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# Catholics and Capital Punishment

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# CATHOLICS AND CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

One easily sees why the Catholic Church's teaching on the morality of capital punishment confuses some. Unlike the moral issues of abortion or artificial contraception, the Church's teaching on capital punishment can appear contradictory. On the one hand, Christian faith has always affirmed the sanctity of human life, from conception to natural death. Life is for God to give and take, rather than humans. On the other hand, the Church's traditional teaching has also affirmed the legitimacy of executing a duly convicted criminal. Public statements by Catholic and other Christian leaders calling for the complete abolition of the death penalty add to the apparent confusion. The issue needs clarification so that one can better understand what is and what is not Church teaching. Any attempt to provide this clarification must take into account two questions:

- 1) Does society have the right to put a criminal to death for heinous crime? If so,
- 2) Do the circumstances of the modern world warrant society's exercise of that right?

# **Part One: The Right to Impose Capital Punishment**

## *Old Testament*

In answering the first question, the Church has always begun by turning to what God reveals to us in Sacred Scripture and tradition. Unfortunately, appeals to Scripture for either the justification or the condemnation of capital punishment have yielded no firm conclusions. Both sides of the issue cite passages for support. For example, opponents note that the first murder in the Old Testament was not punished by death. For having slain Abel, the Lord cursed and banished Cain, but did not punish him with death. When Cain next said he was afraid that someone else would slay him because of his crime, the Lord assured him otherwise: “‘Not so! If any one slays Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold.’ And the Lord put a mark on Cain, lest any who came upon him should kill him” (Gn 4:15). But as proponents of capital punishment are quick to point out, there soon seems to be a change in attitude. After Noah left the Ark, for instance, the Lord blessed him and said to him: “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for God made man in his own image” (Gn 9:6).

Still later, when the Lord gives Moses the Ten Commandments and the ordinances in conjunction with them, the commandment against killing is not absolute. We learn:

Whoever strikes a man so that he dies shall be put to death. . . . If a man willfully attacks another to kill him treacherously, you shall take him from my altar, that he may die. . . . Whoever strikes his father or mother shall be put to death. . . . Whoever steals a man, whether he sells him or is found in possession of him, shall be put to death. . . .

Whoever curses his father or his mother shall be put to death (Ex 21:12-17).

Death was also enjoined as punishment for many other offenses that no one today would consider capital. Religious offenses like idolatry, blasphemy, apostasy, magic, necromancy, and various violations of the Sabbath and cultic life of the people all merited death as punishment. Incest, adultery, bestiality and homosexual activity were sexual offenses punishable by death. The Israelites saw the need for death in these cases because they held them to be violations of the Covenant, the alliance between God and his people. To preserve this alliance, its transgressor had to be excluded from the community. Of course, death poignantly emphasized this exclusion, and the most common method of execution (stoning by a crowd) underscored the communal nature of the act of exclusion. That the executions would occur under the direction of the “state” did not present itself as a problem for the Israelites. In their understanding of God’s Providence, an understanding inherited for the most part by Christians as well, the power of life and death is God’s alone. He is the source and custodian of all order, including the juridical. Therefore, a violator of the Covenant that the Lord had made with his people could be put to death by his authority and in his name.

At the same time, the Old Testament discloses certain instances where even in capital cases the Lord calls for restraint and mercy. As the Lord said to Ezekiel: “I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn back from his ways and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?” (Ez 33:11) Yet even in instances like these the Lord places no absolute restriction on the community’s power to execute a justly condemned criminal.

## *New Testament—The Gospels*

Neither does the New Testament clearly proscribe or condone the use of capital punishment. Certainly, Jesus called upon his disciples to be merciful. In considering his words and actions, we note his concern to assure that the interior motivations of his disciples did not arise from the spirit of vengeance. This even includes the limited vengeance that informs so many Old Testament injunctions about the use of capital punishment. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus established and explains the New Law. He enjoins his followers to renounce not only evil actions, but also the evil inclinations from which they arise. “You have heard that it was said to the men of old, ‘You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment” (Mt 5:21-22). Moreover, the New Law erases all limits to the love the disciples of Jesus must bear for others. Consider the following passage:

You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” But I say to you: do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. . . . You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you (Mt 5:38-39, 43-44).

