

The Catholic Church teaches that public authorities have the right and the duty to punish criminals in a way that matches the seriousness of their crime. They are morally justified in the most serious cases to impose even the death penalty. This is a self-defense based on the commandment to love oneself (cf. *Mark* 12:31). The guilt of an unjust aggressor and the need to protect society makes capital punishment morally different from the killing of an innocent child in elective abortion, which is never justified.

It is worth recalling, however, that Pope John Paul II of happy memory often made public appeals for public authorities to show clemency and to refrain from using the death penalty. In this same vein, Pope Benedict XVI recently commended the Philippine government for outlawing the use of the death penalty. These interventions were made because the Catholic Church also teaches that the death penalty should not be imposed if there are other ways to guarantee public order and the safety of citizens.

In light of the above, for a number of reasons preference should be given whenever possible to punishments other than the death penalty:

- When a person is falsely condemned and executed there is no possibility to correct the error, resulting in a supreme injustice;
- It does not offer the offender the possibility of reform or to pay his debt to society, both of which are principal aims of punishment;
- It can make people forget their own dignity as human persons or that of others, seen for example in the carnival atmosphere that sometimes occurs on the occasion of an execution;
- It is too often associated with attitudes and behavior that are opposed to Christian life, such as hatred of or vengeance against the criminal (cf. *Matthew* 5: 38-48);
- It is now possible, at least in our country, to guarantee the public order and the safety of citizens without recourse to capital punishment.

Support for the abolishment of the death penalty in no way diminishes the condemnation of the evil deeds that brutally victimize innocent people, or the profound sympathy towards people who have been made a victim or who grieve the murder of a family member or friend. This righteous anger and compassion notwithstanding, recourse can and should be made to bloodless means to protect public order and the safety of people, instead of making use of the death penalty.