

CATHOLIC MOBILIZING NETWORK



# A Journey of Faith Facilitator's Guide



[www.catholicsmobilizing.org](http://www.catholicsmobilizing.org)  
(202) 541-5290

# INTRODUCTION TO THE DEATH PENALTY FOR CATHOLICS

This workshop is for Catholics interested in learning more about the Church's position on capital punishment, practical and moral arguments on the death penalty, and how to get involved in ending the use of the death penalty!

<b>Number of participants:</b>	5-45
<b>Participants:</b>	We assume the audience members... <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ are Catholic</li><li>○ do not necessarily oppose the death penalty</li><li>○ may not be informed on the issue</li></ul>
<b>Time:</b>	1 hour (easily stretched to 1.5 hours)
<b>Objectives:</b>	By the end of this session, participants will... <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ understand the Catholic Church's position on the death penalty</li><li>○ know the basic moral and practical arguments against the death penalty and understand who is affected by the system</li><li>○ know how to get involved in ending the use of the death penalty and be comfortable educating others</li></ul>
<b>Materials:</b>	You will need: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ A computer</li><li>○ A projector with sound capabilities</li><li>○ Positive Leadership!</li></ul>
<b>Space:</b>	This workshop can be done in a large semi-circle or in a classroom-seating format, if needed. Make sure everyone can see the screen. It's best to allow room for people to move around and for people to see each other's faces as easily as possible. People need enough room to separate out for group and pair activities.
<b>Facilitator's Guide:</b>	This guide includes.... <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Introduction</li><li>○ Slide Guide</li><li>○ Material Appendices</li><li>○ Participant Packet</li></ul>

Dear Facilitator,

Thank you for your interest and leadership in educating others about the death penalty. We hope this workshop provides you with the information and resources to engage fellow Catholics in thoughtful dialogue.

### What is Prezi?

The workshop uses a presentation tool called Prezi. It operates like a powerpoint presentation, you simply use the arrow keys or right click through the slides. The Prezi includes prayers, pictures, videos, and text. **To present the Prezi, you will need a projector that can be hooked up to a computer and speakers.**

### What is the slide guide?

The slide guide is a detailed step-by step guide for the facilitator to use as she or he presents the Prezi. The facilitator should review the slide guide, along with the other materials, before she or he presents.

### Before the Workshop....

- Contact your local anti-death penalty organization (usually entitled something like Nebraskans to Abolish the Death Penalty or Virginians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty) to find out more **about what's going on in your state**. You may want to ask if they are willing to send a representative to attend your presentation, or if they have any information or upcoming events to share.
- You can also contact the **Catholic Mobilizing Network** (202.541.5290 or [info@catholicmobilizing.org](mailto:info@catholicmobilizing.org)) **and/or your state Catholic Conference** for advice and support regarding presenting this workshop.
- **Post an announcement** on your church's bulletin board and in the Sunday bulletin. Ask the priest and lay leaders to help get the word out about the event. CMN can help promote your workshop on social media.
- **Review** the Prezi and Slide Guide before presenting
- **Print** one copy of the facilitators guide and enough participant packets for all attendees. The facilitator packet includes two appendices.
- You will need to **cut Appendix B** into 10 separate pieces before the presentation.
- Arrive early to **set up the room**, projector and speakers

# Slide Guide

Use the slide guide to help you present the Prezi.





In the left hand column are thumbnails of the slides to help you follow along with the Prezi. *Please note it may take several clicks to have all the content appear in a slide as some text has a 'fade in' effect.*






In the right hand column, the text and content of the slide is written out. The text in italics are suggested comments for you to read aloud in addition to the text on the slides.





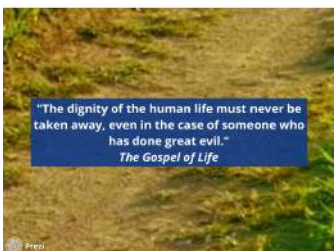
The workshop is participatory so look for this symbol



to alert you when it is time for an activity or handout.





<p>Frame 1</p>		<p>Welcome. We are gathered today to walk the journey of justice and mercy. As we learn more about the death penalty, we may find we are all at different stages on the journey. Thus, it is important to listen to others with compassion and understanding.</p>
<p>Frame 2</p>		<div data-bbox="748 779 1295 911" data-label="Text"> <p>Invite participants to read the prayer aloud with you.</p> </div> <p>Loving Father ~            Together we pray to walk in faith and charity,            Ever trusting in your mercy:            You always wait for us, love us.            You have pardoned us with your Blood,            And pardon us every time we go to you to ask for forgiveness.            Let us be renewed by your mercy.            Let us accept the grace of Christ's Resurrection.            Let us be loved by Jesus –            Let us enable the power of his love to transform our lives too;            And let us become agents of this mercy,            Channels through which your Holy Spirit can water the earth,            Protect all creation and make justice and peace flourish.            Amen.</p>
<p>Frame 3</p>	 <div data-bbox="50 1738 396 1877" data-label="Text"> <p>Running short on time? You can skip this section!</p>  </div>	<p>Before we begin, move around the room and introduce yourself to three people. Ask each person.... What brought you to this workshop today?            What is your favorite.... [book, season, food etc].</p> <div data-bbox="634 1640 1409 1885" data-label="Text"> <p>Give participants a few minutes to engage in conversation            You may ask volunteers to share with the larger group</p> </div>

Frame 4		<p>A Journey of Faith</p> <p><i>We begin on the path of justice and mercy.</i></p>
Frame 5		<p>At the center of our Catholic faith is the belief in the sanctity of life and the inherent dignity of the human person.</p> <p><i>Human life is created in the image and likeness of God and inherent dignity is rooted in the very being of personhood. (CCC 356-357). Therefore, human dignity is an endowment, not an achievement, which can never be lost because of one's actions. The gift of life is from God alone; we do not have the power to create or destroy it.</i></p>
Frame 6		<p><i>This respect for life is upheld for all from womb to tomb, no matter age, gender, race, religion, citizenship, or intellectual or physical ability.</i></p> <p>In what ways are Catholics called to defend human dignity in our modern world?</p> <p>Ask participants to share examples of respect life issues before moving forward</p>
Frame 7		Abortion
Frame 8		Immigration

Frame 9		Stem Cell Research
Frame 10		Euthanasia
Frame 11		Death Penalty <i>The death penalty is also a pro-life issue.</i>
Frame 12		<i>The sanctity of life calls Catholics to be ....</i> Unconditionally Pro-life
Frame 13		"The dignity of the human life must never be taken away, even in the case of someone who has done great evil." The Gospel of Life <i>Anger and revenge are natural human responses to crime. We are horrified by heinous crimes that snuff out innocent and unique lives created in the image of God. Whether violence has touched us personally, or not, we all know there is no way to express the depth of such grief. How do we respond as people of faith?</i>

