

# Death Penalty Abolition/Restorative Justice Resource and Discussion Guide



*This meeting kit is adapted from the resource and discussion guide provided by MSJC for use by Marianist communities (lay or religious) and parish groups who seek a deeper understanding of this issue in light of Catholic Social Teaching and the Marianist charism, and would like to prayerfully respond to this issue.*

## Introduction

The use of the death penalty has been a hotly debated topic for many years. Since MSJC began, we have had an issue team devoted to the abolition of the death penalty. We view it as an unjust and inhumane punishment that is inconsistent with the Gospel. As a positive step, we promote restorative justice and restorative practices. They aim to repair the harm caused when any offense is committed by focusing on the needs of the victims (including the community) and on the offender's responsibility to repair harm and foster healing. Restorative practices seek to improve and repair relationships between people and communities. Note: The MSJC Death Penalty and Restorative Justice Issue Team believes this guide is best facilitated using restorative practices. If you are facilitating this guide, we suggest you read about the Peacemaking Circle Process in "What Are Restorative Justice Programs?" below before starting the process.

---

## OPENING PRAYER

Merciful God, in your dear son we have redemption, even the forgiveness of sins.

We pray in thanksgiving for this time together to explore a new way of doing justice based on accountability, healing, and reconciliation.

We pray for open hearts to hear each person and their stories.

As Christians in a Marianist community, may we embody the compassion, mercy, and tenderness of God for those who need it most: those who have wounded us, or others.

As Mary stood with Jesus at the foot of the cross and heard his words "Father, forgive them," grant us grace not only to forgive but also to accept forgiveness through Christ, the crucified. Amen.

---

## Food for Thought

### Background

The Death Penalty Abolition and Restorative Justice Issue Team works to abolish the death penalty and promote the principles of restorative justice in the criminal justice system and in all areas of society.

This team was formed to connect the Marianist community with abolition efforts in various states. Eventually it became clear that the study and practice of restorative justice is a key element in reform of our criminal justice system and all systems where harm is experienced.

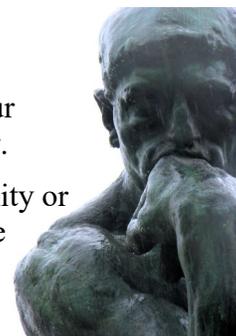
The following video is a very brief introduction to the connection of our Catholic faith and the death penalty.

Please watch together as a community or before your meeting and discuss the reflection questions together.

"Catholics and the Death Penalty"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uQQdoed6hcI&feature=youtu.be>

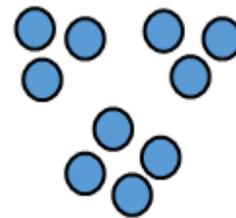
[4 mins. 45 secs]



---

## SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ◆ What is your response to this video? What moves you about the stories shared?
- ◆ What are some of the feelings you experienced when crime touched your neighborhood or community?
- ◆ Do you agree with the speakers that forgiveness can be freeing? Why/how?



---

## Food for Thought

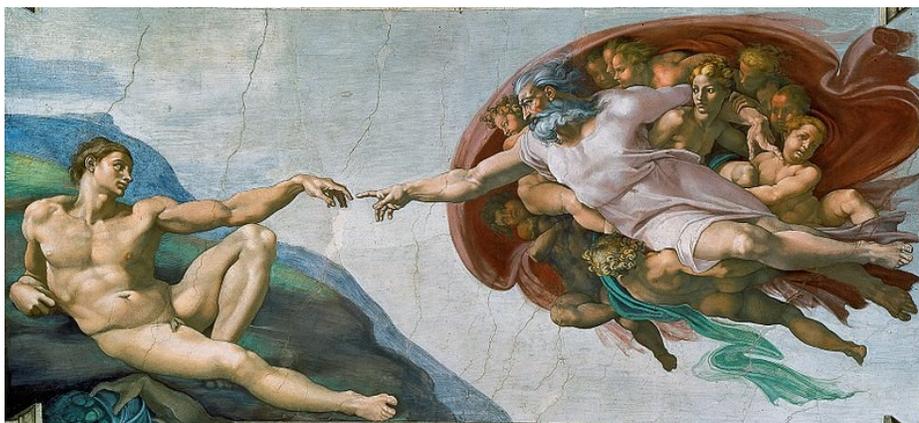
### Catholic Teaching

Numerous principles of Catholic Social Teaching are inextricably intertwined with the movement to abolish the death penalty and promote restorative justice throughout our criminal justice system and society as a whole. The fundamental cornerstone for all Catholic Social Teaching is the sanctity of all human life and the belief that every human person is created in the image and likeness of God. This includes both victims and offenders alike. Therefore, the criminal justice system must provide inmates with the opportunity to live in dignity, which includes food, clothing, education, and medical care. This core tenet of Catholic Social Teaching teaches us that grace can transform and restore even those who

commit the most heinous acts. We must also stand with victims in their search for healing and true justice. In addition, solidarity calls us to see Jesus in the face of everyone, both victims and offenders, to insist on responsibility, and to seek alternatives that rehabilitate and restore rather than simply punish.



These statements were primarily taken or adapted from the USCCB's *Seven Themes of Catholic Social Teaching and Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice*.

