

Happy Monday to all,

On September 15, 1870, the Dutch Senate voted to abolish capital punishment in the Netherlands. The Minister of Justice claimed the death penalty could not be adapted to the degree of culpability of the defendant and that execution is irreparable. He rationalized that crime is committed either pursuant to a plan arrived at calmly, or in the passion of the moment. If pre-meditated, deterrence depends more on whether the person anticipates punishment at all, not on the severity of the punishment. In the spur of the moment, concern about a possible death sentence is not likely to stop the person.

Today, the Netherlands' low crime rate is due to a combination of a robust social safety net that reduces poverty and inequality, a strong focus on crime prevention and rehabilitation over punitive measures, strict gun control, and highly trained, community-oriented police forces.

Rooted in both scripture and the rich tradition of our faith, Catholic Social Teaching is a guide for how to live as a people of justice and mercy. Catholic Social Teaching brings the teachings of Jesus and his call to discipleship to the larger societal conversation of social justice.

Regarding the death penalty, as Catholics, we firmly believe in the inherent dignity of the human person as created in the image and likeness of God. Our Catechism states that this dignity “is not lost even after the commission of very serious crimes; therefore, the death penalty is inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person. 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.” (Catholic Catechism 2267).

The death penalty threatens innocent life. Despite our best efforts, our criminal justice system is not perfect. Studies have shown that at least 4% of those sentenced to death in the United States are innocent. Courts exonerated 161 people due to their innocence since 1973. There are undoubtedly far more wrong convictions that are yet unproven.

The death penalty disproportionately affects those living in poverty. Almost all death row inmates were unable to afford their own attorney at trial. Over-worked and underpaid, it is challenging to find court-appointed attorneys possessing the experience necessary for capital trials. This often results in poorly handled cases that fail to introduce mitigating factors and tools such as DNA evidence, severe mental illness, or Intellectual Disability.

The horrific murder of Charlie Kirk in front of 100's of young college students in Utah, is probably leading many to refocus on the debate about the death penalty. There seems to be little doubt as to what happened. Video clearly shows a well-planned, premeditated attack on a human person with the goal to kill. What are we to do in cases such as this?

In the book, “A Christian on Death Row”, Pope Francis states definitively “The death penalty is in no way the solution to the violence that can strike innocent people. Capital executions, far from bringing justice, fuel a sense of revenge that becomes a dangerous poison for the body of

our civil societies,". And rather than continue the cycle of violence, governments "should focus on allowing prisoners the opportunity to truly change their lives, rather than investing money and resources in their execution, as if they were human beings no longer worthy of living and to be disposed of."

We are a people of life. The ethic of life is consistent, from conception to natural death. Human life is sacred and inviolable at every stage and in every situation; it is an indivisible good. (Evangelium vitae, 87). The death penalty violates this consistent ethic and does not conform to our pro-life teaching.

At Catholic Charities, this conviction drives our comprehensive social services, including support for the elderly and disabled, services for immigrants and refugees, and comprehensive aid for those living in poverty, the physically and mentally ill, and the marginalized. Catholic Charities advocates for justice and upholds human dignity by providing resources and care to all people, regardless of status, embodying a tradition of respect for all stages of life and of social responsibility.

Blessings,

Deacon Mike