

Preaching Against Capital Punishment: Advice to Catholic Clergy

1. Be prepared that as much as 70 percent of your congregation may disagree with the Church's position on the death penalty. But don't let that stop you from preaching.
2. Try not to be bombastic, pretentious, or apodictic in preaching. Don't convey the message that "You're not a faithful Catholic if you disagree with me." (Indeed, a person may well be a faithful Catholic and still support the death penalty.) Instead, be modest and low-key; present a reasoned approach as to why you think capital punishment is not the solution to violent crime, and not in keeping with the Gospel message of forgiveness, mercy, and respect for life.
3. Situate your remarks about the death penalty in the context of Jesus's aligning Himself with those who are vulnerable, abandoned, and on the margins of society. Speak of Jesus's ministry to outcasts, his acceptance of sinners, his boundless love for every person. Say, for example, that our church extends its arms to:
 - the person who is homeless;
 - the elderly in fragile health;
 - the unborn child in the womb;
 - the family who is poor;
 - the child who is disabled;
 - the refugee at our shores;
 - and, yes, even the person who has committed a horrendous crime.
4. Indicate in your remarks that you understand that a violent person must be separated from society, lest he or she create new victims. Do not suggest that those who have committed violent crimes should not be punished. The Catholic Church believes punishment for crime should be sure and swift, humane, yet proportional to the seriousness of the crime.

Jesus Himself was not "soft on crime." What he did was to shift the locus of judgment to a higher court, a court where there is absolute knowledge of the evidence, of good deeds and evil, of faith, and of things private and public.

The above remarks will demonstrate that you are a reasonable person, and will "soften" the congregation's possibly-already-hardened position.

5. Try to situate your remarks in the context of the Sunday readings. That is fairly easy to do, since so many of those readings speak of the tenderness of God's mercy and of Jesus's acceptance of and concern for the "losers" in society, as well as His forgiveness. Some key Scriptural references include:

Matthew 5:38: Jesus says, when injured, turn the other cheek.

Matthew 7: Jesus says, to avoid judgment, stop passing judgment.

Matthew 20:1-14: The laborers in the vineyard; the last shall be first, and the first shall be last.

Matthew 25:35-40: The Last Judgment; what you do to the least among us, you do for Me.

Luke 6:35-37: Jesus says, love your enemy and do not condemn.

Luke 15:11-32: The prodigal Son.

John 1:16: Law was received through Moses; grace came through Jesus Christ.

John 8:6: Jesus forgives the adulterous woman.

Acts 7:60: Stephen's martyrdom.

Romans 12:14-19: Vengeance is to be left to God.

Galatians 3:23-24: By virtue of faith in Jesus, law is no longer in charge.

6. Be prepared for two potential arguments from congregants following the service:

Argument (a): "The Vatican supports the death penalty."

It is true that on a theoretical level, the Vatican has always supported the right of the state to end the life of a person who has taken another's life. But it has clearly stated that such punishment is justified (as the 1997 edition of the Catechism of the Catholic Church points out) "if this is the only possible way of effectively defending human lives against the unjust aggressor." If the latter goal can be accomplished via nonlethal means, the Catechism explains, such means should be used, "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."

The Catechism goes on to point out that governments today, in contrast to those in previous eras, have the ability to render criminals incapable of doing harm without taking their life. As a result, it says, quoting the words of Pope John Paul II in his encyclical "The Gospel of Life," the cases in which the execution of an offender is an absolute necessity "are very rare, if not practically nonexistent."

In his homily at a 1999 Papal Mass in St. Louis, Mo., attended by numerous U.S. government officials, Pope John Paul II called for an end to the death penalty, describing it as “both cruel and unnecessary.”

In 2001, an official Vatican statement issued at the World Congress on the Death Penalty in Strasbourg, France, described the death penalty as “a sign of desperation,” and stated: “The Holy See has engaged itself in the pursuit of the abolition of capital punishment as an integral part of the defense of human life at every stage of its development.”

Argument (b): “The Old Testament supports the use of the death penalty.”

Yes, Hebrew scriptures tended to favor capital punishment for many crimes other than the taking of human life, including adultery, kidnapping, even swearing or striking one’s parents. But, as the Vatican Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace wrote in 1976, “The existence of capital punishment in the Old Testament does not of itself justify it for today.” As the U.S. Bishops have said, new historical circumstances open the possibility of more appropriate punishment.

Jewish law was controlling until Jesus gave instructions to help us separate right from wrong. The law was altered for the Christian by the New Covenant. With Jesus, the message is to forgive and to love. The Good News promises that life can be lived to its fullest in forgiveness and love.