News



New York City Councilman Yusef Salaam, sitting in chair closest to the camera, addresses attendees at Notre Dame Law School March 24, 2025, the opening day of the school's inaugural Death Penalty Abolition Week. Salaam was one of five teenagers eventually proven to have been wrongly convicted in the 1989 assault of a jogger in Central Park in a case that came to be known as the "Central Park Five" case. (OSV News/ University of Notre Dame/Matt Cashore)



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The University of Notre Dame Law School hosted for the first time a four-day event to promote the abolition of the death penalty. Its March 24-27 Death Penalty Abolition Week brought to campus nationally known and respected opponents of the death penalty.

But key arguments against capital punishment, now a legal option in 27 states, were also immediately made by law school representatives who introduced speakers.

"Anyone who has spent any time in any Catholic school must realize that they've spent time face-to-face with the violence, brutality and innate inhumanity of the death penalty," said G. Marcus Cole, Notre Dame Law School dean. "It is clearly depicted on the wall of every Catholic classroom in every Catholic school — in the form of the crucifix on the wall. Our Lord Jesus Christ was a victim of the death penalty."

Cole said that in 2018, Pope Francis made it clear that Catholics must now oppose the death penalty.

"He changed 2267 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church to clearly articulate our united opposition to the death penalty," he said. "Every human life is created in the image and likeness of God and has to be treated that way. Today there is an increasing awareness that the dignity of the person who has committed a crime is not lost — even after the commission of a serious crime."

That increasing recognition and understanding of the innate dignity of every human person — even a convicted criminal — was a major theme in the third talk of the week given by Syl Schieber. Schieber and his wife, Vicki, lost their 23-year-old daughter, Shannon, after she was raped and murdered in her Philadelphia apartment on May 7, 1998, by Troy Graves, a serial killer.

"Two nights later, Vicky and I were at Saturday night Mass and at the Lord's Prayer, when we got to the words, 'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.' I lost my voice. But, almost immediately, I came to understand what being a Christian was about in a much deeper way than I ever had," Schieber told the audience.

In the weeks that followed Shannon's death, the Schiebers grieved deeply but told police detectives, their pastor and friends that they would not push for the death penalty if and when their daughter's murderer was finally arrested and tried. Syl Schieber said that pushback against their death penalty opposition began to come in a variety of ways and from different directions.

"Once they caught the murderer in Colorado in April of 2002, the big news in Philadelphia was not that they had him, but that the Schiebers were going to object to the death penalty," Schieber said, still clearly shocked by this response. "And the district attorney in Philadelphia, Lynne Abraham, said that the death penalty was appropriate in Shannon's case and that she would pursue it."

The Schiebers began to explain that they based their views about the death penalty on their faith.

"But we also pointed out that there were racial and economic disparities in how these death penalties were applied," he said. "And there are district attorneys around the country who really want to pursue the death penalty for those convicted of murder. They want to be tough on crime. Judicial misconduct has been found in many of these cases."

Schieber said the decades of involvement in speaking against the death penalty have also made something else apparent.

"When Shannon was killed in 1998, the average time between a murder and carrying out the death sentence for the murderer was around 17 and one-half years," he said. "Because the death penalty was not pursued for Shannon's

murderer, he was arrested, tried and sentenced about a month later to life in prison without parole."

For Schieber, that meant some kind of emotional closure. "We've never met anyone 15 or 20 or even 30 years after a crime who's been waiting for a murderer's execution who has said that it's been a rewarding journey," he said. "For me, the Lord's Prayer was a tremendous gift — and a key to sanity and being able to move on."

When asked how he viewed the passage in the Old Testament's Book of Exodus that promotes reciprocal justice through the "eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" teaching, Schieber did not take long to respond.

"Part of what Jesus was about was a new law: Forgive your enemies, turn the other cheek," he said. "And in the Gospel of John when the Scribes and Pharisees present the woman they wanted to stone, Jesus told her would-be executioners: 'You who are without sin cast the first stone.' They all had to walk away. None of us are without sins."

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Sr. Helen Prejean, an internationally renowned advocate for the abolition of the death penalty, shared her story on Death Penalty Abolition Week's final day in a courtroom auditorium crowded with students.

"I taught seventh and eighth grade and then in high school," the Sister of St. Joseph began, claiming that as a young religious sister, she knew absolutely nothing about social justice issues. "I didn't even know any poor people!"

But, after going to a conference focused on the needs of others, she moved to an inner-city housing project in New Orleans and began working at Hope House. Soon after, she volunteered to write letters to a death-row prisoner and connected with Pat Sonnier.

Their relationship through the mail grew and Sr. Helen soon filled out the compulsory visitors' form to visit him. Since she was not a family member, she identified herself as "spiritual adviser."

"Little did I know that two years later, the only one who could be with him when he was put in the holding cell there in the death house and then accompany him to execution was going to be his spiritual adviser — me," she said. "We hadn't had an execution in Louisiana in 20 years. This was in the early '80s. The Supreme Court had restored it in 1976, but I hadn't noticed."

"I came out after watching Pat be killed in the middle of the night on April 5, 1984," she recalled. "It was dark and there were sisters who were waiting for me in the Louisiana State Penitentiary parking lot along with these good lawyers who'd worked on the case. The first thing I did was throw up! But that's also when the mission to talk to all of you about this issue began. I'm a witness."

In 1993, Sr. Helen's book "Dead Man Walking" was published. It was a groundbreaking account of what she had learned about Sonnier but also about the cruel inhumanity of the death penalty in America. Two years later, the movie "Dead Man Walking" starring Sean Penn and Susan Sarandon brought her story to a much larger audience.

"When my book came out, 80% of the American public said that they supported the death penalty," she said.

"We hadn't had the dialogue to get into the deeper moral issues of who we are as a people," she continued. "The death penalty is about us. The death penalty is always going to be torture — an extreme physical and mental assault on someone who's been rendered defenseless. And we should not identify a human being solely with the worst act of his or her life."

Representatives from Catholic Mobilizing Network, a Washington-based organization that advocates to end the death penalty, were especially pleased with this inaugural Death Penalty Abolition Week, and that so many young people attended the talks.

CMN's executive director, Krisanne Vaillancourt Murphy, described the organization's goal as "to mobilize Catholics and all people of good will to value life over death, to end the use of the death penalty, to transform the U.S. criminal legal system from punitive to restorative."

"The data shows us that — by and large — U.S. support for the death penalty continues to decline," she said, noting that a 2024 report from Gallup's Annual Crime

Survey demonstrates that public support for the death penalty has dropped to 53%, the lowest it has been since the 1970s.

"This decline can be largely attributed to younger generations who are far less likely than older generations to favor the death penalty," she said.

Meanwhile, "from the 1970s through 2022, Catholic support for the death penalty fell from 75% to 61%," she said.

At the same time, "there are a few states that have recently resumed executions after years without them," she said.

"As lethal injection drugs become harder to procure, either because pharmaceutical companies refuse to sell their drugs for this purpose or because of rampant botched lethal injections, we have seen states seeking additional methods of execution to support their efforts to resume executions," she said. "We are witnessing that some states are so hell-bent on pursuing executions that they'll go to distant lengths in order to take these lives."

Just days after Death Penalty Abolition Week, U.S. Attorney General Pam Bondi announced April 1 that federal prosecutors would seek the death penalty in the case of Luigi Mangione, who is accused of murdering United Healthcare CEO Brian Thompson Dec. 4, 2024, in New York City.