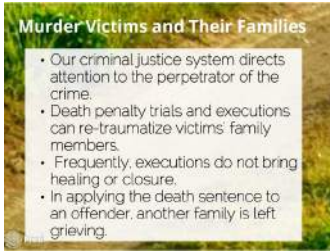


<p>Frame14</p>		<p>Our Faith Needs to be a Source of Strength  <i>All senseless loss due to violence is horrible.</i> The death penalty should not be weighed by the gravity of the offense, but whether it is absolutely necessary to protect society.</p> <p><i>Our faith asks us to protect society and seek justice, not take revenge.</i></p>
<p>Frame15</p>		<p><i>The Catechism of the Catholic Church directly addresses this question</i></p> <p>"If... non-lethal means are sufficient to defend and protect peoples 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." —The Catechism of the Catholic Church 2267</p> <p><i>We have the ability to protect society without execution in this country: Life in prison without the possibility of parole. When we refuse to resort to unnecessary killing, we uphold the sanctity of all life.</i></p>
<p>Frame16</p>		<p><i>You may hear some use scripture as a justification for the death penalty, quoting Exodus "Eye for eye, tooth for tooth." However this account of Hebrew law was not requiring a minimum punishment for certain crimes, it was limiting retribution. In Genesis, Lamech embraced retaliatory vengeance and demanded that seventy-seven men die if he were killed (4:24). Mosaic Law, rather than endorsing such violence, limited the penalty to one life for one life. Biblical law also includes 44 procedural requirements in death penalty cases, including the prohibition of confessions as evidence and the need for multiple eyewitnesses. The American death penalty meets <u>none</u> of the 44 Biblical law requirements. Also, it should be noted in Hebrew tradition a court that executed one person every 70 years was considered bloodthirsty.</i></p> <p>The teachings of Christ in the New Testament call us to protect life, practice mercy, and reject revenge.</p>

Frame 17		<p>Who among you? Reflection on John Chapter 8 Let us reflect on the story of the woman caught in adultery.</p> <p>Invite participants to break into small groups. Ask that one person read the scripture passage aloud for the larger group (Appendix A)</p>
Frame 18	 <p>Discuss in small groups:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. When have I judged others? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- When someone hurt or disrespected me?</li> <li>- When I saw someone hurt or disrespect others?</li> </ul> </li> <li>2. When have I been judged?</li> <li>3. When have I shown understanding or forgiveness?</li> </ol>	<p>Have the groups reflect on the following questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Describe to others in the group an event or tragedy that “hit home” for you, or stirred strong emotions in you. How did you immediately react? Did you allow your visceral emotions cloud your own judgment or understanding of the situation?</li> <li>2. Did you allow yourself to join in with a mob mentality? (This would include sharing Internet memes or jokes that disparage groups, races or faith practices; joining in discussions that accused or judged without all the facts; assumed the worst of an individual or groups of individuals because of their ethnicity, faith, or economic status)</li> <li>3. What makes it easy to “join in” with a group of accusers? What does it take for you to step back and consider that you or others may have overreacted or even be wrong?</li> </ol>
Frame 19		<p><i>But what about the family members of murder victims?</i></p> <p>CMN staff member, Vicki Schieber, lost her daughter Shannon to murder. Listen as she tells her story.</p>
Frame 20		<p>Play Video</p>



Frame 21



*You heard Vicki touch on some of these issues.*

Our criminal justice system directs attention to the perpetrator of the crime.

Death penalty trials and executions can re-traumatize victims' family members.

Frequently, executions do not bring healing or closure.

In applying the death sentence to an offender, another family is left grieving.

Frame 22



Our Faith Calls Us to Justice. In the United States, our death penalty is deeply flawed in its pursuit of justice.

*Based on the principle of human dignity, the Catholic Church is against all executions. The application of the death penalty in the US not only violates this teaching but also raises other social justice concerns. We will review these issues now.*

Frame 23



### Activity

Ask for ten volunteers to come to the front of the room and stand in a line. Give each volunteer one of the 10 instruction sheets found in Appendix B. Explain to the volunteers that you will read the following statistics and they will step forward if prompted on their instruction sheet. The volunteers that step forward will serve as a representation of the corresponding statistic.

As you read through the statements, give time for the volunteers to step forward. You might say thank-you after each statistic to indicate the volunteers can step back in line.

Need to save 15 minutes?  
Skip this section.



1. For every nine executions, one innocent person has been exonerated. (One volunteer steps forward)
2. African-Americans make up about half of all homicide victims. (Five volunteers step forward).
3. Yet, nearly 80% of all executions have been in cases in which the victim was white. (Eight volunteers step forward)
4. Over half of the last one hundred executed offenders have been diagnosed with or displayed symptoms of a mental illness. (Six volunteers step forward)
5. Texas death row inmates face a one-in-three chance of being executed without having the case properly investigated by a competent attorney and without having any claims of innocence or unfairness presented or heard. (Three volunteers step forward)
6. And finally, nearly all of death row defendants cannot afford to hire a private attorney. (All volunteers step forward)

Frame 24



The death penalty does not serve as a deterrent to crime. Death penalty states have higher crime rates than states that have abolished capital punishment.

The death penalty is expensive. Study after study in multiple states have demonstrated capital cases cost more:

- Trial
- Sentencing
- Appeals
- Imprisonment

*The most significant cost in a death penalty case is not the appeals, imprisonment, or even the drugs required for an execution- it is the initial trial on the side of the prosecution. A recent study in Washington state found prosecution costs to be four times higher in death penalty cases than for non-capital cases.*

Frame 25



Infographic demonstrating the cost of California's death penalty.

*The state of California found it could save \$130 million per year if it replaced the death penalty with life imprisonment without parole. What could we do with that money? We could invest in making our communities safer with 1,400 police officers or 1,150 firefighters.*

Frame 26



Innocence

We can never eliminate the risk of executing an innocent person. Over 150 men and women have been exonerated from death row since 1976.

Exonerated means released from death row on the basis of innocence.

Frame 27



Images of three exonerated:

Anthony Ray Hinton spent 30 years on death row for a crime he did not commit. Mr. Hinton was arrested and convicted based solely on the assertion that a revolver taken from his mother's home was the gun used in the murders. After tireless efforts by a team of lawyers, ballistic analysis was done and Mr. Hinton's innocence was proven in 2015.

Kirk Bloodsworth is the first American exonerated from death row by DNA evidence. An honorably discharged former Marine, Bloodsworth was wrongly convicted in 1985. He spent 8 years in prison, converting to Catholicism during that time. He says, "If it can happen to me, a Marine with no criminal record, it can happen to anyone."

*It is a common misconception that DNA provides investigators with certainty of guilt. Only 5-10% of criminal cases have biological evidence that could be subjected to DNA testing. As of May 2015, only 20 of the 152 death row exonerations involved DNA evidence.*

In 1973, Shujaa Graham was convicted of murdering a prison guard by an all white jury and was sent to San Quentin's death row. In 1981, he was released on the basis of innocence.

Frame 28



Racial Bias and Geographic Lottery






Often, race and place determines who lives and who dies.


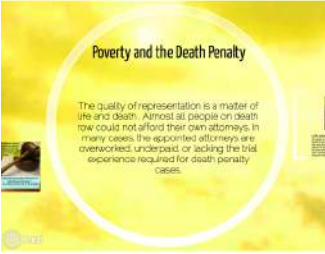
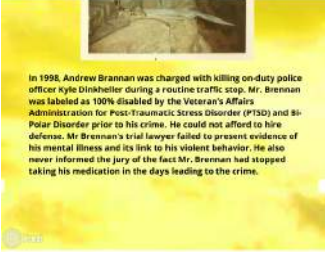

Frame 29








Are Certain Lives of More Value than Others?


