

DISCUSSION GUIDE

A Culture of Life and the Penalty of Death

We renew our common conviction that it is time for our nation to abandon the illusion that we can protect life by taking life. Ending the use of the death penalty would be one important step away from a culture of death and toward building a culture of life.

—United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

The Catholic bishops of the United States are urging Catholics and others to work for an end to the use of the death penalty in the United States. This DVD provides an overview of Catholic teaching on the death penalty and encourages viewers to join the Catholic Campaign Against the Use of the Death Penalty.

Viewing time: 15 minutes.

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INITIAL PREPARATION

- If you are leading a group discussion, preview the DVD and read this guide so that you are familiar with it. Make copies of this study guide for all of the participants. Consider adapting the questions and suggested activities so that the language and examples are appropriate for the ages, abilities, and experiences of group members.
- Obtain copies of the bishops' statement *A Culture of Life and the Penalty of Death* for all participants.
- Schedule enough time for the reflection questions before and after the DVD. The DVD will lose its effectiveness if it is shown without preparation and discussion.

PREPARATION ON VIEWING DATE

- Prepare an area where Scripture can be displayed reverently, and open the Bible to any of the following passages. Try to have enough Bibles on hand so that individuals and small groups can refer to these or other Scripture readings before or after watching the DVD. You may want to open with a prayer that includes one of these readings.

Gn 4:1-15 Mt 5:38-40
Dt 30:19-20 Jn 8:1-11

- Ask participants to read the bishops' statement *A Culture of Life and the Penalty of Death*. Or provide each participant with a copy of the following quote from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

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.

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 more in conformity with the dignity of the human person.

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 definitively 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.”

—*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2267

BEFORE THE DVD

Take a few minutes to reflect on the following questions and then form small discussion groups.

- Are you familiar with Catholic teaching about the death penalty? How would you describe this teaching in a couple of sentences?
- What about this teaching do you find encouraging? What do you find challenging?
- What can you do to act on this teaching in your life?

AFTER THE DVD

Take a few minutes to reflect on the following questions, and then form small discussion groups.

- After viewing the DVD, how would you explain Catholic teaching on the death penalty?
- How is the Church's teaching on the death penalty related to the Church's general teaching about the dignity of every human life?
- What about the Church's teaching on the death penalty is most consistent with your attitude about the death penalty? What surprised or challenged you most?
- Some passages from the Old Testament seem to encourage "a life for a life." What other lessons from Scripture, especially Christ's teaching in the Gospels, shape our understanding of these passages? How do these Scripture messages relate to the Church's teaching on the death penalty?
- Several "facts" are identified during the DVD. Which ones surprised you most? How do these facts contribute to the arguments against the use of the death penalty?
- The Church's teaching distinguishes between the right of the state to use capital punishment to protect society and the decision to use the death penalty when there are other means to protect society. How would you describe this distinction? How does it influence your thinking?
- The bishops have called for an end to the use of the death penalty. Why? What can you do to participate in the Catholic Campaign to End the Use of the Death Penalty?

ACTIONS

Family (Including Adults, Adolescents, and Older Children)

- Pray for those who have been the victims of terrible crimes, for those on death row, and for a commitment to end the use of the death penalty.
- Talk with your children about Catholic teaching on the death penalty, especially when newscasts about imminent executions or trials make this issue visible to them.
- With your children, explore the resources on the website for the Catholic Campaign to End the Use of the Death Penalty (www.ccedp.org).
- Individually or as a family, write letters to elected officials about policies related to the death penalty and to oppose imminent executions.

School or Religious Education Group (Middle and High School)

- In an age-appropriate style, have students pray for those who have been the victims of terrible crimes, for those on death row, and for a commitment to end the use of the death penalty.
- Ask students to visit the website for the Catholic Campaign to End the Use of the Death Penalty (www.ccedp.org) and report on what they have learned.
- Ask students to put together a flier on Catholic social teaching on the death penalty to share with parents, faculty, and other students. Or encourage students to create posters or focus a bulletin board on this issue.
- Invite students and parents to start a petition to promote an end to the use of the death penalty in your state, or invite them to write letters to elected officials on this issue. (See www.ccedp.org for information.)

