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Over 150 theologians call for abolition of death penalty

by Joshua J. McElwee

More than 150 Catholic theologians have signed a statement calling on the United States to abolish capital punishment, and asking the church to work "unwaveringly" toward that goal.

The statement, **issued this morning on the Catholic Moral Theology blog**, comes five days after the controversial Sept. 21 execution in Georgia of Troy Davis. Amnesty International, along with a number of faith and justice groups, had said that "serious doubts" remained over Davis' guilt in the 1989 murder of a police officer.

Signing their names along with the institution where they teach, overwhelmingly at Catholic colleges and universities, the theologians reference church teachings on capital punishment and say they "deplore and lament the killing of Troy Davis" and "decry the death sentences of the more than 3,200 inmates on death row."

Tobias Winright, an associate professor in theology at St. Louis University who helped draft the statement, said in a phone interview that the number of theologians interested in adding their name to the list is growing by the minute. The high number, he said, indicates that the movement to abolish the death penalty is backed by professors across the country, of every age and political stripe.

"We've had signers from North to South, West to East," said Winright. "We have first year teachers, and people who have taught for many, many years. That reflects that this is an important issue to a lot of Catholic theologians right now."

The statement, which Winright said started as an exchange between professors on a listserv over the morality of the killing of Davis, notes that, since the reinstatement of the death penalty in 1973, 138 people have been exonerated from death row.

The number of people exonerated, the theologians write, reflects the fact that "execution is" irrevocable and innocent people have likely been victims of it.

That probability of innocent victims of the death penalty speaks to the case of Davis, who maintained he was not guilty. His case garnered international attention when many of the witnesses who had implicated him in the murder recanted their testimony, and nine others signed affidavits implicating another man, whom Davis said was the actual killer.

Disproportionate among those who have been cleared of crimes worthy of the death penalty, the theologians' statement says, are people of color, who "are from 3 to 5 times more likely to be executed if their victim was white."

Citing the U.S. bishops' 2005 statement "A Culture of Life and the Penalty of Death," the theologians' statement says that while church teaching does not outlaw capital punishment, it recognizes that there are now other ways to "protect citizens from threats to the common good."

The application of the death penalty is "deeply flawed and can be irreversibly wrong, is prone to errors, and is biased by factors such as race, the quality of legal representation, and where the crime was committed," the statement quotes the bishops' 2005 document.

Another sign of the importance of the death penalty question to Catholic theologians, Winright said, is that today's statement has drawn signatures of those who have in the past disagreed on issues of doctrine or liturgy.

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"While we may have disagreements on some things, on this issue there seems to be consensus," said Winright.

While Winright said the theologians hadn't specifically reached out to bishops to sign today's statement, he noted they had received one bishop's signature, Bishop John Michael Botean of the Eparchy of St. George in Canton, Ohio, and would welcome others.

Beyond practical questions of innocence or guilt of those on death row, the theologians say in their statement that the example of Christ, who himself was put to death, points to a "theological stance" that the death penalty is always wrong.

Acknowledging that the "Gospel message of forgiveness and love of enemies presents a difficult challenge" to those who have experienced murder in their families, the theologians write: "The Gospel teaches us how to become fully human: love, not hatred and revenge, liberates us. We need to forgive and love both in fidelity to the Gospel and for our own well-being."

As an example of such forgiveness, the statement points to the work of Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights, an international group of families who have experienced a murder, yet publicly oppose the death penalty.

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Editor's note: As of the morning of Sept. 27, 195 people had signed onto the statement.

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