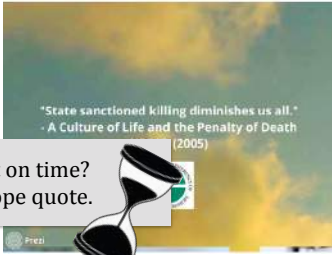
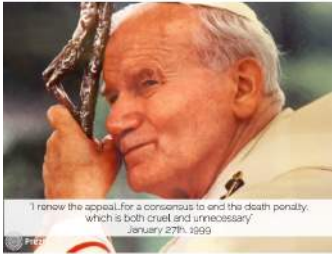


76% of all executions have been for cases in which the victim was white, even though African-Americans make up 49% of all homicide victims.

<p>Frame 30</p>		<p><b>Trial by Peers?</b>  More than 20% of black defendants who have been executed were convicted by all-white juries.  Studies have shown jurors harbor implicit bias in their application of capital punishment.</p>
<p>Frame 31</p>		<p><b>The Wrong Carlos?</b>  Carlos DeLuna was executed by the state of Texas in 1989. He maintained his innocence.  Investigations were conducted after the execution.  Evidence suggests the actual murderer was Carlos Hernandez, a man who lived nearby.  Many maintain racial profiling was responsible for this fatal case of mistaken identity.</p>
<p>Frame 32</p>		<p><b>Geographic Lottery</b>  <i>The death penalty is not applied universally through out the US.</i>  56% of death row sentences come from 2% of US counties.  <i>This means life or death is determined by a county line or the distance of a few miles.</i></p>
<p>Frame 33</p>		<p><b>Criminalization of Mental Illness and Intellectual Disability</b>  Over half of the last one hundred executed offenders have been diagnosed with or displayed symptoms of a mental illness.  The Supreme Court banned the execution of those with intellectual disabilities. Yet, states continue to execute the mentally disabled.  <i>States continue to execute the intellectually disabled by rejecting clinical definitions of disability, requiring the diagnoses before age 18, etc.</i></p>
<p>Frame 34</p>		<p>The state of Texas has come within hours of executing Scott Panetti. Mr Panetti has a well documented history of mental illness that includes schizophrenia and delusions for which he was hospitalized 13 times before his crime. His execution was stayed at the last minute after outcries from faith-communities and others.</p>

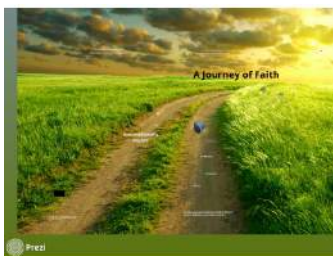
<p>Frame 35</p>		<p>In January of 2015, the state of Texas executed Robert Ladd, a man with an IQ of 67. Mr Ladd was clinically diagnosed as intellectually disabled as a child, required public services for basic life tasks, and was paid a wage less than the minimum wage for employees with disabilities.</p> <p><i>Mr Ladd and Mr Panetti's cases are not unique; unfortunately they are illustrative of those sentenced to die.</i></p>
<p>Frame 36</p>		<p><b>Poverty and the Death Penalty</b></p> <p>The quality of representation is a matter of life and death. Almost all people on death row could not afford their own attorneys. In many cases, the appointed attorneys are overworked, underpaid, or lacking the trial experience required for death penalty cases.</p>
<p>Frame 37</p>		<p>Picture of Andrew Brennan- <i>Andrew Brennan served in the Vietnam War.</i></p> <p>In 1998, Andrew Brannan was charged with killing on-duty police officer Kyle Dinkheller during a routine traffic stop. Mr. Brennan was labeled as 100% disabled by the Veteran's Affairs Administration for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Bi-Polar Disorder prior to his crime. He could not afford to hire defense. Mr Brennan's trial lawyer failed to present evidence of his mental illness and its link to his violent behavior. He also never informed the jury of the fact Mr. Brennan had stopped taking his medication in the days leading to the crime.</p> <p><i>So what happened?</i></p>
<p>Frame 38</p>		<p>Andrew Brannan was executed on January 13th, 2015 by the state of Georgia.</p>



<p>Frame 39</p>		<p>Justin Chaz Fuller's court-appointed lawyer filed an appeal that was riddled with typos, inconsistencies, and errors. The brief was so illogical that another lawyer said it "should have been submitted on a Big Chief Tablet using an eight-count box of Crayolas."</p> <p>Fuller was executed in 2006.</p> <p>"In this country, you are better off being rich and guilty than poor and innocent." Steve Bright, Southern Center for Human Rights</p>
<p>Frame 40</p>		<p>When We Ask People to Kill</p> <p><i>Another side of the death penalty are the stories of those we are asking to kill in our name- executioners, prison wardens, and administrative officials. Many suffer from post-traumatic stress disorders, depression, and other psychological problems.</i></p>
<p>Frame 41</p>		
<p>Frame 42</p>		<p>God, who preferred the correction rather than the death of a sinner, did not desire that a homicide be punished by the exaction of another act of homicide.</p> <p>Saint Ambrose, 4th Century</p> <p>The criminal justice system's goal should be to foster true remorse and restoration.</p> <p>Execution eliminates or cuts short the possibility for transformation.</p>

<p>Frame 43</p>		<p><i>Often, the state executes people at the most productive time of their life.</i></p> <p>Kelly Gissendaner earned a theology degree and ministered to other prisoners while on Georgia's death row. On more than one occasion, she prevented another inmate from taking her own life.</p> <p>Her execution has been postponed twice due to inclement weather and problems with the lethal injection drugs.</p>
<p>Frame 44</p>		<p>"State sanctioned killing diminishes us all."</p> <p>- A Culture of Life and the Penalty of Death USCCB (2005)</p>
<p>Frame 45</p>		<p>"I renew the appeal...for a consensus to end the death penalty, which is both cruel and unnecessary"</p> <p>January 27th, 1999</p>
<p>Frame 46</p>		<p>"I draw the attention of society's leaders to the need to make every effort to eliminate the death penalty"</p> <p>November 19th, 2011</p>
<p>Frame 47</p>		<p>"Nowadays the death penalty is inadmissible, no matter how serious the crime committed..."</p> <p>March, 2015</p>

Frame 48



## A Journey of Faith

*Today we learned about our faith's teaching on the death penalty, addressed social justice issues, and heard stories from those personally affected by the system. I hope the topics we discussed prompt further reflection. For more information and ways to get involved in death penalty advocacy, please refer to these handouts.*

Pass out participant packets

Frame 49



## Loving Father ~

Together we pray to walk in faith and charity,  
Ever trusting in your mercy:

You always wait for us, love us.

You have pardoned us with your Blood,

And pardon us every time we go to you to ask for forgiveness.

Let us be renewed by your mercy.

Let us accept the grace of Christ's Resurrection.

Let us be loved by Jesus –

Let us enable the power of his love to transform our lives too;

And let us become agents of this mercy,

Channels through which your Holy Spirit can water the earth,

Protect all creation and make justice and peace flourish.

Amen.

Invite participants to read  
the prayer aloud with you.

## Appendix A: Scripture Reflection

A Woman Caught in Adultery. John Chapter 8: 1-11

**2** But early in the morning he arrived again in the temple area, and all the people started coming to him, and he sat down and taught them.