Parish Group or Ministry (Teens to Senior Adults)

- Learn more about Catholic teaching on the death penalty by copying and distributing to the group information from the Catholic Campaign to End the Use of the Death Penalty website (www.ccedp.org).
- Organize a letter-writing campaign to appropriate leaders on the death penalty during one of the group's meetings.
- Organize and sponsor a forum for members of the parish (and perhaps members of nearby parishes) with state or federal elected officials to discuss their positions on the death penalty.

Individual (Teens to Senior Adults)

- Learn more about Catholic teaching on the death penalty by visiting the website for the Catholic Campaign to End the Use of the Death Penalty (www.ccedp.org).
- Become a "pen pal" with someone who is on death row. Contact a local correctional facility to learn about these programs.
- Join your diocesan or state legislative network or another advocacy group so that you can receive action alerts, and send messages to policy makers on the death penalty.

For more activities related to Catholic social teaching on the death penalty, go to www.ccedp.org.

RESOURCES AVAILABLE

A Culture of Life and the Penalty of Death

In *A Culture of Life and the Penalty of Death*, the bishops call for our nation to abandon the use of the death penalty as we move one step closer to building a culture of life.

Booklet: No. 5-732, 20 pp.; **DVD:** No. 5-757; **Video:** No. 5-761

The Gospel of Life (Evangelium Vitae)

Reaffirming the “greatness and inestimable value of human life,” Pope John Paul II discusses in this encyclical letter the present-day legal, ethical, and moral threats to life.

English: No. 316-7, 196 pp.; **Spanish:** No. 317-5, 196 pp.

Living the Gospel of Life

A Challenge to American Catholics

Stresses the need to work earnestly to bring about a true renewal in our public life and institutions.

English: No. 5-300, 40 pp.; **Spanish:** No. 5-809, 40 pp.

Catholic Campaign to End the Use of the Death Penalty

In light of Catholic teaching, we see the lack of justification for the death penalty and the overall toll that it takes on society. This brochure and bulletin insert provide Catholics with information that they need to participate in the *Catholic Campaign to End the Use of the Death Penalty*. This practical resource provides facts about the death penalty and suggestions on how to participate in the campaign.

Brochure: English—No. 5-715; Spanish—No. 5-919

Bulletin Insert: No. 5-723

Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration

A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice

Responding to the threats to everyday life that are caused by crime and fear of crime, the bishops tackle the issue of crime and corrections, justice and mercy, responsibility and treatment.

English: No. 5-394, 64 pp., **Spanish:** No. 5-846, 72 pp.

Themes from Catholic Social Teaching

Colorful 5.5" x 8.5" green and purple cards and 17" x 22" posters that contain the seven themes of Catholic social teaching highlighted by the bishops in *Sharing Catholic Social Teaching*.

Card: English: No. 5-315; Spanish: No. 5-815

Poster: English: No. 5-318; Spanish: No. 5-818

In the Footsteps of Jesus

Catholic Social Teaching at Work Today

“How does God call you to make a difference in the world?” That provocative question is at the heart of the video *In the Footsteps of Jesus: Catholic Social Teaching at Work Today*. Divided into two sections, part one presents a comprehensive overview of the seven themes of Catholic social teaching. Part two highlights each of the themes through portraits of eight extraordinary individuals, who share their personal stories of confronting injustice, promoting peace, and living out Catholic social teaching.

Video:

English—No. 5-444, 28 min.

Spanish: No. 5-891, 28 min.

Resource Manual: No. 5-499, 104 pp.

To purchase these resources or obtain a catalog of other USCCB titles, go to www.usccbpublishing.org or call toll-free 800-235-8722 (in the Washington metropolitan area or from outside the United States, call 202-722-8716). Para pedidos en español, llame al 800-235-8722 y presione 4 para hablar con un representante del servicio al cliente en español.



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