What Does the Church Say about the Death Penalty?

By BJ Brown

In this summer of anti-racist activism, ineffective politics, economic hardship and uncontrolled epidemic, you might have missed news reports that the federal government carried out three executions in July, putting Daniel Lewis Lee, Wesley Ira Purkey and Dustin Lee Honken to death by lethal injection. At present, two more federal executions are scheduled for August.

Over the course of your life, you might also have missed the US Catholic Church’s decades-old opposition to the practice of capital punishment in this country. I certainly did. Growing up in the 1970s, I was well aware of the Church’s anti-abortion stance. I remember that I wore a metal bracelet next to my POW bracelet. It featured an alpha and an omega, but I did not yet know what it meant to be pro-life from birth to death.

I don’t recall hearing about the death penalty until shortly before my first visit to Virginia’s death row in August 1985. Seven locked heavy metal doors separated the parking lot from the cells where the prison chaplain, the bishop and I (his newly-minted staff) visited through the bars before celebrating Mass in the law library, where the guards were allowed to remove the men’s shackles. I remember a sharp nudge and whispered imperative to ‘say yes’ when one of the guys offered me a cup of tea brewed with hot tap water. I was struck with how young they all were. As I came to know them and their cases, I learned how much addiction, mental illness and arbitrary circumstances such as where they committed their crimes and the quality of their public defense played in their crimes and convictions.

As I came to understand the US Bishops’ repeated opposition to the death penalty, I also appreciated that it was two-fold:

Commitment to abolishing the death penalty is rooted in our deepest religious convictions. We believe that all human beings are created in the likeness of God, an image that no human deed can erase. We believe that the Lord of life never fails to offer anyone the possibility of redemption from even the most serious sin. In Virginia in the 1980s, these convictions enabled the Catholic diocese to help build an interfaith consensus against capital punishment.

The US bishops have also long argued that implementing the death penalty is irrevocably flawed. It is demonstrably prone to error, leading at best to long-delayed exoneration and at worst to the execution of innocent people. The death penalty is imposed disproportionately on people of color, especially African-Americans, people with mental..."
illness or intellectual disability, and poor people who must rely on public defenders at trial and (if they are lucky) pro bono representation at appeal. In the United States, the death penalty is also peculiarly related to geography. According to the abolitionist Catholic Mobilizing Network, four southern states—Alabama, Arkansas, Florida and Texas—have carried out 74% of the executions in the US in the last 23 years. Also, the cost of imposing and carrying out the death penalty far exceeds the cost of its most common alternative, life without parole. Back in 1980s Virginia, arguments such as these allowed the Church to work with unlikely partners, including the American Civil Liberties Union, in laying the foundations of an abolition movement.

Pennsylvania is a ‘moratorium state.’ The death penalty remains legal; capital crimes are still prosecuted; death sentences are still imposed, and 147 people remain on the state’s death row. In 2015, Governor Thomas Wolf imposed a moratorium on executions, citing his concerns about racial bias, the possibility of executing innocent people and the re-traumatizing effect of the death penalty on the families of murder victims.

For many years, the wider church found “a sign of hope” in the growing opposition to the death penalty. Finally, in 2017, Pope Francis clearly stated the Church’s opposition to capital punishment. Two years later, the Catechism of the Catholic Church was updated to reflect his statement:

*The Church teaches, in the light of the Gospel, that the death penalty is inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the human person, and she works with determination for its abolition worldwide.* (#2267)

Most of the men I met that long ago August day have since been executed by the Commonwealth of Virginia. One took his own life in prison and one was eventually resentenced to life without parole and then exonerated. I would return a few times a year to Virginia’s death row. On one visit, a young guard offered to take me to the execution chamber. Since I was relying on his escort in a maximum-security prison, saying no didn’t seem like a good option. As he showed off the scarred wooden chair, its rickety wiring and worn leather straps, one of the iron leg restraints clanged to the floor. I froze, unable to bend over and pick up the nondescript, U-shaped piece of black iron that lay at my feet.

Our Catholic opposition to the death penalty need not spring from such close encounter with evil. It is, to use the old image, woven seamlessly into our witness for life, for justice and for mercy. Keep it among the issues that you weigh as you approach the upcoming state and federal elections.

To learn more, visit the Death Penalty Information Center’s website, deathpenaltyinfo.org.

The Catholic Mobilizing Network, dedicated to abolishing the death penalty and promoting restorative justice, can be found at catholicsmobilizing.org.