**3** Then the scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery and made her stand in the middle.

**4** They said to him, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery.

**5** Now in the law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?”

**6** They said this to test him, so that they could have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and began to write on the ground with his finger.

**7** But when they continued asking him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.”

**8** Again he bent down and wrote on the ground.

**9** And in response, they went away one by one, beginning with the elders. So he was left alone with the woman before him.

**10** Then Jesus straightened up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”

**11** She replied, “No one, sir.” Then Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go, [and] from now on do not sin any more.”

## Appendix B: Showing the Numbers



The facilitator will read the lines in *italics*. After the line is read, step forward from the group ONLY if your card reads **Step Forward**. Return to your original spot when the next statistic is read.

1. *For every nine executions, one innocent person has been exonerated. (Remain in place)*
2. *African-Americans make up about half of all homicide victims. (Remain in place)*
3. *Yet, nearly 80% of all executions have been in cases in which the victim was white. (Remain in place)*
4. *Over half of the last one hundred executed offenders have been diagnosed with or displayed symptoms of a mental illness. (Step Forward)*
5. *Texas death row inmates face a one-in-three chance of being executed without having the case properly investigated by a competent attorney and without having any claims of innocence or unfairness presented or heard. (Remain in place)*
6. *And finally, nearly all of death row defendants cannot afford to hire a private attorney. (Step Forward)*

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  4. *Over half of the last one hundred executed offenders have been diagnosed with or displayed symptoms of a mental illness.* **(Remain in place)**
  5. *Texas death row inmates face a one-in-three chance of being executed without having the case properly investigated by a competent attorney and without having any claims of innocence or unfairness presented or heard.* **(Step forward)**
  6. *And finally, nearly all of death row defendants cannot afford to hire a private attorney.* **(Step Forward)**
- 

The facilitator will read the lines in *italics*. After the line is read, step forward from the group ONLY if your card reads **Step Forward**. Return to your original spot when the next statistic is read.

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CATHOLIC MOBILIZING NETWORK



# A Journey of Faith Participant Packet



[www.catholicsmobilizing.org](http://www.catholicsmobilizing.org)  
(202) 541-5290

## What You Can Do to End the Death Penalty

### 15 Minutes

- **Write your Legislator:** Write a letter or an email to your *state* legislators telling them why you oppose the death penalty and asking them to support legislation to end it. If your legislator has already supported anti-death penalty legislation, write a letter thanking them. To find out your *state* legislative districts, go to [www.vote-smart.org](http://www.vote-smart.org). You can then find the email or mailing address of your state legislator on his or her website.
- **Write your Bishop:** Write a personal, friendly letter to your Bishop, telling him why you oppose the death penalty. Express your hope and prayers that he will publicly speak in favor of ending the death penalty and call all Catholics to get involved.
- **Visit us online!:** Go to [www.catholicismobilizing.org](http://www.catholicismobilizing.org) to learn more about the Catholic Mobilizing Network, and join us on **Facebook** and **Twitter @CMNendtheDP** to join Catholics in the movement.
- **Tell your friends:** Tell your friends about what you've learned about the death penalty and encourage them to get involved, too.
- **Donate:** Your donation to your state anti-death penalty organization or the Catholic Mobilizing Network makes outreach, education, and advocacy on the death penalty possible. Visit these organizations online to donate.

### An Hour

- **Write to your Parish or Diocesan Newsletter:** Write an article and submit it to your parish or diocesan newsletter about the death penalty. Tell why you oppose it and why it is important for Catholics to act to end the death penalty.
- **Learn More:** See the **Resources** handout for additional learning tools such as books, movies, and websites. .

### Several Hours

- **Show a Film, Put on a Play, or Host Workshop:** You can create change in your community through education. See the Resources sheet for related materials or visit [www.catholicismobilizing.org](http://www.catholicismobilizing.org) for even more!
- **Host a Speaker:** For an experience even more moving, bring in a speaker who has been directly impacted by the death penalty, such as a murder victim's family member or a death row exoneree (see the **Resources** handout for state and national organizations you can contact to find a speaker).
- **Volunteer:** Contact a state or local anti-death penalty organization and offer to volunteer. Visit [www.catholicismobilizing.org](http://www.catholicismobilizing.org) to find an organization in your state.

### More

- **Pass a Resolution:** Resolutions (signed statements by a group) are a powerful grassroots tool for building support. Consider bringing a resolution before your congregation or group. (Visit [www.ejusa.org/act/resolutions](http://www.ejusa.org/act/resolutions) for more information.)





## **Resources and Organizations**

### **Learn More and Get Involved**

#### *The Catholic Mobilizing Network to End the Use of the Death Penalty*

Lay leadership providing materials in English and Spanish for all ages and in various mediums to educate Catholics on the death penalty. They work in collaboration with the USCCB, the State Catholic Conferences, and leading anti-death penalty organizations. Also, join their group on Facebook.

[www.catholicismobilizing.org](http://www.catholicismobilizing.org)

#### *The Death Penalty and the Catholic Church*

US Catholic Conference of Bishops' website on their Catholic Campaign to End the Use of the Death Penalty. Includes the Bishops' statements from their state conferences, Church's teaching, and resources.

[www.usccb.org/deathpenalty](http://www.usccb.org/deathpenalty)

#### *Death Penalty Information Center (DPIC)*

DPIC is the place to go for up to date facts and news about the death penalty. Download a frequently-updated one page fact sheet or sign up to receive death penalty related news updates through email.

[www.deathpenaltyinfo.org](http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org)

#### *Equal Justice USA (EJUSA)*

EJUSA is working to make the criminal justice system more fair, effective, and humane, starting with the repeal of the death penalty and increased services for murder victims' families. Visit their website to learn more and sign up to receive action alerts and news.

[www.ejusa.org](http://www.ejusa.org)

#### *The National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty (NCADP)*

Visit NCADP online to find organizations working in your state to end the death penalty, to read their blog, and for information about their annual training conference, which includes tracks for Catholics and people of faith.

[www.ncadp.org](http://www.ncadp.org)

#### *Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights (MVFHR)*

Visit MVFHR to read the stories of victims' families who oppose the death penalty, check out their great blog, and more.

[www.mvfhr.org](http://www.mvfhr.org)

#### *Murder Victims' Families for Reconciliation (MVFR)*

MVFR is a great source for powerful and moving speakers on the death penalty. Visit their website to learn about murder victims' family members speaking against the death penalty and to sign up for action alerts.

[www.mvfr.org](http://www.mvfr.org)

#### *The Innocence Project*

The Innocence Project fights for exonerations through DNA testing and for better practices to prevent wrongful executions. Visit their site to learn about the causes of wrongful convictions and to take action to prevent them.

[www.innocenceproject.org](http://www.innocenceproject.org)

#### *Witness to Innocence*

Witness to Innocence maintains a speakers bureau of exonerated former death row prisoners. Visit their website to learn about their stories and to find out about having them speak at your school, congregation, or community group.

[www.witnesstoinnocence.org](http://www.witnesstoinnocence.org)



## People are asking...

### Tough questions about the death penalty

#### **Q: I hear about innocent people being freed from death row. Are they really innocent?**

Contrary to popular belief, it is extremely difficult to have a conviction overturned. For those innocent people lucky enough to be exonerated, it took extraordinary resources outside of the normal channels for the evidence to be heard. Volunteer lawyers, students, family, and friends often had to fight lengthy legal battles to finally have their day in court.

