

Catholic Teaching on the Use of the Death Penalty

Sample Group Discussion Plan

This resource for group discussion of Catholic Social Teaching and the death penalty facilitates a program which lasts for one hour. You may choose to extend discussion times in small and large group settings for a longer program.

In preparing for the group discussion, you will need at least one copy of each small group discussion handout for each group (although you may want to provide each group member with a copy as well). You will need paper and pens or pencils for someone from each group to record the group's discussion. You will need to make a copy of the quotations and prayer intentions for the closing reflection and cut them apart to distribute among participants.

Introduction and Opening Prayer (5 minutes)

Leader: We have come together today to learn about and reflect on the death penalty and how our Catholic Faith informs our consciences and convictions on this issue. We will have an opportunity to consider perspectives on the death penalty both as a whole group and in smaller discussions. We will begin as we will end, in prayer:

*Heavenly Father,
You create each person in your image and
invite everyone
to a special relationship with you, our sole
end.
You alone are the Lord of life.
Restore our relationships with you and
one another.
Lord, Jesus Christ,
You are the Way, the Truth, and the Life.
Help us to find our way to justice, to
understand the truth of our human dignity,
and to find new life in you.
Holy Spirit, source of all wisdom.
Renew in us the light of reason and the
spirit of love.
Bless our time together today.
Father, we ask this through Our Lord
Jesus Christ,
Your Son,
who lives, and reigns with you and
the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*

Opening Discussion (10 minutes)

Encourage participants to share their current understanding of the death penalty and Catholic Social Teaching. This time should help them to start thinking about perspectives on the issue:

- What are some typical arguments you hear, whether you agree or disagree with them, in support of the death penalty? Against the death penalty?
- What do you know about Catholic teaching on the death penalty? What are some principles of Catholic Social Teaching (CST) which apply to this issue?
- The Life and Dignity of the Human Person¹ is one of the themes of Catholic Social Teaching. Our Call to Family, Community, and Participation,² with particular concern for the common good, is another. What do these principles suggest about Catholic teaching on the death penalty?
- We will now break into four groups for reflection on specific aspects of the death penalty. The first group will consider Catholic teaching on the use of the death penalty; the second group will reflect on human life, crime and punishment in Scripture; the third group will learn about the effectiveness of the death penalty; and the fourth group will focus on social effects of the death penalty. You will have 15 minutes to read about and discuss your topic as a group. I will ask for one person to take notes and be prepared to summarize your group's discussion for all of us.

Divide the large group into four equal-sized groups, preferably with participants randomly distributed. Ask for a volunteer recorder/reporter from each group and provide him/her with paper and a pen/pencil. Distribute the

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

You will have 15 minutes for your discussion.

¹ E.g. "The Catholic Church proclaims that human life is sacred and that the dignity of the human person is the foundation of a moral vision for society.... We believe that every person is precious, that people are more important than things, and that the measure of every institution is whether it threatens or enhances the life and dignity of the human person." (<http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/projects/socialteaching/excerpt.shtml>)

² E.g. "The person is not only sacred but also social. How we organize our society in economics and politics, in law and policy directly affects human dignity and the capacity of individuals to grow in community.... We believe people have a right and a duty to participate in society, seeking together the common good and well-being of all, especially the poor and vulnerable." (<http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/projects/socialteaching/excerpt.shtml>)

Closing Discussion (25 minutes)

Leader: Call the discussion groups back to the whole gathering. Ask the recorder/reporter from each group to report back on general themes they covered. Encourage other group members to add any other points that they found meaningful. What struck or challenged them most? Encourage comments on the application of CST to the death penalty as well as personal experiences or perspectives. Once a group has finished sharing, invite participants from other groups to ask questions or share their reactions and responses. Each group should have 5 minutes to report on their discussion.

With the remaining five minutes, ask the whole group to consider, one question at a time: What are ways our community can take action? What can we do to help eliminate the use of the death penalty? How can we spread awareness of this issue and the Church's teaching? Who would like to commit to being involved in carrying out these ideas?

Closing Reflection and Prayer (5 minutes)

Gather for reflection and prayer in an arrangement that is appropriate for your group (e.g. standing or sitting in a circle). Cut into separate pieces and distribute the following quotations and intentions, depending on the size of your group. Ask those with quotations to read them out loud in turn.

“Our witness to respect for life shines most brightly when we demand respect for each and every human life, including the lives of those who fail to show that respect for others. The antidote to violence is love, not more violence.”—United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Living the Gospel of Life: A Challenge to American Catholics* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1998), 22.

“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, 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. I renew the appeal I made...for a consensus to end the death penalty, which is both cruel and unnecessary. —Pope John Paul II, Homily at the Papal Mass at the Trans World Dome, St. Louis, MO (January 27, 1999).

“O LORD, you have probed me, you know me:
you know when I sit and stand; you understand my thoughts from afar.
My travels and my rest you mark; with all my ways you are familiar.
Even before a word is on my tongue, LORD, you know it all.
Behind and before you encircle me and rest your hand upon me.
You formed my inmost being; you knit me in my mother's womb” (Ps. 139:1-5, 13).

“Have mercy on me, God, in your goodness; in your abundant compassion blot out my offense.
Wash away all my guilt; from my sin cleanse me.
For I know my offense; my sin is always before me.
Against you alone have I sinned; I have done such evil in your sight” (Ps. 51:3-5).

“Cleanse me with hyssop, that I may be pure; wash me, make me whiter than snow.
Let me hear sounds of joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice.
Turn away your face from my sins; blot out all my guilt.
A clean heart create for me, God; renew in me a steadfast spirit.
Do not drive me from your presence, nor take from me your holy spirit.
Restore my joy in your salvation; sustain in me a willing spirit.
I will teach the wicked your ways, that sinners may return to you” (Ps. 51:9-15).

Leader: We now offer these intentions for our nation and our Church (*Invite those with the intentions to read them*):

“We pray for victims of crime and their loved ones, for those awaiting execution and their families, for our leaders, for those who work in the criminal justice system, and for one another—that we might help bring an end to the culture of violence and build a culture of life in our nation and throughout the world.”

“We pray that the Church may reach out to the families of those whose lives have been taken away through violence, and assure them of our support, compassion, and care.”

“We pray for the commitment to advocate for public policies that better protect society from perpetrators of violence, and that do not resort to the death penalty.”

“We pray for the desire to learn more about Catholic teaching on the death penalty, and the grace to reflect seriously on our own attitudes and positions on the death penalty.”

“We pray for opportunities to educate others about Catholic teaching on the death penalty and the criminal justice system, with courage and clarity, in ways that persuade.”

“We pray for the strength to advocate in the Congress, in the courts, and in the public square; to urge our public officials to support measures that restrict the death penalty or provide alternatives; and in a particular way, to ask those who make decisions about the death penalty to take their own opportunities to bring an end to its use.”

“We pray for the inspiration to reform the criminal justice system to make it more just, more effective, and more restorative to victims, offenders, and communities.”

“We pray for success in building a constituency for life, not death, to defend life, not take it away.”

Leader: We lift up all these hopes and visions in the Name of Jesus, who taught us to pray, “**Our Father...**”

Give participants a copy of the “What Every Catholic Should Know About the Death Penalty” handout to take as they leave.