

CLIFF NOTES

By Fr. Clifford Smith

Catholic Teaching on the Death Penalty

The Roman Catholic Church has traditionally accepted capital punishment based largely on the theology of Thomas Aquinas who accepted the death penalty as a deterrent and prevention method, as long as it was not as the means of vengeance. However, the leaders of the Church began to reevaluate this position, especially after the Second World War and more recently in 1970's and 1980's. In 1980 the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops issued **U.S. Catholic Bishops' Statement on Capital Punishment**: *"In 1974, out of a commitment to the value and dignity of human life, the U.S. Catholic Conference, by a substantial majority, voted to declare its opposition to capital punishment. ... We should acknowledge that in the public debate over capital punishment we are dealing with values of the highest importance: respect for the sanctity of human life, the protection of human life, the preservation of order in society, and the achievement of justice through law.*

"We believe that in the conditions of contemporary American society, the legitimate purposes of punishment do not justify the imposition of the death penalty. Furthermore, we believe that there are serious considerations, which should prompt Christians and all Americans to support the abolition of capital punishment. Some of these reasons have to do with evils that are present in the practice of capital punishment itself, while others involve important values that would be promoted by abolition of this practice."

"... Abolition of capital punishment is also a manifestation of our belief in the unique worth and dignity of each person from the moment of conception, a creature made in the image and likeness of God."

"Recognition of this suffering should not lead to demands for vengeance but to a firm resolution that help be given to the victims of crime and that justice be done fairly and swiftly. The care and the support that we give to the victims of crime should be both compassionate and practical."

"We urge our brother and sisters in Christ to remember the teaching of Jesus who called us to be reconciled with those who have injured us (Matthew 5:43-45) and to pray for forgiveness for our sins "as we forgive those who have sinned against us." (Matthew 6:12) We call on you to contemplate the crucified Christ who set us the supreme example of forgiveness and of the triumph of compassionate love."

The **Catechism of the Catholic Church** states:

#2267: *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, nonlethal 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. 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 nonexistent.*

Under Pope John Paul II, this position was refined. As stated in John Paul II's 1995 encyclical **Evangelium Vitae**, the Roman Catholic Church holds that capital punishment should be avoided unless it is the only way to defend society from the offender in question, and that with today's penal system such a situation requiring an execution is either rare or non-existent.

"Increasingly, our society looks to...increased reliance on the death penalty to deal with crime. We are tragically turning to violence in the search for quick and easy answers to complex human problems. A society that destroys its children, abandons its old and relies on vengeance fails fundamental moral tests.... "We cannot teach that killing is wrong by killing.... This cycle of violence diminishes all of us—especially our children." —*Confronting a Culture of Violence: A Catholic Framework for Action* (U.S. Catholic bishops, November 1994)