Popular culture plays up the notion that people “get off on a technicality,” but it is more likely that an execution will go *forward* on a technicality – because legal barriers prevented the courts from hearing new evidence, or because a lawyer missed a filing deadline or didn’t make an objection at the right time.

One 2007 execution went forward because a judge decided to close the court at 5pm on the night of the execution, even though past practice was to stay open on execution days to consider final appeals.<sup>1</sup> A 2012 Alabama appeal was almost denied because of a mix-up in the mailroom.<sup>2</sup>

Such “technicalities” should never get in the way of someone getting their fair day in court, but in a case of actual innocence they are downright terrifying. Consider the Missouri case of Joe Amrine. The prosecutor told the judge that even if Amrine was factually innocent, he should be executed because the legal process should not drag on and on. Courts actually *refused* to hear evidence of Amrine’s innocence because they said his original trial lawyer should have known the information – and therefore it didn’t count as “new.” It took 18 years for Amrine to be exonerated and freed.

#### **Q: Is there any evidence that an innocent person has been executed in modern times?**

We simply do not know how many innocent people have been executed in the United States. Death penalty lawyers hardly have enough resources to work on the cases of live clients, much less for those who are no longer living.

But in recent years, several cases have come to light where there is strong evidence of innocence. A 2012 report called “The Wrong Carlos” details the case of Carlos DeLuna, who was executed for a crime that was likely committed by Carlos Hernandez.<sup>3</sup> The two look alike, but at the time of the trial prosecutors claimed that Carlos Hernandez was a made-up phantom, despite his long criminal record. Cameron Todd Willingham was executed for setting fire to his home and killing his three children, but eight different arson experts now say that the forensic testimony used to convict him was based on junk science and that there is no evidence that the fire was set intentionally.<sup>4</sup> And Troy Davis was executed in 2012 after nearly a million people worldwide spoke up that there was too much doubt in the case to proceed.

None of these cases are definitive. It is nearly impossible to prove a negative so long after the fact. And few lawyers can afford to spend time and resources trying to prove the innocence of an executed person when there are so many people with strong claims of innocence still living on death row.

Here is what we do know: 152 people have been exonerated from death rows around the country. In many of those cases, the exoneration came after a long legal battle and thanks to the extraordinary efforts of people working outside the system. One Illinois man, who came within *forty-eight hours* of execution, was freed thanks to the investigative work of undergraduate students at Northwestern University.<sup>5</sup> Any one of the 152 death row exonorees could have just have easily been executed.

**Q: I understand that innocent people were sentenced to death in the past. But now that there's DNA, why doesn't that take care of the problem?**

DNA testing is possible in just five to ten percent of criminal cases.<sup>6</sup> While DNA has uncovered many of the flaws in our nation's death penalty – including incompetent lawyers, misconduct, and more – DNA can't, by itself, solve those problems. Thanks to DNA, we now know that evidence we once thought was reliable can often be wrong, including eyewitness identification, confessions, jailhouse informants, and other forensics.

In most cases, there is simply no DNA to test. They instead must continue to rely on those other kinds of evidence – and those other types of evidence aren't very reliable at all. The National Academy of Sciences (NAS), the nation's premier institution of scientific advisors, have declared that most of the common categories of forensic evidence – including fingerprints, bitemarks, hair, and ballistics – are unreliable in connecting crime scene evidence to specific people.<sup>7</sup>

Even when there is DNA to test, it can be tainted or misused. Innocent people have been convicted of serious crimes on the basis of DNA evidence that was analyzed incorrectly or even fraudulently.<sup>8</sup> Any scientific evidence is only as good as the human beings conducting the tests – and human beings can't be right 100% of the time. Even with scientific advances, there is simply no way to create a death penalty system that always gets it right.

**Q: I agree that we shouldn't execute anyone where there is doubt. What about when we are 100% certain that the defendant is guilty?**

There are many examples of cases that seemed absolutely certain – only for cracks in that certainty to appear later.

Days after being violently raped, Jennifer Thompson-Cannino identified Ronald Cotton as the man responsible. Cotton was given a life sentence, based largely on her testimony. Nine years later DNA testing showed that another man was responsible for the rape and Cotton was innocent. Now Jennifer speaks out against the death penalty across the country. She was 100% certain she had the right guy – and she was wrong.

Ray Krone was given a death sentence after forensic experts said that bitemarks on a victim matched his and proved he was guilty. Krone was sentenced to death. It took ten years before DNA evidence exonerated him. Bitemark evidence has since been largely discredited by the National Academy of Sciences.

In Maryland a death sentence can only be imposed in cases where there is biological evidence, a videotape that links a defendant to a murder, or a videotaped confession. This is the narrowest death penalty in the nation but a report by 39 legal experts and former prosecutors outlined numerous cases of innocence where the restrictions would not have helped. And the extra procedures involved has made Maryland's death penalty trials longer and more complicated, which prolongs the pain for the families of murder victims and adds even more costs to an already expensive system.<sup>9</sup>

**Q: You say that the appeals often don't find the mistakes even though some people have been on death row for 20 years. What are all the appeals for if they're not catching the innocent people?**

The legal process is a thicket of statutes, precedents, and rules that take years to navigate. One may assume that each appeal is considering a key piece of evidence or substantive mistake in a case. In reality, many of these appeals are actually simply about process: whether the evidence should be looked at, which court should hear it, which procedural rule applies, how the issue should be raised, etc. Dozens of hearings and legal briefs may be required in several layers of courts before a single one even agrees to review the mistake or hear the new evidence.

**Q: I've heard about people sentenced to life who are later released from prison. Does life without parole really exist?**

Life without parole means what it says: the offender stays behind bars for the rest of his or her life, with no chance of ever being paroled. Life without parole sentences are different from "life" sentences, which do provide the option for parole. Some people have said that life without parole is really a "death sentence by incarceration" for that reason.

Many states didn't begin using life without parole until recently. Today, every state in the country except for Alaska now offers life without parole as an option.

**Q: You say the death penalty takes longer and is more expensive than any other sentence. If we repeal the death penalty, would the extra costs and time transfer to the next highest sentence?**

No. The death penalty isn't longer or more expensive because it's the "highest" sentence. It's longer and more expensive because it's irreversible. And it's the only punishment in the U.S. that is irreversible. That's why the Courts have long held that "death is different." In other words, while capital punishment comes under intense scrutiny and is subject to frequent tinkering and refining, other sentences don't receive that kind of oversight.

Even in life without parole cases, for example, a single lawyer is considered sufficient (death penalty cases require two because they are much more complicated), and juries don't have to be screened for their



opposition to incarceration the way they do with the death penalty. The penalty phase of a death penalty case simply doesn't exist for non-death penalty cases. None of these requirements would apply to other types of cases, even if the death penalty were off the table.

The experiences of states without the death penalty confirm this. New York eliminated the death penalty in 2007 and left life without parole as the highest sentence. In the years since then, life without parole cases have been treated more like second degree murder cases than death penalty cases. There have been no new procedures or extended appeals put into place.