Since the New Law makes such a radical departure from what passes for common wisdom, some have hastily and mistakenly argued that loving one’s enemies sets aside any right to resort to the death penalty for self-defense.

Others cite the parable of the wheat and the weeds (Mt 13:24-30) to argue against the death penalty. In this parable the wheat and the weeds represent the righteous and the evildoers.

Both are allowed to coexist until the end of time, and only then will the evildoers be punished. The point that opponents of the death penalty are trying to make with this parable and with the Sermon on the Mount is that God alone has the prerogative to punish those committing grave offenses, and human beings do not. Indeed, as we will see, some of the early Church Fathers have held similar opinions. However, the suggestion that God demands from us absolute non-resistance creates a false division between divine and natural law since the latter has always allowed for self-preservation and resistance under attack. Instead, a correspondence exists between the two. Natural law subsists and flourishes under divine law, which in turn perfects it. Therefore, divine law disposes of no part of the natural law, including presumably the right to self-defense.

If the words of Jesus do not in themselves settle the question of capital punishment's legitimacy, neither do his actions. The example of the woman caught in adultery is typical. Her accusers present her to Jesus and say to him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Now the law of Moses commanded us to stone such. What do you say about her?" (Jn 8:4-5) Jesus does not say to them, "Stone her," but instead makes his well-known reply, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her" (Jn 8:7). Opponents of the death penalty see this as an implicit rejection by Jesus of the community's right to execute the condemned. Yet the details of the incident do not conclusively bear out that interpretation. Jesus does not say the woman does not deserve stoning. He merely suggests that carrying out the sentence by those guilty of other offenses is inappropriate. His words to the woman, "Go, and do not sin again" (Jn 8:11), suggest neither her innocence nor the unsuitability of her punishment. They imply only that she was forgiven.

The events surrounding Jesus' own death sentence do not settle the issue, either. When Pilate informs Jesus he has the power to release him or have him crucified, Jesus answers: "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above" (Jn 19:11). Proponents of capital punishment cite this passage for support, arguing that Jesus affirms the legitimate but subsidiary power of the civil arm to execute offenders. However, this is probably reading too much into the text. Strictly speaking, Jesus' words refer only to the divine origin of civil power itself, without offering a particular judgment regarding the morality of capital punishment. Similarly, Jesus does not affirm or reject the statement of the good thief crucified next to him: "We are receiving the due reward of our deeds" (Lk 23:41).

### ***Saint Paul's Letter to the Romans***

Unlike the gospels, St. Paul's Letter to the Romans addresses directly the issue of capital punishment and the community's role in its implementation. Having just mentioned the duties and obligations of the Christian disciple, St. Paul offers the following advice:

"Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of him who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, *for he does not bear the sword in vain; he is the servant of God to execute his wrath on the wrongdoer*" (Rom 13:1-4, emphasis added).

Some see in St. Paul's statement the recognition of a lawful and divinely sanctioned power held by civil officials to pronounce and carry out a capital sentence. Without doubt, Paul accepts the general authority of the civil ruler. He even accepts the authority of the civil ruler of his times, of first century Hellenistic culture, to apply capital punishment. But the acknowledgement of this authority does not automatically suggest a reflection on the morality of capital punishment in general, or, in particular, on the power to administer it. At most, St. Paul simply accepts a ruler's authority to carry out capital punishment, without commenting on its morality. Certainly his toleration need not imply his approval.

### *The Fathers of the Church*

Neither did the Church in the post-apostolic age establish a clear consensus regarding capital punishment. The views of this period range from accommodation to limited acceptance to outright prohibition of the practice. St. Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215) made the first attempt to devise a theory justifying capital punishment. He justified his position from the standpoint of self-defense. While seeing the reform of the wrongdoer as the primary purpose of punishment, he nevertheless admitted that one could become evil beyond any expectation for reform or "cure." In this case, he argued the guilty might be put to death to prevent further evildoing. While making his point, he was the first to argue that an evildoer is like an infected limb that plagues the body. If it cannot be cured, the physician (the judge and executioner) must remove it to prevent the infection from harming the rest of the body (society). Citing Old Testament passages, St. Clement also justified such a death as a deterrent to other evildoers.

