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## **The culture of life and the death penalty**

At the last meeting of the U.S. bishops last November, we approved a new document on the death penalty, "Culture of Life and the Penalty of Death," asking for the end of the use of the death penalty in our country. Around the same time the U.S. media was monitoring the more than 1,000 executions since the reinstatement of the death penalty by the Supreme Court in 1976.

No doubt that this is one of the most controversial issues of our times. We must address it if we are really promoting a culture of life in our society.

The Catholic Church following the teachings of St. Augustine, and later on, of St. Thomas Aquinas, teaches that the death penalty is a legitimate means for the state to apply justice and to re-establish the order lost because of an extreme crime. Throughout the 20th century, industrialized countries all over the world began to raise serious questions about the death penalty. Pope John Paul II marked a meaningful turn in the theology of the death penalty in his encyclical "Evangelium Vitae" ("The Gospel of Life") that was reflected in the new Catechism of the Catholic Church.

Number 2267 of the Catechism 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, however, 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 are more in conformity to the dignity of the human person."

Additionally, the Catechism points out: "Today, in fact, 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 definitely taking away from him the possibility of redeeming himself — the cases in which the execution of the offender is an absolute necessity are very rare, if not practically non-existent."

As we can see, recourse to the death penalty has not been excluded in a definitive manner; and it is not considered intrinsically evil, such as the intentional elimination of an innocent life through abortion or euthanasia. There is no moral equivalence between abortion or euthanasia and the death penalty.

But the fact that the death penalty is not morally excluded is not enough if we want to establish a real culture of life. Pope John Paul II and the Catechism ask us to go beyond. We are asked to avoid, as much as possible, applying the death penalty. In a developed society like the United States, we must use better means to punish the criminal, to protect society and to assure social order.

Violent crime is a tragedy and has no place in our society. In the recent document on the death penalty, the bishops of the United States said: "As pastors, we share the justified anger and revulsion at terrible and deadly

crimes. In calling for an end to the use of the death penalty, we do not seek to diminish in any way the evil and harm caused by people who commit horrible murders. We also share the hurt and horror, the loss and heartache that are the result of unspeakable acts of violence.”

Some ask if the most horrible crimes wouldn't qualify as “rare” cases in which the death penalty should be applied. The bishops respond: “According to ‘The Gospel of Life,’ the existence of a ‘rare’ occasion when the death penalty may be used is not determined by the gravity of the crime but by whether ‘it would not be possible otherwise to defend society.’ No matter how heinous the crime, if society can protect itself without ending a human life, it should do so.”

The issue of the death penalty raises understandable passions. But we, Catholics, must be guided by the truth of our faith, not just by the feelings of the moment. For this reason, as Catholics, we must recognize, as the bishops say in the document: “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.”

Once again, we as Catholics are confronted with the moral dilemma of choosing between life and death. The answer to this dilemma is given by God in the book of Deuteronomy: “I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live.” (Dt 30:19)

I pray with all my heart that the Lord Jesus may grant to all Catholics, and people of good will, in the Archdiocese of San Antonio the grace and blessing to always choose life.

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