Formal statements from the US bishops can be accessed under the Human Life and Dignity heading of the Issues and Action section of their website.

You may also find it helpful to read Helen Prejean’s 1993 book Dead Man Walking and Bryan Stephenson’s 2015 book Just Mercy. Both books have been made into popular movies.

The image on the preceding page was taken in April 1987 after Mass at Virginia’s Mecklenberg Correction Center, where the state’s death row was then housed. Catholics from Virginia’s death row are standing with Bishop Walter Sullivan and members of his staff. One of the men pictured had saved his commissary money to purchase take this Polaroid during the visit.
Daily Mass Intentions
Monday, August 3: Virginia M. Kelly (D)
Presider: Fr. Hannafey SJ
Tuesday, August 4: Old St. Joseph’s Memorial Society
Presider: Fr. Modrys SJ
Wednesday, August 5
Presider: Fr. O’Donnell SJ
Thursday, August 6: Old St. Joseph’s Memorial Society
Presider: Fr. O’Donnell SJ
Friday, August 7
Presider: Fr. Hannafey SJ

Sunday, August 9
7:30 AM Presider: Fr. O’Donnell SJ
9:30 AM Presider: Fr. Hannafey SJ (livestreamed only)
11:30 AM Presider: Fr. Modrys SJ

Please remember our sick and homebound brothers and sisters,
our ministry at Pennsylvania Hospital and all those who have asked for our prayers.

George Bernato, Debbie Brooks, Ann Crowther,
Jane Crowther, Mary Kay Crowther, Barbara Epting,
Walter Fluhr, Allan May, Jerry McAndrews SJ,
Owen Petrzelka, Philip Press, Matthew Smith,
Sara Smith, Sharon Winge and Pat Yusko.

If you wish to have someone included on the parish prayer list,
please call BJ Brown at 215-923-1733
or email bjbrown@oldstjoseph.org.

Archbishop Nelson Pérez’s dispensation from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass remains in effect.
Guidelines for attending Mass at Old St. Joseph’s are available on our website (or by clicking here). Please keep these things in mind as you decide whether it is safe for you to attend public worship.
Announcements

Rev. Bryan Massingale’s 
*Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*
Following up on the July 13 *Parish Conversation on Race*, Old St. Joseph’s Adult Education and Ignatian Spirituality Committees invite all members of the parish to read Reverend Bryan Massingale’s book, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*. Father Massingale is a professor of applied ethics in the theology department of Fordham University. His research interests include African American religious ethics, racial justice, liberation theologies, and race and sexuality. Book discussions (by Zoom) are scheduled for **Thursday, September 10 and Tuesday, September 29 at 7:30 PM.**

**New Sanctuary Movement Philadelphia**
Old St. Joseph’s has become a member congregation of [New Sanctuary Movement Philadelphia](#) an interfaith, multicultural movement organizing to end injustices against immigrants, regardless of status. This commitment was recommended by the parish Social Justice Committee as a next step building on the involvement of OSJ parishioners in accompanying immigrants to court.

Old St. Joseph’s will be part of the New Sanctuary Movement’s *Driving Philadelphia Forward* campaign, which will shift into high gear in the fall. The campaign seeks to amend state law to broaden access to standard driver’s licenses to people who have taxpayer identification but no social security numbers. This allows immigrants of varying status to obtain legal identification and a small protection against arbitrary arrest and deportation. Much more information will follow!

OSJ’s membership in New Sanctuary Movement Philadelphia is supported by the Barbelin Fund, the restricted fund supporting parish social ministry, including Faith, Food and Friends. In the past weeks, OSJ has received notes of thanks form Nutritional Development Services, Catholic Relief Services’ Rice Bowl, Bread for the World, and the Bethesda project, who all received support from the Barbelin Fund in June (see the [June 28, 2020 bulletin](#) for details).

**PREP Teachers Needed!**
PREP, the Parish Religious Education Program, is seeking several teachers for this year's program. Classes will meet via Zoom with periodic in--person sessions at the parish as conditions permit. Instructional materials and support will be provided. If you're interested or want more information, please contact Christine Szczepanowski at [prep@oldstjoseph.org](mailto:prep@oldstjoseph.org) or 215-923-1733 x123.

**August Special Collections**
The following special collections are now active on [ParishSOFT Giving](#) through August 30. You may also contribute via text at 215-929-7151 by using the keywords below:

- **The annual archdiocesan Missionary Cooperative Appeal** will benefit the work of the Handmaids of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. The collection will be taken up in church on August 9; watch for more information in that week’s bulletin. The keyword for the collection is MissionCoop.