Other Fathers accepted capital punishment as a civil reality, but condemned Christian participation in it. St. Athenagoras (d.

190) wrote both of the possibility of justifying capital punishment and of the unseemliness of Christian cooperation in it. Without commenting upon the legitimacy of its application, Tertullian (c. 160-220) inveighed against its severity. He accepted the public authority's "power of the sword," while disapproving of Christian involvement in its exercise. Origen (c. 185-254) likewise took for granted the ruler's power to inflict the death penalty. For him, one could suffer a greater penalty than death by execution. He argued that death is a lesser penalty than that of grave guilt and eternal damnation. Still, with Tertullian, he was critical of the abuses of capital punishment and decried Christian participation in it.

In the fourth and fifth centuries, as Christianity was first tolerated and then promoted throughout the Roman Empire, thought on Christian participation in capital punishment evolved. Christians increasingly found themselves in public office holding power over life and death. St. John Chrysostom (c. 349-407), for instance, accepted that the Christian Emperor Theodosius had this power, even if Chrysostom thought its application on occasion severe or indiscriminate. Although St. Augustine (354-430) did not say much on the subject, he recognized certain situations in which a Christian ruler, without incurring the guilt of murder, might put someone to death. For example, in his famous work, *The City of God*, he wrote:

There are some exceptions made by the divine authority to its own law, that men may not be put to death. These exceptions are of two kinds, being justified either by a general law, or by a special commission granted for a time to some individual. And in this latter case, he to whom authority is delegated, and who is but the sword in the hand of him who uses it, is not himself responsible for the death he deals. And accordingly, they who have waged war in obedience to

the divine command, or in conformity with His laws have represented in their persons the public justice or the wisdom of government, and in this capacity have put to death wicked men; such persons have by no means violated the commandment, ‘Thou shalt not kill’ (Book I, chapter 21).

Even so, St. Augustine recommended that the legitimate exercise of capital punishment be put aside in favor of less-severe sentences in particular instances. He never wrote that punishment should be withheld entirely from wrongdoers. Indeed, St. Augustine believed the fear of punishment useful in two regards. Out of fear of bodily punishment, it first of all deters evildoers from their actions. It then leads to a more enlightened fear, the fear of offending against the love of God.

Lactantius (d. 317) took a view different from those who admitted some possible legitimacy for capital punishment. For Lactantius the Fifth Commandment, “Thou shalt not kill,” admitted of no exception. Although the Church would never come to accept Lactantius’ view of the Fifth Commandment as an absolute prohibition of capital punishment, his influence would continue to be felt in theological reflection on the issue down to our day.

### *The Middle Ages*

By the 12th century, Christians widely accepted the civil power’s right to put evildoers to death. Indeed, Pope Innocent III (c. 1160-1216) condemned certain heretics of the Middle Ages for, among other things, denying this right. But while the Church affirmed the secular power of the sword, it also quickly conditioned this right. It forbade the arbitrary or indiscriminate use of this power. Secular authorities could employ it only for justice, not hatred. Moreover, in 1215 the Fourth Lateran Council for-

bade the direct participation of all clerics in any capital criminal case or process.

St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), perhaps the greatest theologian of Christian history, made the most influential medieval contribution to Christian thought on the death penalty. In fact, even in our own day we come across this Dominican friar's mark on the subject. In his two greatest works, the *Summa Contra Gentiles* and the *Summa Theologiae*, St. Thomas reiterated and further developed the medical analogy already drawn out by Clement of Alexandria:

It is lawful to kill brute animals inasmuch as they are naturally ordered to the use of men, as imperfect to perfect. Every part is ordered to whole as imperfect to perfect and, so, every part is naturally for the whole. Consequently we see that if the amputation of a member – say one that is putrid or corrupting the other members – is required for the health of the whole body, then it is laudably and salubriously cut off. Now an individual person is compared to the whole community as part to whole; and therefore if a man is a danger to the community and a corrupting element because of some sin, then he is lawfully and salubriously killed, that the common good be preserved (ST II-II, q. 64, a. 2).

