



FLORIDA CONFERENCE
OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS
The nonpartisan public policy voice of the Catholic Church of Florida

FLORIDA BISHOPS' PASTORAL LETTER ON THE DEATH PENALTY SUMMARY

The bishops of Florida have issued a response to the rapid expansion of capital punishment in Florida.

In 2025, Florida carried out more executions than at any time in its history, and in recent years it has enacted legislation that broadened the use of the death penalty, including lowering the jury vote required to recommend a death sentence and expanding the crimes eligible for capital punishment. These developments warrant renewed public reflection on the moral, legal, and practical implications of the death penalty.

THE CORE MESSAGE

The letter reaffirms the Catholic Church's longstanding commitment to the dignity of every human person. While recognizing the profound suffering experienced by victims of violent crime and their families, respect for human dignity extends even to those convicted of the most serious offenses. Because modern correctional systems can effectively protect society through life imprisonment without parole, the Church concludes that executions are no longer morally justified. The bishops write:

"Rather than promoting life by deterring homicides, the death penalty promotes a culture of death by declaring that we can improve society by bringing about the death of a human being in our names."

WHAT JESUS TEACHES

Rather than promoting revenge, Jesus consistently taught mercy, forgiveness, and the possibility of repentance. Jesus rejected violence, forgave sinners, and encouraged reconciliation instead of retaliation. These teachings call Christians to move beyond the ancient principle of "an eye for an eye" toward a higher standard based on mercy and respect for life.

CHURCH TEACHING: Key Elements

While fundamental moral truths do not change, the Church's understanding of how those truths apply can deepen over time. Development of this kind can be seen in the Church's growing understanding of issues such as slavery and advances in scientific knowledge. As appreciation for human dignity increases and new ways of protecting the public become available, the Church has come to recognize that the death penalty is no longer morally justified in today's circumstances.

Beginning with Pope St. John Paul II's 1995 encyclical *The Gospel of Life*, the Church has emphasized that capital punishment should be used only if it is absolutely necessary to protect society. Because today's prison systems can generally accomplish that goal without executions, those circumstances are considered extremely rare or practically nonexistent.

Since then, Popes Benedict XVI, Francis, and Leo XIV have all reaffirmed opposition to capital punishment. Pope Francis revised the Catechism of the Catholic Church to state that the death penalty is "inadmissible" because it violates the dignity of the human person, and the Church now works actively for its abolition around the world.

JUSTICE FOR VICTIMS

Opposition to the death penalty is not opposition to justice. Those convicted of murder should receive severe punishment, and victims and their families deserve compassion, support, and justice. However, that justice does not require another killing. The alternative in Florida law to capital punishment is not letting offenders go free; it is life imprisonment without the possibility of parole, which is a severe punishment.

PRACTICAL REASONS TO OPPOSE THE DEATH PENALTY

Aside from the Church's moral teaching, there are practical reasons to oppose Florida's death penalty. Many supporters believe it is needed to deter murders, but decades of research into this question have not demonstrated that capital punishment is such a deterrent. Another practical reason is that, perhaps surprisingly, keeping the death penalty legal, far from saving the state money, costs the state far more than life imprisonment through higher trial, appeals, and incarceration expenses. Finally, wrongful convictions do happen; Florida has the highest number of death row inmates who have been exonerated of any state.

THE BISHOPS' APPEAL

The bishops of Florida wish to remind Catholics of the teaching of our Church against the use of the death penalty in situations—like our own—where bloodless means are sufficient to punish offenders and protect public safety. They also appeal to the consciences of all citizens of our state, as they write:

We do work with determination for its abolition, and we urge all Catholics, and our fellow citizens of good will, to end the practice of capital punishment in our state. We ask God that the ethic of human dignity will infuse every element of society with respect for persons – from the most innocent unborn child to convicted felons – through people of faith transformed by the Gospel message of Christ's love and life.

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