



**TENNESSEE
CATHOLIC
CONFERENCE**

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A Call to End the Death Penalty in Tennessee

The Catholic Church upholds the sacredness of every human life, even the life of one who is guilty of serious crimes. To take a life in punishment denies the image of God in which every person is made. The Gospel calls not for vengeance, but for mercy.

Historically, Church teaching allowed for the possibility that execution could be an appropriate punishment based on the recognition of the state's legitimate authority and its duty to protect its people. Even in allowing for that possibility, Church teaching reflected the understanding that execution is permissible only when it is the sole practicable means to prevent further harm. That understanding includes the recognition that even the most serious criminals retain an inherent dignity that must be respected, prompting the Church to limit the use of the death penalty as much as possible.

Saint John Paul II framed the modern understanding that the death penalty is unnecessary in modern society, proclaiming that modern societies can protect people without taking a life. His conviction has been affirmed by Popes Benedict XVI and Francis, who have made clear that capital punishment violates the dignity of the human person.

Pope Leo XIV embraced the fullness of Catholic Teaching stressing the importance of respecting the dignity of life from beginning to end when he told reporters that "Someone who says 'I'm against abortion but says I am in favor of the death penalty' is not really pro-life."

The death penalty extinguishes the chance for repentance and redemption. It closes the door that mercy would open. True justice protects life, even as it punishes wrongdoing. A culture of life cannot coexist with the machinery of death.

To oppose the death penalty is to affirm hope—that no one, even a person who has committed a grave crime, is beyond the reach of grace. God's judgment, not our retribution, has the final word.

In Tennessee, a series of executions, including one that clearly resulted in significant suffering of the condemned, have been carried out. The execution of Harold Wayne Nichols, who was convicted of raping and murdering 21-year-old Karen Pulley in 1988, is scheduled for December 11. We pray for Karen and for her family and friends. With even more executions planned for 2026, we call for a moratorium on the practice and for the abolition of the death penalty under state law.

Most Reverend J. Mark Spalding
Bishop of Nashville

Most Reverend David P. Talley
Bishop of Memphis

Most Reverend Mark Beckman
Bishop of Knoxville

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