



# NEWS

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## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

### **U.S. Bishops' Proposed Statement Calls for End to the Use of "The Penalty of Death" to Build a "Culture of Life"**

WASHINGTON—A statement to be considered by the U.S. Catholic bishops declares the United States cannot "teach that killing is wrong by killing those who kill." The use of the death penalty contributes to a cycle of violence in our society that must be broken, according to *A Culture of Life and the Penalty of Death*. "The sanction of death undermines respect for human life and dignity."

The statement describes the death penalty as a continuing sign of a "culture of death" in U.S. society. "It is time for our nation to abandon the illusion that we can protect life by taking life," the bishops' proposed document asserts. "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 what it does to all of society."

The statement echoes the powerful words and courageous action of Pope John Paul II who taught clearly and forcefully against the use of the death penalty. In his encyclical, *The Gospel of Life*, Pope John Paul II insisted that punishment "ought not go to the extreme of executing the offender except in cases of absolute necessity: in other words, when it would not be possible otherwise to defend society."

Today however, as a result of steady improvements in the organization of the penal system, such cases are very rare, if not practically non-existent."

In a visit to St. Louis in 1999, Pope John Paul II said, "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...I renew the appeal I made...for a consensus to end the death penalty, which is both cruel and unnecessary."

The draft statement strongly insists that more must be done to assist victims of violence. "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 ... 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."

The proposed document includes brief statements and stories from the families of victims of deadly crimes as well as from a former death row inmate who was exonerated.

While the statement acknowledges that people of goodwill can disagree on this issue, the bishops encourage engagement and dialogue, not judgment and condemnation, in the hope of leading others to a re-examination and conversion on the issue of the death penalty.

This proposed statement is part of a wider *Catholic Campaign to End the Use of the Death Penalty* including a new website ([www.ccedp.org](http://www.ccedp.org)). Many people, especially Catholics, are reexamining their past support for the death penalty. A survey conducted by Zogby International, Inc. in November 2004 and March 2005 of 1700 Catholics suggested that support for the death penalty among Catholics had dropped from 70 percent in the 1970's to under 50 percent in 2005. It also reported that those who attend Church often are more likely to oppose the use of the death penalty, with respect for life cited most frequently as the reason.

This Catholic Campaign to End the Use of the Death Penalty urges Catholics to *pray* for victims of crime and their families as well as those on death row and the prison officials who watch over them; to *reach out* to families who have lost loved ones through violence; to *learn* more about the Church's teaching on the death penalty; to *educate* others, especially through the Church's parishes, schools and other programs; to *advocate* for an end to the use of the death penalty in states that have capital punishment; and to *change* the debate by emphasizing life over death.

"We don't really expect the use of the death penalty to end in one piece of sweeping legislation or a stunning court decision, although we're making significant progress in both legislatures and the courts," explained Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio, chair of the USCCB Domestic Policy Committee. "Rather, it will wither away in the daily and individual choices of prosecutors and legislators, judges and jurors and ordinary Catholics and others. We believe this day will not come easily, but with hard work and prayer it will come sooner rather than later."

If approved, the document, which was developed by the USCCB Domestic Policy Committee and is supported by the Committee on Pro-Life Activities and the Committee on Doctrine, will be the first comprehensive statement focused on the death penalty by the Catholic bishops of the United States in twenty-five years.

The draft statement and the campaign call on Catholics to defend all human life and unite together to be "people of life for all life." This issue, says the statement, "is more than public policy; it involves our faith...[it] is about more than how to respond to violent crime; it is about justice and what kind of society we want to be...this initiative is not about ideology, but life and death."

For additional information go to [www.ccedp.org](http://www.ccedp.org)

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