



Asian Journal of Religious Studies

“The Lord is truly among us.”

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Address all correspondence (incl. DD) to:

The Editor

AUC, Papal Seminary, Pune 411014, India

Email: journal@papalseminary.org or kuru@kuru.in

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Editorial

No to Death Penalty

Pope Francis declares capital punishment unambiguously wrong. No exceptions. This invites us to reflect on our attitude to life and death.

Pope Francis's condemnation of capital punishment is simple and unambiguous: It is inadmissible. No exceptions for especially heinous crimes; no loopholes allowing execution when other lives might be in jeopardy, as in past Catholic teachings. No, declared the pope; state-sanctioned killing is always an unjustifiable attack on the dignity of human life, it's always wrong.

Since his election to the papacy five years ago, Francis has introduced a less formal, more pragmatic and progressive approach to his ministry, taking strong stands on issues like climate change and consumerism. His approach has often drawn criticism from Catholic conservatives, and the new teaching on the death penalty is bound to generate a heated debate — indeed it already has — on what it means for Catholic judges and politicians in the United States.

The church's new position on the death penalty carries no formal punishment for defying it, but in eliminating any ambiguity it does compel Catholic officials at least to find concrete reasons to not abide by it. Four Supreme Court justices are Catholic, as is Brett Kavanaugh, President Trump's nominee for the court; among governors, Pete Ricketts of Nebraska, a Catholic and staunch supporter of

the death penalty, has already declared that he will not block an execution scheduled for this month.

There will also be conservative Catholics who reject the pope's reasoning for changing his church's teaching on capital punishment after centuries in which it was tolerated. A letter to bishops accompanying the revised teaching explained at length that it was a development of the teachings of the last two popes, John Paul II and Benedict XVI, reflecting changes in awareness that had taken place in recent times.

Yet the importance of the pope's definitive rejection of capital punishment is not solely for Catholics, or for Christians, as the Vatican made clear in saying that the church would work "for its abolition worldwide."

The New York Times in its "Opinion Section" holds that for those who have long opposed capital punishment as cruel and pointless, the only lingering question is why the Catholic Church or any religious denomination that still condones executions would take so long to recognize that they are simply inadmissible.

May we collectively promote life from womb to tomb, which includes protection of the unborn and those condemned to die by the state!

Kuruvilla Pandikattu

Editor