

Social Effects of the Death Penalty

Discussion Group Handout #4

In this group, you will reflect on some of the social effects of the death penalty. Ask one or several people to read aloud and consider the following passages, and then discuss what you have read based on the questions which follow. Have one group member take notes to summarize your discussion for the larger group. You will have 15 minutes for your discussion.

Building a Culture of Life

Others question whether our criminal justice system can indeed protect society. They point to examples of the release of offenders who subsequently commit horrible acts of violence. But in the face of a growing culture of death, every effort should be made to promote a culture of life. Therefore, we believe that the primary response to these situations should not be the use of the death penalty but should instead be the promotion of needed reform of the criminal justice system so that society is more effectively protected. One alternative to the death penalty is life without the possibility of parole for those who continue to pose a deadly threat to society. Our Conference has addressed these challenges in its criminal justice statement entitled *Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration*.¹

Catholic teaching on the common good commits each of us to pursue the good of everyone and of society as a whole.² When the state, in our names and with our taxes, ends a human life despite having non-lethal alternatives, it suggests that society can overcome violence with violence. The use of the death penalty ought to be abandoned not only for what it does to those who are executed, but for what it does to all of society.³

The pursuit of the common good is linked directly to the defense of human life. At a time when the sanctity of life is threatened in many ways, taking life is not really a solution but may instead effectively undermine respect for life. In many ways the death penalty is about us: the actions taken in our name, the values which guide our lives, and the dignity that we accord to human life. Public policies that treat some lives as unworthy of protection, or that are perceived as vengeful, fracture the moral conviction that human life is sacred.⁴

Effects on Families

Our family of faith must care for sisters and brothers who have been wounded by violence and support them in their loss and search for justice. They deserve our compassion, solidarity, and support—spiritual, pastoral, and personal. However, standing with families of victims does not compel us to support the use of the death penalty.... For many left behind, a death sentence offers the illusion of closure and vindication. No act, even an execution, can bring back a loved one or heal terrible wounds. The pain and loss of one death cannot be wiped away by another death.⁵

A number of us have also visited people on death row. We have listened to their families who tell of their own fear, grief, and shame. Some who have been on death row have been released after years of facing execution because new evidence has exonerated them. The human loss and cycle of violence in capital cases touches their families too.⁶

¹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *A Culture of Life and the Penalty of Death: A Statement of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Calling for an End to the Use of the Death Penalty* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2005), 7.

² See John Paul II, *On Social Concern (Sollicitudo Rei Socialis)* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1987), no. 38.

³ *A Culture of Life and the Penalty of Death*, 14.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 5, 6.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

Effects on the Criminal Justice System

Those who work in the criminal justice system also deserve our concern, prayers, and attention. Governors, wardens, corrections officers, judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys, and especially those involved directly in executions face difficult choices of life and death, crime and punishment, justice and mercy, rehabilitation and redemption. In addition, some may find themselves required to participate in a process they find morally objectionable.⁷

Our prisons must be transformed from warehouses of human failure and seedbeds of violence to places of responsibility, rehabilitation, and restoration.⁸ [...] It is time to turn away from a deeply flawed system of state-sponsored executions to a way of protecting society and holding accountable the truly guilty in a way that reflects our society's best values.⁹

Discussion

- How does the Church's teaching on the dignity of each individual life and on the social nature of each human being (i.e. called to community) affect your perspective on the way the death penalty affects individuals, families, and societies?
- What effects does the use of the death penalty have on our efforts to build a culture of life and a society which promotes the common good?
- How could our criminal justice system change to respect human life and dignity more consistently?

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 18. See also United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2000), 39.

⁹ *A Culture of Life and the Penalty of Death*, 20.