

Presentation of the Message for the 58th World Day of Peace

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The Holy Father's message for the World Day of Peace is a welcome and inspiring call toward peace that illuminates a hope-filled path to attend to unhealed wounds, mend broken relationships, and confront the injustices and suffering in our world. Through the "saving forgiveness offered to all through Jesus Christ," he calls us to be bearers of God's merciful justice in the world, even in the presence of grave harm.

As Jubilee 2025 appears on the horizon, grounded in "a hope that does not disappoint," the Holy Father's message challenges the global Church to confront structures of sin, reminding us that "every individual can be a resource" toward addressing injustice and creating enduring change.

Pope Francis outlines obstacles to peace which are contrary to human dignity and he provides concrete proposals to advance peace and restore dignity. His call to end the death penalty is the reason I am here, as Catholic Mobilizing Network's mission is to mobilize Catholics and people of goodwill in the United States to end the death penalty, advance justice solutions in alignment with Catholic values and promote healing through restorative justice.

Pope Francis asks for our firm commitment to respect the dignity of human life, namely "the elimination of the death penalty in all nations." Capital punishment is a "structural sin" existing in at least 55 nations across the globe, where nearly 28,000 people find themselves on death row (this statistic, of course, does not include cases in countries where there are no official statistics). In my home country of the United States, 27 of the 50 states have the death penalty.

The system of capital punishment anywhere leaves in its wake ripples of suffering in families, in communities, and in our social systems. We find the criminal legal system can often retraumatize victims or leave them out of the justice process altogether; there is the dehumanization in the isolating confines of death row; evidence of racial bias and rampant discrimination, wrongful convictions, and even executions of innocent people.

Indeed, the death penalty's very existence epitomizes a throwaway culture. Pope Francis says: "This penalty not only compromises the inviolability of life but eliminates every human hope of forgiveness and rehabilitation."

Steadfast, faith-filled advocacy to end the death penalty is an act of profound hope in our world today. And the experience of God's infinite mercy and model of forgiveness buoys our witness.

Forgive Us Our Trespasses: Grant Us Your Peace, our theme today, is far from theoretical. Forgiveness opens our hearts to expressions of mercy on the path toward peace – at personal and structural levels.

I carry with me stories about the forgiveness journeys of murder victim family members, of men and women on death row, and of exonerated brothers and sisters – all affirming what the Holy Father suggests about healing and establishing peace. My friends Vicki & Syl Schieber lost their daughter Shannon in 1998. Shannon was murdered while finishing her first year of graduate school. Their suffering was unimaginable; yet they chose to respond in a restorative way. They fought to spare the man who took their daughter's life from a death sentence.

In the spirit of reconciliation, the Schiebers took courageous steps to ensure that their pain did not result in more suffering or feed into a sinful social structure. Compelled by forgiveness, advocating for the life of the man who killed their daughter was a tangible expression of the healing justice they longed for.

Forgiveness is a long journey and dare I say countercultural. So, the Holy Father reminds us that the path toward peace needs graced hope to light our way:

- A compassionate hope that shepherds mercy when our world disposes life.
- A steadfast hope that emerges despite terrible loss and unimaginable harm.
- A persistent hope that continues to pursue justice when all seems lost.
- A restorative hope that chooses not to condemn but instead to work toward healing.
- A reconciling hope that allows the grace of forgiveness to overcome vengeance.

When our hearts are oriented toward a spirit of forgiveness, abolition of the death penalty is a tangible expression of mercy that signals our personal and structural commitment to the pursuit of peace.

Indeed, we are called to be bearers of God's merciful justice in the world. Eliminating the structural sin of the death penalty is essential to building up a culture of life that will sustain our path of peace.