In Massachusetts, which also has no death penalty, lawyers are certified, screened, and paid in the same way whether the case is a first or second degree murder case. Both life without parole and second degree murder cases take about the same length of time, and about ten times less than the estimated time of a death penalty case in Maryland, for example. Even when life without parole cases get appealed in these states, the results are similar to other murder cases. The appeals are not taken as seriously as death penalty appeals, they are shorter, there are fewer of them, and they have a much smaller success rate.<sup>9</sup>

### **Q: You say that the death penalty is neither “swift nor certain.” Isn't death the most certain there is?**

It may seem that way, but death is actually the *least* certain penalty there is. Historically, more than two-thirds of all death sentences are reversed at some point in the process for serious error. The vast majority of those cases are then re-sentenced to something other than death, like life without parole.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, every phase of the process, from trial and sentencing to appeals and reversals, means the offender's name is splashed all over newspapers and television and surviving families must relive their pain through the media, the courts, and in the public spotlight.

Most other sentences can begin instantly – the day the defendant leaves the courtroom. They fade from the front pages and into irrelevance from the public arena. Surviving loved ones are no longer tied to the person who committed the murder. The court process is over and the struggle to rebuild their lives can begin.

### **Q: Why should the taxpayers have to pay for incarcerating someone for years on end? Isn't it cheaper just to put someone to death?**

In actuality taxpayers get stuck with a much greater tab when the death penalty is an option. The death penalty process is more complicated because a life is on the line. But the system's finality, complexity, and length drive costs through the roof, diverting precious resources from crime prevention, victims' services, and other community needs.

Study after study has found that *death penalty cases cost up to 10 times more than comparable non-death penalty cases*. The most rigorous cost study in the country found that a single death sentence in Maryland costs almost \$2 million more. Maryland spent \$186 million extra to carry out just five executions.<sup>12</sup> In California, a 2011 study showed that death penalty cases are 20 times more expensive. That state has spent over \$4 billion on the death penalty since 1978.<sup>13</sup>

## **Q: Would the death penalty be cheaper if we just shortened the appeals process?**

No. Much of the extra costs in death penalty cases are incurred during the initial trial. Death penalty trials are among the most complicated and time-consuming cases a court faces. They involve more lawyers, more witnesses, more experts, a longer jury selection process, more pre-trial motions, an entirely separate trial to determine the sentence, and countless other expenses – *racking up exorbitant costs even before a single appeal is filed*. Moreover, these costs are incurred *even in cases where the prosecutor sought the death penalty but the jury chose a different punishment*.

Many of the extra costs are legally mandated to reduce the risk of executing an innocent person. And even these safeguards are not enough – at least 152 people have been exonerated from death row after waiting years or *decades* for the truth to come out. Cutting appeals would virtually guarantee that some of these innocent men and women would be dead today, executed for crimes they did not commit.

## **Q: My state has not studied the cost of the death penalty. How can we know that our death penalty costs us more?**

More than 15 studies in as many states have found that death penalty cases are more than 10 times more expensive than comparable non-death penalty cases. No state cost study has found the death penalty to be cheaper.

These studies come from all kinds of states – those that use the death penalty a lot like Texas and Florida, those that use it very little like Maryland and Kansas, and those in the middle like Tennessee and California. There is no reason to believe that a study in any other state will find they somehow manage to do it any cheaper.

## **Q: Even if the death penalty does cost more, can you put a price on justice?**

There is no price on justice. But the question of the cost of the death penalty isn't about counting dollars. It's about counting lives. For every dollar we spend on a broken death penalty system, we are taking money away from criminal justice programs that would actually prevent crime and keep us safer.

It has long been said that a budget is a moral document, because the choices we make about how to spend our precious resources are a reflection of what we think is important as a society.

Paying for the death penalty means choosing a failed policy that makes irreversible mistakes, monopolizes our courts, and delays justice for families of murder victims. Our resources are finite, so that choice is made at the expense of proven gang prevention programs, desperately needed grief counseling and financial assistance to families of murder victims, training or better equipment that would keep police officers safer, proper staffing that would keep our prisons safer, evidence-based crime prevention programs that would keep our neighborhoods safer, and many other things that would not only save lives, but also improve lives.

**Q: You say the death penalty is “arbitrary” and “unfair.” What does that mean? If someone committed a crime isn’t it *fair* that they are punished?**

The U.S. Supreme Court has said that if the death penalty is applied arbitrarily, it cannot be applied at all. Yet in reality, the system is little better than a lottery: an accomplice gets death while the person who actually pulled the trigger is sent to prison; a convenience store robbery gone awry results in execution, while a methodical serial killer gets a life sentence; two equivalent crimes occur on different sides of the county line – one sentenced to die, the other to prison. Such disparities are the norm, not the exception. Factors like geography, access to a decent lawyer, race, and even gender can often determine who lives and who dies.

**Q: You say the death penalty has failed because of all the innocent people who’ve been freed. Why don’t the reversals mean the system is working?**

A system that finds serious error in seven out of every 10 sentences can hardly be described as “working.” A high reversal rate means higher costs for the state and painful delays for victims’ families. It is also a red flag that something is terribly wrong with the system.

The 152 innocent people who were sentenced to die and later released had to fight long legal battles before the truth was finally heard. In many cases luck was a big factor in their release – another crime that happened to reveal the person actually responsible, for example, or even journalism students uncovering evidence as part of a class project. Those exonerated will tell you they were not freed because of the system, they were freed in spite of it.

**Q: The death penalty is so infrequently used in my state, why is there a pressing need to repeal it?**

As long as the death penalty is an option, there is a real and unacceptable risk of executing an innocent person. Plus, a death penalty that is so rarely used is little more than a cruel hoax on victims’ families, who are promised one punishment at the time their loved one is killed but often will never see an execution take place. And a death penalty that is virtually never used is just another name for life without parole – at an exorbitantly greater cost.

**Q: Death penalty opponents often say that capital punishment isn’t a deterrent to crime while proponents say it is. Which is it?**

There is no evidence that the death penalty deters crime any more or less than other harsh punishments like life in prison without parole.

If the death penalty deterred, one would expect the South – where executions are frequent, to have

lower murder rates than other regions, and for states with the death penalty to be safer than those states without. In fact, the opposite is true. Regions with the most executions also have the highest murder rates.<sup>14</sup> And states without the death penalty actually have lower murder rates than those with the death penalty.<sup>15</sup>

This isn't surprising: to the extent someone with a deadly weapon in a rage is going to be deterred from anything, the real prospect of spending a lifetime in prison is at least as persuasive as the small chance of getting executed. There is simply no correlation between murder rates and the death penalty, and nearly two-thirds of Americans and 88% of criminalologists agree that the death penalty is not an effective deterrent.<sup>16</sup>

A recent batch of studies have come out claiming that the death penalty does deter. These studies have come under intense attack in the research world for their faulty methods, missing data, misleading categorization, and a host of other problems that make the data completely unreliable.

In 2012, the National Research Council reviewed all of the deterrence studies from all sides of the issue and found there was no credible evidence that the death penalty deters murder.<sup>17</sup>

### **Q: Don't we owe it to murder victims and their families to execute the person who took their loved one away?**

People who have experienced the trauma of losing a loved one to murder deserve to see the person responsible for the crime held accountable, as swiftly and surely as possible. They also deserve to have as much support rebuilding their lives as possible. The death penalty provides neither of those things.