- The collection for the **Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary**, keyword Assumption, is open online although there will not be a special holy day Mass because the feast falls on a weekend.

- The annual collection for **Catholic University of America** will be taken up in church on August 16; the key word is CatholicUniversity.

**In Memoriam**
The Jesuit community of Saint Joseph's University will host a Memorial Mass on **August 11, 2020 at 11:30 AM** for Jesuits who died from COVID-19, including Fathers Michael Hricko SJ and Edward Dougherty SJ. Physical attendance is limited to invited family members and friends, but you may watch the Mass via St. Joseph’s University’s [livestream](#).
INFORMATION

Pastor
Fr. Walter Modrys SJ (pastor@oldstjoseph.org)

Parochial Vicar
Fr. Francis Hannafey SJ (fhannafey@oldstjoseph.org)

Pastoral Associate
BJ Brown (bjbrown@oldstjoseph.org)

Business Manager
Eric German (germane@oldstjoseph.org)

Director of Music
Mark Bani (music@oldstjoseph.org)

Parish Offices
(phone@oldstjoseph.org)

Religious Education (PREP) Coordinator
Christine Szczepanowski (prep@oldstjoseph.org)

Faith, Food & Friends Director
Deborah Hluchan (faithandfriends@oldstjoseph.org)

Director of Hospital Ministry
Tom Volkert (hospitalEM@oldstjoseph.org)

Rectory Office Hours
Monday through Friday: 9:30 AM to 4:30 PM

Mass Times
Monday–Friday at 12:05 PM.
Live-streamed at 9:30 AM Sunday; at vimeo.com/osjphl.
Public Mass at 11:30 AM Sunday.

Medical Emergency
In a medical emergency when the need for a priest is urgent, please call the rectory.

Hearing Enhancements
Old St. Joseph's is equipped with an audio hearing loop. Switch on the T-coil function of your device to use the loop. Booklets with the Sunday readings are available in the rear of the church.

Registration
Registration forms are available in the rectory office during normal office hours, on the bookcases in the back of the church and online at www.oldstjoseph.org. They can be returned to the parish office by mail or in person.

Sacrament of Reconciliation
Priests are available for the Sacrament of Reconciliation Monday through Saturday by appointment; please call the parish offices.

Sacrament of Baptism
To arrange a baptism, please contact Fr. Hannafey (fhannafey@oldstjoseph.org) at least two months before the desired date.

Eucharist for the Homebound
To arrange to receive Communion at home, please contact the parish offices.

The Sacrament of Anointing
Homebound or hospitalized persons wanting to receive the Sacrament of Anointing should call the parish office.

Sacrament of Matrimony
If you want to be married at Old St. Joseph’s, please visit our website, oldstjoseph.org and read the material under the heading Weddings. Please call the parish office at 215-923-1766 at least nine months before your desired wedding date.

Rite of Christian Initiation
If you are an adult wishing to be baptized, or to receive First Eucharist and Confirmation, or are a baptized non-Catholic seeking full communion with Catholic Church, please call the parish office or email rcia@oldstjoseph.org.

Mass of Christian Burial
To schedule a funeral or memorial Mass, ask your funeral director to call the parish office.

Parish Pastoral Council
(phone@oldstjoseph.org)

Parish Finance Council
Paul Shay, chair

Historic Preservation Corporation Board
Fr. Walter Modrys SJ, president

Adult Education
Rita O'Brien and Jeanmarie Zippo (adulted@oldstjoseph.org)

Eldership
Pat Nelson (eldership@oldstjoseph.org)

Parish Life
Joe Casey (parishlife@oldstjoseph.org)

Ignatian Spirituality and Formation
Len Mancini (osjsspirituality@oldstjoseph.org)

Women, Faith and Fellowship
Rana McNamara (wff@oldstjoseph.org)

Young Adult Community
(osjyac@gmail.com)

Altar Servers
Maria Ramirez (altarserver@oldstjoseph.org)

Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion
Bill Stewart (EM@oldstjoseph.org)

Hospital Ministry
Luanne Balestrucci (hospitalEM@oldstjoseph.org)

Homebound Ministry
Neal Hébert (homeEM@oldstjoseph.org)

Lectors
Lou Anne Bulik (lectors@oldstjoseph.org)

Ushers
Nikola Sizgorich (ushers@oldstjoseph.org)

Children’s Liturgy of the Word
Peggy Connolly (clow@oldstjoseph.org)
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To them, she's the queen who will save them all.

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