The Death Penalty

Why do we kill people, who kill people, to show people that killing people is wrong?



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Death Penalty Research Paper

“I ask to my family and friends that you all continue to pray, that you all continue to forgive. Continue to fight this fight.” Those were the last words of Troy Anthony Davis, who died September 21, 2011. He had killed a police officer in Savannah, Georgia. His family, along with many others in the nation, thought the death penalty was the wrong punishment for him. Now there is a foundation that speaks out against the injustices of the death penalty that began because of this one execution.

Davis was one of the victims of the death penalty, “... the most severe form of punishment as it requires law enforcement officers to kill the convicted offender” (Duhaime’s Law Dictionary para 1). In the United States, forms of legal execution range from lethal injection to being shot by a firing squad. Support for the death penalty is going down, but it is still legal in most states. In a recent poll, 46% of respondents said they preferred life imprisonment, and 45% thought the death penalty was not implemented fairly. The Catholic Church has an even stronger prohibition against the death penalty. For Catholics, and for many people, the death penalty is murder and in the past forty years it has taken the lives of over 1,400 Americans. Most other nations also consider it murder, and the United States is one of only a few countries that still has a death penalty.

The Catholic Church teaches that all life matters therefore the death penalty is not acceptable. “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” (Life and Dignity of the Human Person 1). The Catholic Church believes and teaches that no matter how heinous the crime, if society can protect itself without ending a human life, it should do so and not take the lives of other humans. The Second Vatican Council declared that "the future of humanity is in the hands of those men who are capable of providing the generations to come with reasons for life and optimism” (USCCB page 1). The social teachings of Catholicism are based on our understanding of dignity and human life. Every human being is born and created in the likeness of God and redeemed by Jesus Christ, and therefore worthy of respect as a child of God and a member of the human family. From the moment of conception to natural death, every person has inherent dignity and deserves life consistent with dignity.

There are many different problems with our country having the death penalty, including infringing the basic dignity of the human person, running the risk of putting an innocent person to death, and unfair application of the death penalty. The way that the justice system functions in our country is one way to show if we are democratic or not: are our laws just and fair? The death penalty is not just and fair, and by implementing it. This is not the image we want our country to have. It’s not the image we want our own state to have, either.

In Ohio alone, 53 people have been killed since 1976. 142 people are on death row and while many are trying to appeal their sentences, only 9 have successfully avoided being executed. In fact, “Cuyahoga and Summit Counties... are responsible for more than 25% of Ohio’s death sentences” (Death Penalty Information Center - Ohio para 2). However, the state is having problems getting the drugs they need for lethal injections, and until they can find the drugs they need, executions will be postponed. “Ohio has trouble getting drugs to use for lethal injections in great part because pharmaceutical companies don’t want their medical products used for killing people” (Higgs para 7). Although the state has had trouble finding drugs, it hasn’t stopped sentencing people to death.

Some people have been found innocent after receiving a death sentence, but the chance of overturning a guilty verdict and avoiding the death penalty is very rare. Take Dave Keaton’s story for example. He was arrested in 1971 for murdering an off-duty police officer. There were several irregularities that led up to his being put on death row. First, the jury was all white and Keaton was black. Next, journalists discovered that the polygraph operator in Keaton’s case had a long history of convincing people to confess to crimes they did not commit. On top of that, Keaton’s fingerprints did not match those from the scene. Keaton appealed his sentence because of these irregularities, and the court found that there was not enough evidence to keep him on death row. Eventually the murder charges against him were dropped, and and the real culprits were convicted.

While Keaton successfully overturned his sentence, the chances of getting off death row are extremely low. Instead, the best way to keep someone from being executed is to avoid being put on death row in the first place. That means at the defendant’s initial trial the lawyer needs to convince the jury that the death penalty is the wrong punishment even if the defendant is guilty. If the lawyer fails to keep the defendant off of death row, and the defendant wants to fight the death sentence, then a long appeals process follows. During that process the lawyer will ask an appellate court to overturn the death sentence. However, the chances of succeeding are extremely slim.

Another issue with the death penalty is that there is racial bias when implementing it. In a study about race and the death penalty in Georgia, it was found that, “defendants whose victims were white, faced, on average, odds of receiving a death sentence… 4.3 times higher than similarly situated defendants whose victims were black” (The Death Penalty in Black and White: Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Decides para 42). In Ohio, data from a recent study showed that a person convicted of killing a white female was six times more likely to be put on death row than a person who killed a black male. Cuyahoga County was also found to have almost eleven times the amount of executions than the average county. Sharon L. Davies, Executive Director of the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at The Ohio State University, said that the "race or gender of a victim, and the county of the crime, should not influence who is sentenced to die" and urged "Ohio citizens and lawmakers[to] review the findings of this important research" (Death Penalty Information Center - Ohio para 6).

Because of all of these issues with the death penalty, many people want it abolished. As Helen Prejean, a nun who works to abolish the death penalty has said, “[a]llowing our government to kill citizens compromises the deepest moral values upon which this country was conceived: the inviolable dignity of the human persons.” The first steps to ending the death penalty in Ohio have already been taken. “A bipartisan bill that would abolish the death penalty in Ohio is pending in the Ohio House. It was introduced last July by Democratic Rep. Nickle Antonio of Lakewood and Republican Rep. Niraj Antani of Miamisburg” (Higgs para 17).

There have even been presidents trying to limit the penalty. “President Clinton signed the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996 which restricts review in federal courts by establishing tighter filing deadlines, limiting the time for evidentiary hearings… only allowing a single habeas corpus filing in federal court” (Death Penalty Information Center - Limiting the Death Penalty para 22 and 23). The United States also joined a resolution called Protocol No. 6 to the European Convention on Human Rights which states that the countries which have not abolished the death penalties should limit the number of offenses on which the penalty can be imposed and also asks the countries who are participating not to impose the penalty on juveniles. There is also hope that the death penalty can be abolished not only in Ohio and the United States, but also worldwide. President Clinton signed an act which helps to limit the death penalty, representatives from the state of Ohio have introduced a bill to end the penalty, the public opinion has changed, and internationally there have been efforts made that limit the death penalty.

The Catholic Mobilizing Network proclaims the Church’s pro-life teachings and prepares Catholics for informed involvement in the public debate to end the death penalty and promote restorative justice. Assuming that the guilty party’s identity and responsibility have been fully determined, the tradition of the Church does not exclude recourse to the death penalty. At the heart of Catholic teaching on the death penalty is the belief that, “ human life is sacred because from its beginning it involves the creative action of God. All Christians and people of good will are thus called today to struggle not only for abolition of the death penalty, but also to improve prison communities. Nowadays the death penalty is inadmissible, no matter how serious the crime committed. It is an offense against the inviolability of life and the dignity of a human person,” said Pope Francis.

In conclusion, the death penalty is a punishment that takes the life a person who has committed a capital crime. The Catholic Church is against the death penalty. The Church respects the basic dignity of the human person and believes human life is sacred, even if it is the life of a dangerous criminal. The death penalty has it own faults, including bias towards race. The death penalty is morally wrong and the public has started to change their opinion. There is hope that in the future the death penalty will be abolished, and many people and organizations are working towards that goal.

As students we can do a few things to abolish the death penalty. We can donate to Catholic ministries trying to end the death penalty. We can sign up for emails that can give us local news updating us on what we can do around our community. We can also tell others about the death penalty and take action when we see an injustice, such as peacefully protesting outside the prisons where executions take place. Finally, we can correspond with inmates on death row and let them know we still value them and believe in their basic dignity. Because it is unjust and immoral, we should do everything we can to abolish the death penalty.

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