St. Thomas uses language here that seems rather stark, because it suggests the individual's rigid subordination to society. However, other aspects of his thought mitigate this harshness. For example, St. Thomas pointed out that only a public authority could judge and execute a serious offender where society's defense is a stake, and where the offender's reform is not expected. St. Thomas left no room for private vigilantism. Finally, St. Thomas reminded his readers in places of the retribu-

tive and medicinal qualities of punishments short of the death penalty.

### ***Development in Thought after Aquinas***

Following St. Thomas, Catholic moral theologians down to our own day continued to qualify the situations where the death penalty could be applied. Eventually, a consensus emerged which formulated three general prerequisites for applying the death penalty:

1. Only a legitimate public authority can impose it.
2. The penalty must correspond to the gravity of the crime.
3. Moral certainty of the wrongdoer's guilt must exist.

The first condition allows only a legitimate public authority to impose the death penalty. Its fittingness is apparent if one makes the reasonable assumption that a wrongdoer threatens public safety. It then follows that the one who is primarily responsible for public order and the common good ought to be the one to carry out the execution. This condition clearly means to exclude both individual and mass acts of vengeance, even if the offender's guilt is proven. Such acts include, for instance, a mob lynching or the killing of an adulterous spouse, still common in some countries today. For this reason, the lawful public authority must always be formally invoked at an execution.

The second condition for lawfully applying the death penalty holds that it must correspond to the gravity of the crime. While a broader understanding of grave criminal activity existed in the past, in peacetime nowadays the death penalty is chiefly reserved for the crime of murder (there are currently some provisions in U.S. law to execute convicted major drug felons). This presumes that the direct taking of innocent human life does enough severe harm to society to warrant the removal of the offender by execution.

As a final condition for applying the death penalty, moral certainty must exist about the guilt of the accused. In normal circumstances this means the accused has the right to a reasonable defense in fair trial. Most would also agree that a confession of guilt to a capital crime need not be obtained for the public authority to arrive at the moral certitude required to sentence a criminal to death. In recent years critics of the death penalty have argued that this condition is not being fulfilled due to several biases still present in the legal system.

## **Part Two: The Exercise of the Right to Impose Capital Punishment**

Up to this point, we have examined only whether, according to Catholic teaching, society has the right to impose capital punishment. There is another pertinent question that Catholic teaching considers, namely, “Should society exercise that right?” Those answering in the affirmative place their answer within the framework of the general nature and purpose of all punishment, and traditionally appeal to one or more of the three following arguments:

**1. Capital punishment as *retribution*:** it restores the balance of justice by inflicting punishment in exchange for the harm done to an individual and society.

In general, one understands “retribution” to mean rendering to a convicted criminal what is his or her “due,” through the deprivation of life, liberty and/or property. The retribution thus meted out simply restores “the balance of justice.” For this reason, retribution earns its description as an “absolute theory” of punishment. Unlike “relative theories” of punishment, such as deterrence and reform, the case for retribution does not rely upon less immediate reasons. Opponents of the retributive theory of

punishment criticize it as a thinly veiled justification for revenge and vindictiveness.

As applied to capital punishment in particular, the retributive theory presents some difficulties. One is the fact that capital punishment cannot be applied in degrees. One cannot put a person partially to death. Yet a convict's culpability for a capital crime often does admit of degrees. And even if legal guidelines exist for assessing the culpability of a convicted criminal in potentially capital cases, critics make the strong argument that they are neither perfectly nor equally applied.

**2. Capital punishment as *deterrence*:** the threat of death discourages someone from committing heinous acts against individuals and society.

