



BECAUSE WE ARE CATHOLIC

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN CALIFORNIA SERVES AND ADVOCATES FOR THE POOR, VULNERABLE AND THOSE IN NEED NOT BECAUSE THEY ARE CATHOLIC, BUT *because we are Catholic.*



“PUNISHMENT FOR ITS OWN SAKE, WITHOUT ROOM FOR HOPE, IS A FORM OF TORTURE, NOT OF PUNISHMENT. [THE DEATH PENALTY] IS AN OFFENCE TO THE INVIOABILITY OF LIFE AND TO THE DIGNITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON; IT LIKEWISE CONTRADICTS GOD’S PLAN FOR INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETY, AND HIS MERCIFUL JUSTICE.”

— Pope Francis

Year of Mercy: Grassroots Catholics Work to End the Use of the Death Penalty

Stanley “Tookie” Williams was one of the early leaders in the West Side Crips, a South Central Los Angeles street gang. An openly volatile and violent person, Williams was a drug addict, and had little regard for human life. In 1979, Williams was convicted of four murders, two with special circumstances for their heinous nature. He received the death penalty as punishment.

But by the time Tookie Williams was executed in 2005, after a 24-year stay on death row, he was a well-known peace and anti-gang crusader. While incarcerated, Williams co-authored nine anti-gang books for children, was a vocal anti-violence advocate, and was nominated several times for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Kent Peters, board member of California People of Faith Working Against the Death Penalty (CPF), recalls Tookie’s execution.

“Here was a man who had ultimately saved hundreds of lives because of his anti-gang work inside of death row,” recalls Peters. “I had this unclean feeling knowing that the State was killing in my name. It was executing a peace activist.”

In this Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy, we as Catholics are called to exercise those mercies that have been so abundantly bestowed on us by

our gracious God, including that of forgiveness. While capital punishment may seem to be the obvious answer for heinous crimes against humanity, especially those that devastate us personally, it leaves no room for God’s faithfulness or redemption.

It is the reason that Kent Peters became involved with California People of Faith Working Against the Death Penalty in the late 90s, and why he continues his involvement in the San Diego chapter of the faith-group seeking to abolish capital punishment for good. Part of the wider statewide coalition, the local group works with other faith clergy in the area on education and outreach against the death penalty. One of the group’s largest achievements was an interfaith clergy meeting in 2006 with then San Diego District Attorney Bonnie Dumanis.

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Fr. Chris Ponnet of St. Camillus Parish leads Catholics Against the Death Penalty Southern California in an anti-death penalty protest.



California People of Faith rally at a pharmaceutical conference to end the use of lethal drugs used in executions.

“We explained to DA Dumanis that the death penalty goes against all faith traditions and made our case,” said CPF Board Member Jennifer Bonakdar. “It’s hard to say it was because of our meeting, but there has been a significant decrease in the number of capital cases tried in the San Diego area since that time.”

Nevertheless, there are significant challenges in overcoming the use of the death penalty.

While working on the issue for a 2012 proposition, Bonakdar recalls some people “had no idea the death penalty even existed in California. There hasn’t been an execution since 2006, so sometimes people just aren’t aware.”

Peters agrees. “It’s easy to do this work when executions are taking place, but harder to garnish support when it feels like we are living in a moratorium on the subject.”

The group is holding a march in downtown San Diego on October 4 to mark ‘Wrongfully Convicted Day’ and working feverishly to bring awareness to the two death penalty propositions on this year’s ballot in November.

“We are living in a time when crime in California has dropped, the murder rate has dropped, and we haven’t had an execution in over a decade,” said Peters. “We don’t need to scare people and make them think capital punishment works when there are other ways to keep people from being a threat.”

“There is something radically concerning in the human spirit to kill another person who is not a threat,” he said.

Other faith-based groups like Catholics Against the Death Penalty Southern California (CADPSC), a group

based out of St. Camillus’ Parish in Los Angeles, has zeroed in on bringing legislation into the spotlight that would stop the death penalty in California.

The group mobilized years ago to put into motion strategies needed to secure legislation. Meeting each month, the CADPSC Board consists of Catholics with a variety of connections to the death penalty, including a retired judge, an attorney, prison chaplains and an exoneree who was released from a life sentence after wrongfully serving more than 20 years.

“We have part-time positions to keep us organized, have gathered signatures at parishes, mailed out postcard campaigns and have a speaker’s bureau to get the word out,” said Fr. Chris Ponnet, an active member of the group and long-time member of the Death Penalty Focus Board.

This November, California has two death penalty propositions on the ballot. Prop. 62 would end the use of the death penalty in California and has been endorsed by the California Catholic Conference of Bishops (CCC). The CCC is also opposed to Prop. 66, which would eliminate important safeguards that help prevent innocent people from being executed. Since the propositions compete, whichever receives the most votes prevails.

According to deathpenaltyinfo.org, since 1973, more than 150 people have been released from death row from evidence of their innocence. As of January, there are 743 inmates on death row in California.

“Speeding up executions would not only run the risk of executing an innocent person but have a debilitating on society to see executions taking place so regularly,” said Fr. Ponnet.

For more information, go to:

California Catholic Conference
<http://www.cacatholic.org/death-penalty>

Catholic Mobilizing Network to End the
Use of the Death Penalty
<http://catholicismobilizing.org/>

People of Faith Against the Death Penalty
<http://www.pfadp.org/>

Catholics Against the Death Penalty Southern California
<http://www3.stcamilluscenter.org/cadpsc/cacatholic.org>