



DOMINICAN SISTERS OF SPRINGFIELD, ILLINOIS

CORPORATE STANCE: ABOLITION OF THE DEATH PENALTY

We, the Dominican Sisters of Springfield Illinois, recognize and respect the dignity of all persons and seek to end all forms of violence in our lives and in our world. We therefore seek the abolition of the death penalty.

June 1999

EXPERIENCE

Capital punishment is permitted under U.S. federal, military and civilian law. Currently, the laws of 25 states provide for the death penalty. Twenty-one states have abolished the death penalty, and 4 states have a death penalty moratorium ordered by the governor.

Of the 195 countries recognized by the United Nations, the U.S. along with China, Iran, Iraq, Uganda, Somalia, Rwanda, and Syria are among the 55 countries/territories that retain capital punishment. One-hundred-forty-two countries have abolished it in law or in practice (do not execute persons even though they have the law).

Since 1973, more than 160 people have been released from death row with evidence of their innocence.

ANALYSIS

The death penalty is final, and it is flawed. The imposition of the death penalty has been shown to be biased toward poor persons and minorities. In states across the country, African Americans are disproportionately represented on death row and among those who have been executed. Black people make up 13 percent of the population, but they make up 42 percent of death row and 35 percent of those executed (2017).

In addition, many studies have found that the race of the victim affects who receives the death penalty, with homicides of white victims more likely to result in the death penalty. In 96% of the reviews of race and the death penalty in death penalty states, there was a pattern of either race-of-victim or race-of-defendant discrimination, or both. 62% of all executions since 1976 have occurred in the southern states and Texas, former slave states.

The federal system is no different. Several reviews of the federal death penalty have found troubling racial disparities in charging, plea bargaining, sentencing, and executions. As of 2019, there are 62 people on death row, and 37 are persons of color. Twenty-six of these individuals are black.

A review conducted by the United States Department of Justice found that 48% of White defendants were able to receive a sentence less than death through plea bargaining. Yet, only 25% of Black defendants and 28% of Hispanic defendants were able to plead guilty in exchange for life sentences. Poor persons do not have equal access to good defense. About 90% of those persons facing capital charges cannot afford their own attorney.

Using the death penalty as a deterrence for taking a life does not work. Death penalty states as a group do not have lower rates of criminal homicide than non-death penalty states. We are able to defend and protect society by means other than the death penalty. Life in prison without parole can do this.

The argument that housing a prisoner for life is more expensive than execution is inaccurate. Numerous studies show that the death penalty actually costs society more than keeping a person in prison for life. Costs include court appointed defense, pre-trial preparation, lengthier jury selection, longer trial, added security during incarceration, and automatic appeals that rightly follow such a conviction.

REFLECTION

The foundation of all Catholic Social Teaching is the inherent dignity of the human person. Catholic teaching on human dignity is rich and multi-faceted. The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church teaches that every human being must always be understood in his/her unrepeatable and inviolable uniqueness. This entails above all that political and social institutions and their leaders must be for the promotion and integral development of the person.

Pope Francis has spoken out against the death penalty, noting that every life must be guarded without exception and that capital punishment is a serious violation of the right to life belonging to every person. In 2018, he approved changes to the Catechism of the Catholic Church (2267). *The death penalty is inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person*, with the addition that the church *works with determination for its abolition worldwide*.

Abolishing the death penalty worldwide, he said, is *courageous* and witnesses to the conviction that humanity can *face crime and reject evil*, offering the guilty the possibility to repair the damage caused. Pope Francis reiterated that the doctrine accepting the death penalty came from a *period that was more legalistic than Christian* which *ignored the primacy of mercy over justice*.

The full body of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops voted overwhelmingly to accept the revised passage in the catechism in June, 2019.

ACTION

1. For more information, go to Death Penalty Information Center <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/> and the National Coalition Against the Death Penalty <http://www.ncadp.org/>
2. The U.S. Attorney General recently reinstated the death penalty for federal crimes and ordered six executions. For now, the courts have delayed those executions from going forward. Contact your senators and representative to voice opposition to the reinstatement of the death penalty.
3. The Death Penalty Information Center has a section focused on victims' families. <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/policy-issues/victims-families>. They cannot be forgotten in our work of opposing the death penalty.