Supporters of the deterrent value of punishment argue for its effectiveness insofar as the penalty inflicted dissuades both the wrongdoer from repeating the offense and someone else from imitating the wrongdoing. For obvious reasons, only the latter consideration applies in the case of capital punishment. Even so, critics dispute the deterrent capability of capital punishment. They say capital punishment may even harden a criminal. It may drive him or her to further acts of desperation while attempting to avoid arrest and the prospect of execution. Nor will capital punishment effectively deter murders committed "in the heat of passion," or by the mentally ill, or by those under the influence of drugs. Critics note that the often-sensationalized ambiance surrounding public executions trivializes capital punishment and therefore lessens its deterrent potential. At the same time, they wonder how executions performed in the presence of just a few witnesses can *publicly* deter potential wrongdoers.

**3. Capital punishment as *reform*:** the threat of imminent death can spur the conversion or repentance of the convicted, aptly preparing him or her for the next life.

This final justification for punishment assumes that it can successfully provide the context for a wrongdoer's true conversion, repentance, and resolve to refrain from further evil deeds. Proponents of the death penalty claim it can do the same. Indeed, they even assert that such occasions would not present themselves so often were it not for the reality of impending death. Critics counter by noting the death penalty is merely a possible occasion for conversion. Therefore, they see the argument that the death penalty can encourage an evildoer's reform as tangential at best. And even if the threat of death brings about a change of heart, they wonder what is served by then putting a criminal to death. It does not make him or her virtuous. Execution poignantly eliminates a converted criminal's period of earthly grace and penitence, since one's lifetime is the only period of "probation" one can enjoy. There are certainly some cases of unexecuted murderers who later repented and became virtuous individuals. The contrite murderer of St. Peter of Verona (1206-1252), for example, later became a Dominican brother and was referred to as "the blessed Carino" by those who knew him.

### **Part Three: The Modern Application of Capital Punishment**

Authoritative Catholic teaching draws upon all that has been discussed thus far. It distinguishes between society's *right* to inflict capital punishment, and the *need* to do so. While it does not deny the death penalty's proper lawfulness under certain conditions, it does oppose its modern *application*, given the particular circumstances of our culture and our times.

## *Statements by Conferences of Bishops*

Various national conferences of Catholic bishops defend this teaching of the Church. The bishops of the United States and of the Philippines, for example, question the justification for capital punishment “under present circumstances.” The Filipino bishops address themselves to the three justifications for capital punishment outlined above. They deny first its usefulness as a basis for reform, since death automatically eliminates any possibility the convict has to render “creative compensation.” They also question whether the threat of impending death ought to be the chief premise for God’s grace to act upon the heart of a condemned criminal. Neither does the argument for deterrence convince the Filipino bishops, who note the inconclusive nature of the evidence in regard to the death penalty. Finally, while affirming the legitimate general retributive effect of punishment, they wonder whether achieving this effect would require or justify the execution of a criminal. While certainly not denying that society should be protected from criminals, they observe that vindictiveness can never be the basis for a Christian approach to punishment.

Besides scrutinizing the death penalty’s justification, the Filipino bishops stress the difficulty of achieving its fair application. When it comes to sentencing, the available data show that a convict’s socio-economic status, gender, and race still seem to make a difference between life and death. Given its irreversibility, the execution of a wrongfully convicted person remains an especially unnerving possibility as well.

On their part, the U.S. bishops try to show the harmony between the abolition of capital punishment and certain Christian values. Abolition, they maintain, shows a way to break the cycle of violence that afflicts the modern world. It reaffirms the

Church's teaching on "the unique worth and dignity of each human person from the moment of conception, a creature made in the image and likeness of God" (U.S. Bishops, "Statement on Capital Punishment," *Origins*, 27 Nov. 1980, p. 37). Along this line of thought, the Filipino bishops offer a particularly helpful insight. They reject the classic notion outlined above comparing a criminal's execution to the removal of a diseased organ. They observe:

A human being is not only a member of society as an organ is a member of a living body. While a human being must live for the good society, society exists in order to promote the good of the individual human being. A human being has a value in himself/herself and is not the goal and purpose of society in a way that a limb or organ is not the goal and purpose of the human body ("Restoring the Death Penalty: 'A Backward Step,'" *Catholic International*, 15-31 Oct. 1992, Vol. 3, No. 18, pp. 886-87).

