

Catechism of the Catholic Church

2265. Legitimate defense can be not only a right but a grave duty for one who is responsible for the lives of others. ***The defense of the common good requires that an unjust aggressor be rendered unable to cause harm.*** For this reason, those who legitimately hold authority also have the right to use arms to repel aggressors against the civil community entrusted to their responsibility.

2266. The efforts of the state to curb the spread of behavior harmful to people's rights and to the basic rules of civil society correspond to the requirement of safeguarding the common good. ***Legitimate public authority has the right and the duty to inflict punishment proportionate to the gravity of the offense.*** Punishment has the primary aim of redressing the disorder introduced by the offense. When it is willingly accepted by the guilty party, it assumes the value of expiation. Punishment then, in addition to defending public order and protecting people's safety, has a medicinal purpose: as far as possible, it must contribute to the correction of the guilty party.

2267. Assuming that the guilty party's identity and responsibility have been fully determined, 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, nonlethal 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. Today, as a consequence of the possibilities which the state has for effectively preventing crime, by rendering one who has committed an offense incapable of doing harm—without definitively taking away from him the possibility of redeeming himself—***the cases in which executing an offender is an absolute necessity are very rare, if not practically nonexistent.***

Recommended Resources

Evangelium Vitae (The Gospel of Life), encyclical letter by Pope John Paul II, 1995.

A Culture of Life & the Penalty of Death, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005.

Compendium of Social Doctrine, Pontifical Council for Justice & Peace, 2004; United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Web Sites

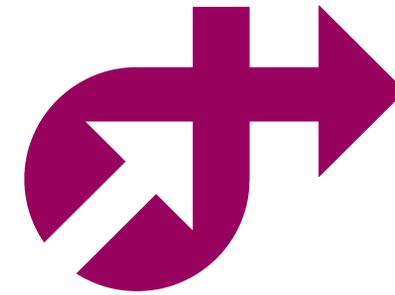
- Catholic Campaign to End the Use of the Death Penalty www.ccedp.org
- The Death Penalty Information Center www.deathpenaltyinfo.org
- Catholics Against Capital Punishment www.igc.org/cacp
- National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty www.ncadp.org
- The Journey of Hope www.journeyofhope.org
- Murder Victims Families for Human Rights www.murdervictimsfamilies.org

For more information on current efforts in Indiana to abolish the death penalty, please contact:

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The Indiana Catholic Conference is the coordinating body of the five Catholic dioceses of Indiana. Its Board consists of the bishop and a layperson from each diocese.

The Death Penalty



No Justice

No Healing

No Closure

From the

Indiana Catholic Conference

As Catholics, we profess and are called to uphold a consistent ethic of life, to stand against violence in every form—abortion, euthanasia, assisted suicide, war, and all those conditions which undermine the dignity of life, including poverty, hunger, racism, endemic diseases, and so on.

Today, we ask that you reflect upon the death penalty. It is important for us to consider this against the background of the consistent challenge of the gospels to promote love, not hate; forgiveness, not vengeance. Jesus, Himself a victim of the death penalty, did not condemn His executioners, but forgave them.

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We cannot teach that killing is wrong by killing. The death penalty not only affects the person executed by denying him or her the opportunity for repentance and rehabilitation, but it also perpetuates the cycle of violence and further diminishes the respect for human life in ourselves. It neither promotes authentic healing for the victims or families of the victims of crime, nor deters criminal behavior in society.

Thank God that few of us have had our hearts torn asunder by the homicide of a family member or dear friend. We might imagine that the killing of the guilty would somehow ennoble the family and friends of the victim or somehow help them come to closure in their grief. That is not generally what happens. Killing the guilty may satisfy society's anger for awhile, but it doesn't release or ease the murder victim's loved ones from their grief. Only forgiveness accomplishes that.

Jesus showed again and again by His words and in His actions that the only true road to justice passes through mercy. Justice cannot be served by more violence.

Life is God's to give and God's to take. It is not for us to play God and to deprive a sinner of the possibility of repentance. It is for us to put into action the words we pray often every day in the prayer which Jesus taught us: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

In his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae (The Gospel of Life)*, Pope John Paul II stated the teaching of the Catholic Church in #56: "Punishment ought not go to the extreme of executing the offender except in cases of absolute necessity." The Pope went on to teach that such cases of absolute necessity in which society cannot be defended in any other way are "very rare, if not practically non-existent." The Catechism of the Catholic Church repeats this teaching of Pope John Paul II in #2267.

As disciples of Jesus, we have deep compassion for the survivors of a murder victim. We need to accompany them through their painful journey from deep sorrow, anger, and despair to some measure of peace.

We must also take to heart the words preached by Pope John Paul II in St. Louis in January 1999: "The new evangelization calls us to be unconditionally pro-life: we will proclaim, celebrate and serve the Gospel of Life in every Situation ... modern society has the means of protecting itself, without definitively denying criminals the chance to reform. I renew the appeal I made most recently for a consensus to end the death penalty, which is both cruel and unnecessary." For more than 25 years, the Indiana Catholic Conference has addressed its concern regarding the use of the death penalty.

Indiana should forego the use of the death penalty because

- **There are other ways to protect society and punish criminals.**
- **Its application is flawed and can be irreversibly wrong.**
- **State-sanctioned killing in the name of its citizens diminishes all of us.**
- **The sanction of death undermines respect of human life and dignity.**

In seeking to end the use of the death penalty, we do not dismiss the evil and harm caused by people who commit horrible crimes, especially murders. We share in the sorrow and loss of the families and victims of such crimes. And we call upon our faith community and all persons of good will to stand with the victims and to provide spiritual, pastoral, and personal support. Yet the pain and loss from one death cannot be wiped away by another. The death penalty does not bring healing, reconciliation, or justice.

The Death Penalty in Indiana

After Indiana reinstated the death penalty in 1976, its use of the death penalty was uncommon until 1994. Only 2 individuals were executed from 1976 through 1993. From 1994 through 1999, the state executed 5 individuals, almost 1 per year. Since 2001, there has been a significant increase—2 executions in 2001, 2 in 2003, 5 in 2005, and 1 in January 2006.

Indiana is 1 of 38 states that continue to execute individuals; 12 states do not have the death penalty.

The death penalty is deeply flawed. In Indiana, 2 persons have been exonerated after serving time on death row.

Indiana law has changed in recent years to reflect changes in the application of the death penalty:

- **Juveniles and the mentally retarded are no longer eligible for the death penalty.**
- **A jury must impose the death sentence in a capital case, rather than the judge.**

In 1993, Indiana adopted an alternative—life without parole. However, since this alternative became available, 19 individuals have been condemned to death in Indiana.

Attitudes regarding the death penalty are changing. Support for the death penalty among Catholics continues to decrease; in a recent poll, only 48% support its use.

- **53% of Catholics ages 18–28 oppose the use of death penalty.**
- **56% of Catholics who attend mass weekly oppose its use.**

