



MINISTRY
AGAINST THE
DEATH
PENALTY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Statement from Sister Helen Prejean Regarding the Evolution of Catholic Teaching on the Death Penalty

I am overjoyed and deeply grateful to learn that Pope Francis closed the last remaining loophole in Catholic social teaching on the death penalty.

The Catholic Church has opposed capital punishment for many years, but the official language used to talk about the issue up to this point has always been equivocal. This left room for some to claim that executions are morally permissible. The Catechism's new language is very clear: "The death penalty is inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person." Absolutely no exceptions.

Pope Francis is building on opposition to the death penalty that began with Pope John Paul II, who spoke about the dignity of guilty life as well as innocent life and described executions as cruel and unnecessary. I've been glad to play a part in these developments.

The moral ground zero of this issue in the Catholic context has been the question of self-defense and the inviolable dignity of every human being. There's nothing dignified about rendering a person defenseless, strapping them down to a gurney, and killing them. That's not self-defense, either. The moral tectonic plates have shifted and the very nature of the act of executing a person can no longer be justified.

What's especially striking about the new language in the Catechism is that it speaks of a Church-wide commitment to global abolition of the death penalty. Announcements like the one made today are important and it's wonderful to have opposition to the death penalty embedded in Catholic teaching, but these are still just words on a page. Words must be followed by action. It's time to abolish state-sponsored killing forever.

Sister Helen Prejean is known around the world for her tireless work against the death penalty and her bestselling book Dead Man Walking. Her organization, the Ministry Against the Death Penalty, is based in New Orleans but its reach is both national and international.

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Media Contact: Griffin Hardy
Phone: (202) 656-7794
Email: griffin@sisterhelen.org

3009 Grand Route
St John, APT 6,
New Orleans, LA 70119

tel (504) 948-6557

hprejean@sisterhelen.org
www.sisterhelen.org