The Filipino bishops also insist that while no one ought to equate criminals convicted of capital offenses with the unborn, the aged, or the infirm, abolition would nevertheless bolster the consistent ethic of life which the Church proclaims. Finally, the bishops contend the abolition of capital punishment would follow the merciful teaching and example of Jesus, who gave his life for wrongdoers.

### ***Catechism of the Catholic Church***

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* published during the pontificate of Pope John Paul II remains a definitive source of recent authoritative Catholic teaching on capital punishment (another significant source is *Evangelium Vitae*). In its discussion of the Fifth Commandment, the *Catechism* considers the topic in light both of the right to legitimate defense and of the

effects of punishment (nn. 2263-67). Regarding the first, it distinguishes between “the legitimate defense of persons and societies” and intentional murder. Legitimate defense is neither an exception to, nor a dispensation from, intentional murder. It is in a different category altogether. The virtuous love one bears oneself serves as a basis for morality. No one acting according to this love in defense of one’s own life would incur the guilt of murder when dealing an aggressor a mortal blow. Moreover, legitimate defense often extends beyond one’s own person. The defense of other lives, the common good, and the family are not only rights, but they are solemn duties as well for those to whom it has been entrusted. “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” (n. 2265).

The *Catechism* also considers the effects of punishment in addressing the question of the death penalty. It affirms that the chief effect of punishment must remain the correction of the upheaval caused by an offense. In other words, restoration of societal order is paramount. By suggesting that punishment may aid the atonement of a criminal who accepts it as just, the *Catechism* further acknowledges its corrective value.

Finally, the *Catechism* specifies what the legitimate defense of the common good and the purpose of punishment imply regarding the death penalty. It states: “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” (n. 2267).

Thus, the *Catechism* affirms the right of civil society to inflict the death penalty. In explaining the right, however, it adds

a very important *caveat*: “If... non-lethal 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” (n. 2267).

### ***Pope John Paul II***

Besides the teaching of bishops and the Church’s catechetical teaching, Papal authority also plays a most instructive role in elaborating Catholic teaching on capital punishment. Particularly important is *Evangelium Vitae*, Pope John Paul II’s encyclical on the dignity of human life. In the encyclical, the Pope elaborates much of what the bishops and the *Catechism* present. With them, the pope reaffirms the validity both of legitimate defense and of the purposes of punishment. The latter redress the disorder an offense has caused, defend public order, and guarantee public safety. When addressing the question of whether the execution of a wrongdoer does these things, however, the Pope’s teaching is quite explicit. He writes:

It is clear that for these purposes to be achieved, the nature and extent of the punishment must be carefully evaluated and decided upon, and 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 nonexistent* (*Evangelium Vitae*, 56, emphasis added).

John Paul II does not deny the traditional teaching regarding the proper legitimacy of the death penalty. Neither does he deny the legitimacy of punishment in general. Given the particular circumstances of our culture, however, he does oppose its mod-

ern *application*. Here the Holy Father further clarifies the distinction between the state's legitimate right to execute under certain circumstances and the need to exercise that right in today's world. What gives the state its right to perform an execution is not the degree of harm a crime inflicts (although a heinous act remains a prerequisite in capital cases), but rather the inability of society to protect itself by any other means. According to the Holy Father, a society's inability to protect itself by any other means is the determining factor in the decision to execute a criminal. Since our society can remove those guilty of serious offenses by means of life imprisonment, the Holy Father judges as negligible society's need to use the death penalty. In short, inflicting capital punishment when it is not necessary would transgress Catholic teaching. Pope John Paul II's opposition to the use of the death penalty is, therefore, a legitimate exercise of his pastoral leadership as the Vicar of Christ on earth.

Finally, Catholic teaching on capital punishment is an opportunity to examine our own attitudes. While we must show compassion for the victims of crime and support society's legitimate and just self-defense, in Christ we are not free to direct revenge or hate toward anyone. This includes those guilty of criminal wrongdoing. Christian charity must not only be exercised with prudence, but also shown to all.

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