It prolongs pain for victims' families, dragging them through an agonizing and lengthy process that holds out the promise of an execution at the beginning but often results in a different sentence in the end. Meanwhile, it showers scarce resources on a few cherry-picked cases while real needs of the vast majority of victims' families, such as specialized grief counseling, financial assistance, and ongoing support, are ignored.

### **Q: Do we need the death penalty to keep someone who already has a life sentence from killing again in prison?**

No. In fact, the death penalty has nothing to do with prison safety. Proper staffing, equipment, programming, and classification are the keys to making prisons safe and preventing prison murder.

People serving life sentences have *more* incentive than others to follow prison rules, because they must make prison their homes for life. Breaking the rules can jeopardize the few privileges they can secure in the prison world, and they must stay on the good side of guards who will control their every move until the day they die. For those few individuals who do break rules, corrections officers will tell you that it is always possible to make life more difficult for an inmate – including isolation, which can be much more agonizing than the prospect of an execution.

## **Q: Do we need the death penalty to protect police officers?**

No. The death penalty has not been shown to save the lives of law enforcement. In fact, more than twice the number of police officers were killed in the South from 2002-2011 than any other region in the country, even though the South is home to the majority of executions in the U.S.<sup>18</sup>

The best way to keep police officers safe is to ensure proper staffing, equipment, and training to officers and to implement crime prevention programs that work. The death penalty is a distraction from those concrete needs, diverting millions of law enforcement dollars that could be used to keep police and the public safe.

Law enforcement agree that the death penalty is ineffective at reducing violent crime. A full 99% of police chiefs said that other changes such as reducing drug abuse or improving the economy were more important than expanding the death penalty in reducing violent crime.<sup>19</sup>

## **Q: What about the most heinous crimes? Do we need a special punishment for the “worst of the worst”?**

All murders are heinous. Reserving a punishment for the “worst of the worst” murders implies that other murders are ordinary. There is no such thing as an “ordinary” murder for the grieving family left behind. The death penalty necessarily divides families from those worthy of a death penalty case and those who are not. It elevates certain victims’ lives above others. Many families of murder victims feel these kinds of distinctions are disrespectful.

## **Q: Do we need to keep the death penalty for terrorists?**

No. In fact, the death penalty can actually *impede* the fight against terrorism. It can make martyrs out of people who committed acts of terrorism (some of whom sought to die for their acts anyway) and make it easier recruit more people to their cause. Many of our international allies have refused to extradite people accused of terrorism to the United States because of our death penalty system, preventing us from prosecuting or even interrogating them. And finally, executing people convicted of terrorism sends these individuals to their grave with a wealth of intelligence that could one day help prevent other terrorist plots.

Terrorism is not an ordinary crime that can be addressed with standard law enforcement tools and resources at the local level. It requires a complex solution that integrates law enforcement with intelligence, defense, diplomacy, and foreign policy considerations. The death penalty often gets in the way of the effort to balance these considerations, especially at the state level.

## **Q: Do prosecutors need the death penalty to secure plea bargains?**

Using death as a billy club to secure plea bargains is not only unnecessary, it’s dangerous. The threat of death increases the risk of convicting the innocent. There are documented cases of innocent people confessing to crimes they did not commit simply to avoid a death sentence. They often spent years in

prison before the truth was uncovered. This is why many prosecutors believe it is unethical to use the death penalty to force a plea.

Many cases are resolved by plea bargains – whether or not the death penalty is on the table. Life and death are too important to be used as a bargaining chip – and the evidence suggests that guilty pleas are frequent even without such coercion.

## **Q: What is a moratorium on executions? How is it different from repealing the death penalty?**

A moratorium is like a time-out on executions for a certain period of time. Often a moratorium is put in place while the death penalty's many problems are studied and addressed. The only thing on hold during a moratorium is the actual execution – no one is removed from death row and prosecutors are free to seek death sentences.

Many states use the death penalty infrequently. But execution gaps – even if they are indefinite – do not provide any mechanism for addressing the death penalty's flaws. If the state did suddenly resume executions, innocent people would *still* be at risk and the process for determining sentencing would *still* be arbitrarily and unfairly applied.

And even if the state never resumes executions, this kind of limbo creates other problems. The death penalty system would continue to drag victims' families through the agonizingly long and complicated process, promising an execution that would probably never happen. Millions would be wasted pursuing death sentences that would never be carried out. And thousands of hours of court and law enforcement time would be spent chasing executions instead of solving scores of other crimes.

Taking a break from executions is not a permanent solution. The only way to address the death penalty's serious flaws is to end it.

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- <sup>1</sup> Judge Sharon Keller of the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals, was eventually reprimanded by the State Commission on Judicial Conduct for her role in the execution of Michael Wayne Richards.
  - <sup>2</sup> Supreme Court Justice Samuel A. Alito Jr. described what had happened to death row inmate Corey Maples as “a veritable perfect storm of misfortune.”
  - <sup>3</sup> James Liebman et al, “Los Tocayos Carlos.” <http://www3.law.columbia.edu/hrlr/ltr/>.
  - <sup>4</sup> David Grann, “Trial by Fire. Did Texas Execute an Innocent Man?” *The New Yorker*, September 7, 2009.
  - <sup>5</sup> Anthony Porter – see Death Penalty Information Center for more details on the case.
  - <sup>6</sup> “Non-DNA Exonerations,” Innocence Project. <http://www.innocenceproject.org/know/non-dna-exonerations.php>.
  - <sup>7</sup> National Research Council of the National Academies, “Strengthening Forensic Science in the United States: A Path Forward,” 2009.
  - <sup>8</sup> See, for example, the cases of Josiah Sutton, Timothy Durham, and Gilbert Alejandro.



- <sup>9</sup> “Maryland’s Death Penalty. Still Here, Still Unfair. More Arbitrary and Costly.” Maryland Citizens Against State Executions, 2012.
- <sup>10</sup> James S. Liebman et al, “A Broken System: Error Rates in Capital Cases, 1973-1995,” Columbia Law School Journal, 2000.
- <sup>11</sup> Jonathan Gradess, “The Cost of the Death Penalty in Maryland,” Testimony before the Maryland Commission on Capital Punishment, 2008.
- <sup>12</sup> John Roman et al, “The Cost of the Death Penalty in Maryland,” Urban Institute, 2008. <http://www.urban.org/url.cfm?ID=411625>.
- <sup>13</sup> Judge Arthur L. Alarcon and Paula M. Mitchell, “Executing the Will of the Voters?: A roadmap to mend or end the California legislature’s multi-billion dollar death penalty debacle,” 44 Loyola of Los Angeles Law Review S41, Special Issue, 2011.
- <sup>14</sup> Murder rates based on the years 2001 to 2011. FBI’s Uniform Crime Reports, cited by the Death Penalty Information Center.
- <sup>15</sup> Murder rates based on the years 1991 to 2011. FBI’s Uniform Crime Reports, cited by the Death Penalty Information Center.
- <sup>16</sup> Michael Radelet and Traci Lacock, “Do Executions Lower Homicide Rates? The Views of Leading Criminologists,” *Journal of Law and Criminology*, 2008. General public’s views taken from Gallup poll, 2011. 64% of those polled say the death penalty is not a deterrent.
- <sup>17</sup> National Research Council of the National Academies, “Deterrence and the Death Penalty,” 2012.
- <sup>18</sup> Law enforcement murder rates based on the years 2002-2011. “Law Enforcement Officers Feloniously Killed, Table 1,” FBI Uniform Crime Report, 2011.
- <sup>19</sup> National Survey of Police Chiefs Report in “Smart on Crime.” Death Penalty Information Center. <http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/documents/CostsRptFinal.pdf>.



