



## **Death Penalty Position Paper**

### **September 2016**

The Catholic Bishops of Florida continue to urge our state leaders to reconsider the contradictory practice of sanctioned murder with the purpose of punishing and deterring murder. 2015 marked a 25-year low in executions nationwide, yet Florida was one of only six states to carry out executions last year and continues to lead the nation in the number of death row exonerations (26) while maintaining the second highest number of new death sentences (9) and the second largest death row population (approximately 400) in the country.<sup>^</sup>

The Catholic Church firmly believes and teaches that all human life is sacred. We stand in solidarity with victims' families in grieving precious lives that were taken too soon through heinous offenses. We pray for the peaceful repose of the victims and for the healing of those they leave behind. While we uphold the state's significant responsibility to protect its citizens and punish criminal activity, we maintain the God-given, inherent dignity of all human life, even of those who have caused great harm. Therefore, we support the alternative of life imprisonment without the possibility of parole, which is a grave punishment.

Recent popes, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and the U.S. Catholic Bishops have made it clear that our society has other ways to protect itself from those who commit terrible crimes and ought to forgo the use of the death penalty. Saint Pope John Paul II in his encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae*, wrote:

*. . . 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 (no. 56).*

Guided by the United States Conference of Catholics Bishops' statement, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, that notes, "...incremental improvements in the law are acceptable as steps toward the full restoration of justice," (no. 32) the Catholic Bishops of Florida support efforts to require a unanimous jury when making a recommendation of death, narrow the broad aggravating factors that make defendants eligible for a death sentence in our state, and secure a more transparent clemency process for those sentenced to death.

Twenty states and the District of Columbia have discontinued their use of the death penalty; eight of those in the last nine years. We look forward to the forthcoming date when we can consider Florida aligned with these states.

<sup>^</sup>The Death Penalty in 2015: Year End Report. (n.d.). Retrieved September 9, 2016, from <http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/YearEnd2015>