

## Wisconsin's Bishops Oppose Reinstating the Death Penalty

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**W**e oppose the death penalty because we value human life, even when that life might seem unworthy to us. For Catholics, being “pro-life” means protecting life at all stages, from conception to natural death. A selective approach that values human life only in certain circumstances is inconsistent with who we are as a people of faith.

Wisconsin Bishops, *A Letter to Catholics in Wisconsin on the Death Penalty*, 2006

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## What You Can Do

**Pray** for the victims of crime and their families, and those who have been wrongly convicted.

**Learn** about the Church's teaching on the death penalty and Wisconsin's criminal justice policies.

**Educate** people in your parish about the Church's teaching on the death penalty.

**Advocate** by taking part openly in the public conversation on the death penalty, writing to the editor of your local paper, and encouraging others to vote NO on November 7<sup>th</sup>.

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For more resources  
on the death penalty, contact:



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE  
131 W. Wilson St., #1105  
Madison, WI 53703  
hone: 608-257-0004  
Fax: 608-257-0376  
Email: [office@wisconsinatholic.org](mailto:office@wisconsinatholic.org)  
[www.wisconsinatholic.org](http://www.wisconsinatholic.org)

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**Choose  
Life**

*Oppose  
the  
Death  
Penalty*

Vote  
NO  
November 7

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*An Educational Resource for Catholics*  
Wisconsin Catholic Conference

# Why Oppose the Death Penalty

Our nation should forgo the use of the death penalty because:

- The sanction of death, when it is not necessary to protect society, violates respect for human life and dignity.
- State-sanctioned killing in our name diminishes all of us.
- Its application is deeply flawed and can be irreversibly wrong, is prone to errors, and is biased by factors such as race, the quality of legal representation, and where the crime was committed.
- We have other ways to punish criminals and protect society.

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops  
*A Culture of Life and the Penalty of Death*, 2005

**I**t is true that in the past the Church accepted the death penalty. But such use of lethal force by the state was strictly conditioned and limited. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* now states that if “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.” (#2267)

Wisconsin Bishops, *A Letter to Catholics in Wisconsin on the Death Penalty*, 2006

## Questions & Answers about the November 7 Death Penalty Referendum

### What does the referendum say?

The referendum question reads as follows:

“Should the death penalty be enacted in the State of Wisconsin for cases involving a person who is convicted of first-degree intentional homicide, if the conviction is supported by DNA evidence?”

### Is this referendum part of a national trend to reinstate the death penalty?

No, quite the opposite. Increasingly, state governments have repealed, considered repealing, or declared moratoria on executions because they recognize the judicial system is highly compromised. Indeed, the Wisconsin legislature was ahead of its time in 1853 when it abolished capital punishment.

### Wouldn’t Wisconsin be safer if the death penalty were reinstated?

Our state’s rejection of the death penalty has not compromised public safety. Wisconsin’s homicide rate is far lower than many states that have the death penalty. In fact, it has been declining more rapidly here than in states that do have capital punishment.

### But doesn’t the ultimate crime of murder deserve the ultimate punishment?

While it is natural to desire a punishment that is proportional to the crime, proportionality requires fairness. Yet our judicial system simply cannot ensure that capital punishment is imposed equally on all who are convicted. For example, the system is not colorblind. Nationwide data show that a black person convicted of murder is far more likely to receive the death penalty if the victim is a white person and less likely to receive the death penalty if the victim is a black person.

Beyond issues of race or class, the judicial process is also fraught with too many other possibilities for error or bias: overeager or unscrupulous police and prosecutors; unreliable eyewitness accounts; incompetent defense lawyers; biased judges and juries. Indeed, since the 1970s, more than 120 death row inmates have been exonerated nationwide. No one knows how many more were wrongfully executed. The ultimate punishment is also irreversible.

### Wouldn’t the presence of DNA evidence ensure that an innocent person could never be executed?

No. Although DNA provides one of the most accurate types of evidence, it is not foolproof. State crime labs have very little regulation. To date, there are still no federal guidelines that crime labs must follow in handling DNA evidence. Studies of several crime labs across the nation have found numerous examples of human error, from contaminated DNA tests, to false-positive matches and falsified results.

### Why does the Church oppose the death penalty now when it permitted it in the past?

The Church has traditionally taught that states have the right to impose the death penalty in order to protect their citizens, but this right has been carefully circumscribed. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* now states that if “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.” (# 2267)