# Catholic Mobilizing Network

To End the Use of the Death Penalty

## What Every Catholic Should Know About the Death Penalty

### Scripture and the Death Penalty

In *A Culture of Life and the Penalty of Death*, the bishops explain the scriptural roots of Catholic teaching on the death penalty. This begins with the story of creation, which teaches that every life is a precious gift from God (see Gn 2:7, 21-23). This gift must be respected and protected. We are created in God's image and redeemed by Jesus Christ, who himself was crucified."

***"Mercy is the Lord's most powerful message. It is not easy to trust oneself to the mercy of God, because his mercy is an unfathomable abyss. But we must do it!"***

— Pope Francis, *First Statement as Pope*, March 2013

The bishops also explain, "some argue that biblical statements about 'life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth' (see Ex 21:23-25, Lv 24:17, Dt 19:21) require that the death penalty be used for certain crimes. A correct interpretation of these passages indicates, however, that the principal intent of such laws was to limit the retribution that could be exacted for an offense, not to require a minimum punishment. Furthermore, it is important to read individual passages in the context of Sacred Scripture as a whole. While the Old Testament includes some passages about taking the life of one who kills, the Old Testament and the teaching of Christ in the New Testament call us to protect life, practice mercy, and reject vengeance."

### From a Victim's Family

*"By the time Shannon's murderer was captured four years later, we had learned that 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... Facing the reality of her death made us realize that the sacredness of life was not an abstract concept. Ultimately we concluded that if we couldn't stand by our principles when it was excruciatingly difficult, then they were not our principles at all. We took the stand to oppose the use of capital punishment for our daughter's murder."*

— Vicki Schieber, mother of murdered daughter, Shannon;  
founder, *Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights*

### Catholic Teaching and the Death Penalty

***"the death penalty is inadmissible, no matter how serious the crime committed. It is an offence against the inviolability of life and the dignity of the human person, which contradicts God's plan for man and society, and his merciful justice, and impedes the penalty from fulfilling any just objective."***

— Pope Francis, *letter*, March 2015

Catholic teaching offers a unique perspective on crime and punishment. It affirms our commitment to comfort and support victims and their families, while acknowledging the God-given dignity of every human life, even those who do great harm.

Catholic teaching on human life is rooted in the belief that all life is a gift from God that must be respected and defended from conception to natural death. In his encyclical *The Gospel of Life*, the Holy Father challenges followers of Christ to be "unconditionally pro-life." He reminds us, "The dignity of human life must never be taken away, even in the case of someone who has done great evil. Modern society has the means of protecting itself, without definitively denying criminals the chance to reform" (*Gospel of Life*, 27).

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains, "the traditional teaching of the Church does not exclude recourse to the death penalty, if this is the only possible way of effectively defending human lives against the unjust aggressor. If, however, non-lethal means are sufficient to defend and protect people's safety from the aggressor, authority will limit itself to such means" (CCC, 2267). The test of whether the death penalty can be used is not the gravity of the offense, but whether it is absolutely necessary to protect society. The *Catechism* adds that today "the cases in which the execution of the offender is an absolute necessity 'are very rare, if not practically non-existent'" (CCC, 2267).

The Catholic bishops of the United States have spoken out clearly and strongly against the use of the death penalty. In 1999 they issued *A Good Friday Appeal to End the Death Penalty*. They explained that their opposition to the death penalty is based on more than concern for "what it does to those guilty of horrible crimes but for what it does to all of us as a society." In 2005 they issued *A Culture of Life and the Penalty of Death*. They acknowledged that sentences such as "life in prison without parole" provide non-lethal alternatives and called for an end to the use of the death penalty in the United States, stating "it is time for our nation to abandon the illusion that we can protect life by taking life."

## Facts About the Death Penalty

### From the Death Penalty Information Center

#### Who Is Affected?

Approximately 3,035 inmates are on death row in 37 state, military and federal prisons. Since 1976, there have been a total of 1,402 executions in the United States, including 43 in 2012, 39 in 2013, 35 in 2014 and 8 in 2015 as of February 16, 2015. But the impact of the death penalty goes well beyond those on death row. It also impacts the families of inmates as well as the families of victims. To date, 18 states and the District of Columbia have repealed the penalty: AK, CT, HI, IL, IO, ME, MD, MA, MI, MN, NJ, NM, NY, ND, RI, VT, WV, WI and DC.

#### Misspent Millions

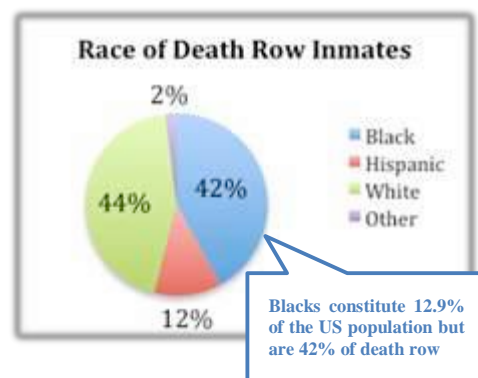
Citizens of 32 states are implicated in the death penalty through their tax dollars. Studies in state after state have shown that the death penalty is more costly than alternative sentences. For example, the California death penalty system costs taxpayers \$118.5 million per year over and above the costs of keeping convicts locked up for life (*California Commission on the Fair Administration of Justice*, Pg 117).

#### Innocent Lives in the Balance

Human beings run the criminal justice system—and we make mistakes. 150 people from 26 states have been exonerated from death row after finding evidence of their innocence. Rather than showing that the system is working, exonerations provide evidence that our system is flawed. DNA testing cannot solve these problems. DNA evidence exists in only 10% of criminal cases.

#### Is the Justice System Just?

- Over 90% of those on death row across the country were too poor to afford their own attorney.
- Studies by states across the country show that geography plays a role in who lives and dies. A similar murder might get death in one county but not in a nearby county.
- Over 80% of those executed in the U.S. were convicted of killing a white person, even though African Americans are the victims in at least half of all homicides (*Death Row USA*, NAACP Legal Defense Fund)
- In 2013, China, Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and the US ranked as the top 5 countries worldwide with the most confirmed executions.



## What You Can Do

- **Pray** for victims of crime and their families, those who have been wrongly convicted, and those awaiting execution.
- **Learn** about Catholic social teaching, U.S. criminal justice policies, and the policies in your state. Go to the web site listed below for more information about the death penalty.
- **Educate** people in your parish or community about Catholic social teaching and the criminal justice system. Visit the web site listed below for Vatican and U.S. bishops' statements on the death penalty as well as statements from individual bishops and states Catholic Conferences.
- **Advocate** by contacting your elected officials. Discuss Catholic teaching on the death penalty and what steps could be taken at the state and national level to curtail or end its use.




**Join the Catholic Mobilizing Network to End the Use of the Death Penalty**

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