

“**You Shall not Kill**”

“A sign of hope is the development of a growing opposition to the death penalty in public opinion, even as a social instrument of legitimate defense. Today modern societies have the opportunity to fight crime effectively without permanently removing the chance of redemption from those who have committed crimes. This issue has to be considered within the perspective of a penal justice which is more and more in compliance with human dignity and God’s plan for humanity and society. The commandment “You shall not kill,” has absolute value and applies to both the innocent and the guilty.

The special Jubilee of Mercy is a propitious occasion to promote, throughout the world, ever more mature forms of respect for life and the dignity of every person. Even a criminal maintains an inviolable right to life, which is a gift of God. I appeal to the consciences of those who govern to reach an international consensus to abolish the death penalty. And I propose, to those among them who are Catholic, to make a courageous and exemplary gesture by seeking a moratorium on executions during this Holy Year of Mercy.

All Christians and people of good will are called today to work not only for the abolition of the death penalty, but also to improve the conditions of life in prison, in respect of human dignity of persons deprived of liberty.” (Pope Francis, February 2016)

**Year in Review on Texas Death Penalty**

(Abstract from the ‘Texas Death Penalty Developments in 2015: The Year in Review’ by the Texas Coalition Against the Death Penalty; to read the whole document go to www.tcadp.org)

In 2015 new death sentences fell to their lowest number since the U.S. Supreme Court reinstated capital punishment in 1976. Juries condemned three new individuals to death, according the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ). Death sentences peaked in 1999 with 48 people sent to death row.

The first death sentence of the year was not imposed until October 7, representing 9 months and 17 days since the previous death sentence was imposed in Texas. On this day, jurors in Brazos County sentenced Gabriel Hall to death for murdering Edwin Sharr and attacking Linda Sharr in their home in College Station in 2011. Hall had been adopted from the Philippines and was 18-year-old at the time of the crime. Since 2009, prosecutors in Brazos County have pursued the death penalty in numerous cases where the defendants presented evidence of intellectual disabilities or severe mental illness.

2015 is the first year since reinstatement that an African-American defendant did not face the death penalty in Texas. Over the last five years, nearly 60% of all new death sentences in Texas have been imposed on African-Americans. While African-Americans comprise only 12.5% of the population of Texas, they constitute 42.5% of death row inmates, according to TDCJ. Hispanics comprise 27.4% of individuals on death row in Texas (38.6% of the population of Texas), and whites comprise 28.2% (43.5% of the Texas population).

As of November 19, 2015, TDCJ counted 252 death row inmates, which includes 6 women. This remains the lowest Texas death row population since 1987. More than one-third of these individuals were convicted in Harris County. Texas has the third-largest death row population in the nation, after California (745) and Florida (392).

The State of Texas executed 13 people in 2015, accounting for nearly half of all U.S. executions this year (13 out of 28). Just six states were responsible for executions in 2015. Texas has executed a total of 531 people since 1982, with Harris County accounting for 125 executions, more than any state in the country besides Texas. Executions peaked in Texas in 2000, when 40 people were put to death. The average amount of time spent on death row for all of the men executed in 2015 was 16 years.

Several of the men executed this year were barely legal adults at the time of the crime. A 2005 ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court prohibits the death penalty for those under age 18 at the time of the crime. The State of Texas put to death individuals with intellectual disabilities, those with evidence of severe mental illness, and one with a compelling case of innocence.

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Fourteen inmates scheduled for execution in 2015 received reprieves, including stays granted by the courts and the withdrawal of execution dates. This constitutes the highest number of reprieves in recent years – in a typical year, around seven reprieves are granted.

Wrongful Convictions. On June 8, 2015, Harris County District Attorney announced her office was dismissing capital murder charges against Alfred Dewayne Brown after determining there was insufficient evidence to support another conviction. That same day, he left the county jail in Houston as a free man. Brown spent a decade on death row and had consistently maintained his innocence. Last November, the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals overturned Brown’s conviction and death sentence after finding the Harris County D. A. Office had withheld material evidence favorable to Brown’s case. The Harris County D. A. Office agreed that relief should be granted. Brown is the 13th person released and exonerated from death row in Texas.

Nationally, six individuals were exonerated and released from death rows in 2015; collectively, they spent 114 years in prison for crimes they did not commit. Three of them spent more than 25 years in prison. A total of 156 people have been exonerated from death rows nationwide since 1973, including 13 individuals in Texas.

Legislative Developments. During the 84th Texas Legislature, lawmakers considered numerous bills related to capital punishment. Several critical bills aimed at improving the fairness and accuracy of the criminal justice system were signed into law by Governor Greg Abbott, including bills establishing an innocence commission to examine cases of wrongful convictions, increasing access to post conviction DNA testing, and overhauling the grand jury system.

Over the last 15 years, use of the death penalty has dropped significantly in Texas, mirroring national trends. Texas has gone from a peak of 48 new death sentences to the fewest death sentences on record. Executions have declined, as well.

The death penalty remains racially biased and geographically isolated, as the number of Texas counties devoting resources to costly death penalty trials dwindles each year. The risk of wrongful convictions and evidence of wrongful executions continue to undermine the fairness and accuracy of the system. The cases of individuals scheduled for execution this year also illustrate the deep flaws that plague our state’s capital punishment system.

In Brazos County (Bryan/College Station)

- Brazos County is responsible for 17 death sentences since 1976, including 3 since 2012 and the first death sentence of 2015;
- Since 2009, prosecutors in Brazos County have pursued the death penalty in numerous cases where the defendant presented evidence of intellectual disabilities or severe mental illness;
- Since 1974 Brazos County accounts for 12 persons executed, 4 waiting execution and 1 removed from death row.

The Wrongful Conviction of Anthony Graves (TCADP)

Anthony Graves was convicted in 1994 of assisting in multiple murders in 1992 and sent to death row. There was no physical evidence linking Graves to the crime, and no motive, and only a testimony that was re-canted again and again through the years. In 2006 the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit overturned Graves’ conviction and ordered a new trial. After investigating the case and finding no piece of credible evidence that links Anthony Graves to this capital murder, Washington-Burleson County District Attorney filed a motion to dismiss all charges that had resulted in Graves being 16 years in death row and facing two serious execution dates. Graves was released from a Texas prison in October 2010.

What You Can Do

PRAY for victims of crime and their families, those who have been wrongly convicted, and those awaiting execution.


EDUCATE people in your parish or community about Catholic social teaching and the criminal justice system.

ADVOCATE by contacting your elected officials. Share with them Catholic teaching on the death penalty and urge them to take steps at the state and national level to curtail or end its use. Some of the websites listed above have resources for advocacy.

Activities in Life, Justice and Charity at St. Mary’s

Social Justice Summer Bible Study: A Call to Justice

Join us each week for the Social Justice Bible Study with reflections and discussions on how to respond to the biblical call to justice by treating everyone as our brothers and sisters and living as a responsible global citizen.

Service opportunities: St. Mary’s has several service opportunities during the summer. Check on the web calendar on the home page and sign up online at www.aggiecatholic.org/summer2016.

Upcoming service opportunities: Soup Kitchen at the Twin City Mission: Fridays July 22 & 29, Aug 5, 12, 19 & 26 from 3:30 PM to 6:00 PM; Meals-on-Wheels on Saturday July 30 from 7:45 AM to 11 AM.

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