



## Prayer to End the Use of the Death Penalty

Merciful Father, we ask your blessing on all we do to build a culture of life. Hear our prayers for those impacted by the death penalty.

We pray for all people, that their lives and dignity as children of a loving God may

be respected and protected in all stages and circumstances.

We pray for victims of violence and their families, that they may experience our love and support and find comfort in your compassion and in the promise of eternal life.

We pray for those on death row, that their lives may be spared, that the innocent may be freed and that the guilty may come to acknowledge their faults and seek reconciliation with you.

We pray for the families of those who are facing execution, that they may be comforted by your love and compassion.

We pray for civic leaders, that they may commit themselves to respecting every human life and ending the use of the death penalty in our land.

Compassionate Father, give us wisdom and hearts filled with your love. Guide us as we work to end the use of the death penalty and to build a society that truly chooses life in all situations.

We ask this Father through your Son Jesus Christ who lives and reigns with the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever.

Amen

Source: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

### *What Can I Do?*

- Join FLCAN, the Florida Catholic Advocacy Network, at [www.flaccb.org](http://www.flaccb.org) and receive updates and alerts.
- Find out who your legislators are and make your voice heard.
- Attend Catholic Days at the Capitol for a briefing on current legislative issues and meet with legislative officials.
- Contact your local respect life office to join in their efforts.
- Join or help start a prison ministry at your parish or diocese.
- Join or coordinate prayer vigils.
- Above all else, pray for the victims of violent crimes and their families, for persons on death row awaiting execution, and for the end to the use of the death penalty.



### **Culture of Life Series**

**Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops**  
**201 West Park Avenue**  
**Tallahassee, FL 32301-7715**  
**(850) 222-3803**

**This brochure and others in the Culture of Life Series are available to view and print at:**  
**[www.flaccb.org/culture-of-life](http://www.flaccb.org/culture-of-life).**

*“Walk as children of light...”*  
**Ephesians 5:8**

**Florida’s Death Penalty:**  
***A Catholic Response***

## Florida's Death Penalty: A Brief History

**1924**—Frank Johnson is the first inmate executed in Florida's electric chair.

**1972**—In *Furman vs. Georgia*, the U.S. Supreme Court holds that capital punishment is unconstitutional, striking down state death penalty laws nationwide and creating new guidelines for a new death penalty.

**1976**—The Supreme Court begins to approve new state laws for capital punishment.

**1979**—Executions resume in Florida; John Spenkelink becomes the first death row inmate to be executed under the new statutes.

**1998**—Judias "Judy" Buenoano becomes the first woman to die in Florida's electric chair.

**2000**—Florida passes legislation allowing lethal injection as an alternative execution method; Edward Castro, through lethal injection, is the 50th executed inmate in Florida.

**2016**—In *Hurst vs. Florida*, the U.S. Supreme Court finds that Florida's death sentencing scheme violates the U.S. Constitution which requires a jury, not a judge, to make the findings necessary to impose a death sentence.

**2017**—In response to *Hurst*, Florida governor signs into law a bill requiring juries be unanimous in recommending a death sentence. Prior to this law, Florida was the only state with the death penalty that did not require juries be unanimous in the finding of aggravating circumstances and allowed a simple majority vote (7-5) to impose a death sentence.

**2020**—Florida Supreme Court's decision in *State v. Poole* reverses in part the holding from *Hurst* requiring jury unanimity to impose a death sentence.

**2023**—Florida legislature repeals law requiring jury unanimity to recommend a death sentence and authorizes the court to impose a sentence of death on a recommendation of 8 of 12 jurors; provides that the crime of sexual battery against a minor under the age of 12 is eligible to receive the death penalty; and revises the capital offense of murder to include a death caused by the unlawful distribution of a controlled substance.

## Florida's Death Penalty: The Problem

**Racial disparities:** Research has consistently come to the conclusion that defendants are much more likely to be sentenced to death if the victims are white. In 2017, Mark Asay became the first white person executed in Florida for killing an African American person.

**Florida is an outlier:** 20 states and the District of Columbia have repealed the death penalty. An additional four have declared gubernatorial moratoria.

In 2016, the Fair Punishment Project published a report identifying 16 counties, out of 3000+ nationwide, that sentenced more than five people to death between 2010-2015. Four of them are in Florida.

**Arbitrariness:** Florida's new law requiring jury unanimity to impose a death sentence has been held to be partially retroactive, only allowing those whose sentences were finalized after June 2002 to be eligible for resentencing.

**Cost:** It is estimated that one execution costs taxpayers \$20 million. Taxpayers pay approximately \$51 million per year to enforce the death penalty in Florida, above and beyond what it would cost to punish all first-degree murderers with life in prison without parole.<sup>1</sup>

**Alternatives exist:** The appeals and retrials processes frequently end in a life sentence, a result that readily could have been obtained with far less expense.

**Botched executions:** At least five Florida executions have had complications leading to extraordinary suffering, most recently in the 2006 case of Angel Diaz.<sup>2</sup>

**Have we executed the innocent?** As of July 2019, Florida has exonerated and freed 29 inmates from death row, more than any other state in the country.

According to a 2009 statement by Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, the Supreme Court "has never held that the Constitution forbids the execution of a convicted defendant who has had a full and fair trial but is later able to convince a habeas court that he is 'actually' innocent."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>"The High Price of Killing Killers," Palm Beach Post, January 4, 2000.

<sup>2</sup>Death Penalty Information Center, "Examples of Post-Furman Botched Executions."

<sup>3</sup>"Death row doubts? Not in the mind of Justice Scalia," Fort Wayne Journal Gazette Editorial, September 9, 2014.

## Florida's Death Penalty: What the Catholic Church Teaches

"Recourse to the death penalty on the part of legitimate authority, following a fair trial, was long considered an appropriate response to the gravity of certain crimes and an acceptable, albeit extreme, means of safeguarding the common good.

Today, however, there is an increasing awareness that the dignity of the person is not lost even after the commission of very serious crimes. In addition, a new understanding has emerged of the significance of penal sanctions imposed by the state.

Lastly, more effective systems of detention have been developed, which ensure the due protection of citizens but, at the same time, do not definitively deprive the guilty of the possibility of redemption.

Consequently, the Church teaches, in the light of the Gospel, that 'the death penalty is inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person', and she works with determination for its abolition worldwide." (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2267)

"You shall not kill." (Exodus 20:13)

"Do not court death by your erring way of life, nor draw to yourselves destruction by the works of your hands. Because God did not make death, nor does he rejoice in the destruction of the living." (Wisdom 1:12-13)

"...we do not wish to have the sufferings of the servants of God avenged by the infliction of precisely similar injuries in the way of retaliation. Not, of course, that we object to the removal from these wicked men of the liberty to perpetrate further crimes; but our desire is rather justice be satisfied without taking of their lives..." (St. Augustine, Letter 133)

"When the state, in our names and with our taxes, ends a human life despite having non-lethal alternatives, it suggests that society can overcome violence with violence. The use of the death penalty ought to be abandoned not only for what it does to those who are executed, but for what it does to all of society." (USCCB, *A Culture of Life and the Penalty of Death*)