty among American Catholics “has plunged in the last few years.”⁶ According to a December 2004 Zogby International survey of 1,700 American Catholics, only 48% of American Catholics now support the death penalty, a 20% drop since 2001. The survey also found that 1/3 of Catholics who once supported the death penalty now oppose it.⁷
- According to the same survey, Catholic belief in the death penalty seems to be linked to the frequency of Mass attendance, with those attending more frequently less likely to support the death penalty.
- Among the major reasons Catholics gave for opposing the use of the death penalty was “respect for life.” 79% of Catholics feel that opposing the death penalty is “consistent with the defense of human life.” Two of three (63%) Catholics are deeply concerned about what the use of the death penalty “does to us as a people and a country.”⁸
- Since 1999, when Pope John Paul II called for an end to the death penalty in a visit to the United States, the annual number of executions in the U.S. has dropped by more than half, the number of new death sentences also dropped by 60%, and four of the most Catholic states in the nation – New Mexico, New York, New Jersey, and Illinois – have joined the growing list of states that have ended the death penalty altogether.⁹

“This cause unites our pro life and social justice convictions in defense of human life and dignity. We are called to respect human life in all stages, and in all circumstances. I hope that Catholics will increasingly speak to their belief that the use of the death penalty in this nation must cease. We pledge to be an integral part of carrying out this campaign”

-Gail Quinn, Executive Director of the Secretariat for Pro Life Activities, March 2005

“We cannot overcome crime by simply executing criminals, nor can we restore the lives of the innocent by ending the lives of those convicted of their murders. The death penalty offers the tragic illusion than we can defend life by taking life.”

-United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, A Good Friday Appeal to End the Death Penalty, 1999

⁶ Statement by John Zogby at press conference launching the Catholic Campaign to End the Death Penalty, Holy Thursday 2005.

⁷ Zogby International Survey for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. December 2004.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Recinella, Dale. “Ending the Death Penalty.” America. April 2008; See also <http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org>