

Catholic bishops again condemn death penalty: Executions "unfair, unnecessary and unhealthy for America's soul."

by [Kevin Eckstrom](#) in the [December 13, 2005](#) issue

The U.S. Roman Catholic bishops have renewed their call to end the death penalty, saying state-sponsored executions are unfair, unnecessary and unhealthy for America's soul.

The nation's Catholic bishops, in Washington for their annual mid-November meeting, affirmed church teaching that allows capital punishment in limited circumstances, but said life imprisonment is a better alternative. "We seek to build a culture of life in which our nation will no longer try to teach that killing is wrong by killing those who kill," the bishops said in an 18-page statement. "This cycle of violence diminishes all of us."

On the death penalty, the bishops are hoping to harness growing skepticism over capital punishment among both Catholics and the general public. A poll commissioned by the bishops in March found that support for the death penalty among Catholics has slipped to just 48 percent, down from 68 percent in 2001.

It might be a mistake, however, to make too much of the declining numbers. A separate Gallup poll conducted last spring for the *National Catholic Reporter* found that 57 percent of Catholics support "stiffer enforcement" of the death penalty.

While abortion, euthanasia and the death penalty are frequently condemned as part of a "culture of death," the bishops were clear that capital punishment is different, and that "people of goodwill disagree" on its merits. Indeed, church teaching allows the death penalty when it "is the only practicable way to defend the lives of human beings effectively against the aggressor," but says such circumstances are rare.

Catholic politicians who have been criticized for their support of abortion rights have complained that the bishops are not applying equal pressure on politicians who support the death penalty. "The death penalty has never been considered intrinsically evil by the church," said Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio of Brooklyn. "We're not saying that anyone who would be signing a death warrant would be committing an intrinsically evil act. That's the difference."

Since the U.S. Supreme Court reinstated capital punishment in 1976, nearly 1,000 people have been executed. But the annual number of executions has dropped by about 40 percent since 1999, and at least 119 death row inmates have had their death sentences overturned.

Given those realities, plus growing skepticism about the fairness of the death penalty and recent Supreme Court decisions that outlawed executions for juveniles and the mentally retarded, the bishops said the death penalty has become obsolete.

"The use of the death penalty ought to be abandoned not only for what it does to those who are executed, but for what it does to all of society," the bishops said.