



# On the death penalty

By Archbishop Daniel E. Pilarczyk, Catholic Archdiocese of Cincinnati

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We are here this afternoon to pray and think about capital punishment, about society's practice of killing those who have offended gravely against their fellow human beings.

There are three reasons why a society claims the right to exact capital punishment. The first is to protect the safety of the rest of us. The second is to deter others from committing similar crimes. The third is to exact some form of retribution from the offender. All three of these reasons have a certain validity, but none of them justifies killing the criminal.

Obviously it is right to protect the members of a society from those who would harm it. We simply can't live together if our property, our physical integrity, and even our lives are at the mercy of evil doers. We need protection. But we don't need to kill the evil doer in order to provide that protection. All we have to do is take the evil doer out of circulation so that he or she can do no further wrong.

It is also right to seek to discourage or deter those who would do us harm. We deter them with the threat of punishment. Sometimes the threat works, and sometimes it doesn't, but without the threat of punishment, many people, perhaps most people would be inclined to do whatever they wished, however wicked or harmful it might be. Capital punishment, however, doesn't seem to deter. The crime rate in places that have capital punishment doesn't seem to be much different than the crime rate where other kinds of deterrence is in force.

Then there is retribution. Those who offend against society can rightly be expected to be called to make up for their offences in some way. The most ordinary kind of retribution is to take the criminal away from the benefits of living in a free society, to make him or her live for a time in a different and far less pleasant set of circumstances. These offenders abused their opportunities in freedom, so we take away some of that freedom. This is totally appropriate. Another kind of retribution, another way of having people make up for their crimes is to kill them. This mode of retribution has the advantage of making the criminal pay the ultimate price for his or her crime, but it runs the risk of error and, more importantly, it runs the risk of legitimizing revenge. It encourages the victims, or their families, or society at large to say, "This person did harm to me or to mine, and I want this person to be killed for it." Revenge is a very expensive luxury for a society. It keeps alive elemental feelings of hostility and hatred that civilization itself exists to eradicate, or at least to control. The zeal to kill criminals may, in the long run, be as destructive to society as the crimes for which we kill the criminals. It's a risk that we cannot afford to run.

We don't need capital punishment for protection because we can protect ourselves in other ways. We don't need capital punishment for deterrence, because it doesn't work as a deterrent. We shouldn't seek capital punishment for retribution, because of what it does to those who seek it.

May the Lord give us the wisdom to live together as we ought.