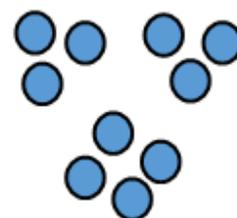


“The Church teaches in the light of the Gospel, that ‘the death penalty is inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person’, and she works with determination for its abolition worldwide.”<sup>1</sup>

---

## SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ◆ What reaction do you have after reading about the link between Catholic Social Teaching and the death penalty?
- ◆ What does it mean to you to have dignity?
- ◆ How might God be calling us to proclaim dignity of victims of crime and of the incarcerated?



---

# Food for Thought

## The Marianist Charism for Community and Restorative Practice

The presence of monasteries, convents, and religious communities throughout Christian history has helped shape a deep Catholic understanding of community. In a Marianist movement, comprised of both lay and religious, something critical occurred in the life of Blessed Chaminade in Saragossa, Blessed Adèle in Agen, and Venerable Marie Thérèse in Bordeaux; it concerned community. Community was so essential that it became the very vehicle of apostolic action. The Marianist vision of community living is based in the conviction that every person has innate dignity because all are made in the likeness of God. From the



beginning, this vision offered an opportunity for all people, regardless of religious belief or faith tradition, to share a safe and welcoming place for the support of their faith and restoration of their self-worth. Christ's call for us to love one another includes the particular challenge to love and to respect those who are different from us.

Some of the personal and interpersonal skills needed for living and being in Marianist lay or religious community include communication, cooperation, mutual respect, courage, forgiveness, patience, and trust. This means appreciating the presence of a wide range of perspectives, opinions, and beliefs, as well as the diverse people who bring the various religious, cultural, and social elements of their lives to community. This also means collaborative decision-making and conflict resolution among the members of the community.

---

## SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ◆ How does your community live out the personal and interpersonal skills discussed above?
- ◆ Which skills are your community's strengths? Which could be improved together?
- ◆ Which community members embody each of the specific skills? What are the strengths of your individual community members?
- ◆ How might God be calling us to proclaim dignity of victims of crime and of the incarcerated?



---

## What Are Restorative Justice Programs?

The following video is a very brief introduction to restorative justice within the criminal justice system. Please watch the video as a group before reading the section below. Keep in mind within our current criminal justice system that there is very rarely a chance for victims, families, community members, or perpetrators to come together to dialogue or find healing.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8N3LihLvfa0>

Restorative justice offers tremendous possibilities for "healing" even in the brokenness and alienation of today's criminal justice world. Hundreds of programs in many parts of the world demonstrate that restorative justice is not only relevant but also essential. Without doubt, healing is needed. Even many Catholic dioceses are employing Restorative Justice Programs that respond to crimes and other causes of harm within the community.

Something that all Marianist communities can begin doing to promote Restorative Justice in their own lives and communities is practicing the Peacemaking Circle. Once we begin to value and use Restorative Justice in our lives, it will permeate into the greater community and into our criminal justice system.

The Peacemaking Circle is a dialog process combining ancient wisdom about living in community with modern understandings about complex multicultural societies. The process is used for holding difficult conversations and for strengthening relationships within a group.<sup>2</sup>

Underlying values of the circle:

- No one sits outside the circle
  - A circle keeper facilitates the process
  - While each person speaks, all others listen
  - All in the circle have equal opportunity to speak
-

---

The circle process resonates with our Marianist characteristic of community because it is meant to:

- build and strengthen community
- promote understanding of self and others
- break down barriers between people and groups
- provide a safe space for addressing difficult issues or conflicts
- foster authentic connections and relationships
- process a particular event
- shift climate towards a more “relational” environment
- elicit wisdom, ideas, points of view, information
- offer a process for decision-making

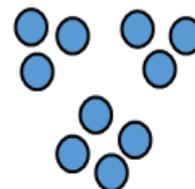
The Death Penalty Abolition and Restorative Justice (DP/RJ) issue team promotes restorative philosophy and practices, because we are part of the human community that experiences sin, and restorative justice calls us to the biblical values of discernment, empathy, and truthfulness, as essential to healthy communities. Our Marianist call to do justice includes creating environments where transformation and healing are more likely to take place.

Please note: A trained facilitator is needed to initiate a circle process for a community. If your community would like to have a trained facilitator attend your meeting, or if you would like one or more members to become trained facilitators in the Peacemaking Circle process, contact MSJC

---

## SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ♦ What is your response to this video? What moves you about the stories shared?
- ♦ How do you think Chaminade, Adèle, or Marie Thérèse would view these particular issues (death penalty, restorative justice, circle process) if they were alive today?
- ♦ As Marianists and as Christians, what action might we commit to take (individually or as a community) to respond to this issue? See the section below for examples



---

## Action

### Examples of Restorative Practices<sup>3</sup>

- Circle process for addressing harm, conflict, loss, or decision making
- Circles and conferencing in schools for learning, community building, school culture, and responding to harm
- Outreach to those impacted by crime and harm within and throughout your parish

### Ways to Advocate for Restorative Justice

- Use restorative principles in our day-to-day interactions.<sup>4</sup>
- Introduce restorative practices such as circle process to our families or workplaces.
- Develop a restorative process within your parish/ministry for addressing harm, conflict, community building, or decision making.
- Create a ministry or become involved in a local restorative justice program, such as a Community Conferencing Center, prison ministry, reentry program, or victim support community.

### Ways to Advocate for Restorative Justice Within the Criminal Justice System

- Create a more dignified and healing environment for those impacted by crime which could include such legislation as follows:
  - Ending the death penalty
  - Reducing harsh sentencing, such as mandatory minimums
  - Increasing victim involvement in the sentencing process
  - Programs that focus on humane conditions, rehabilitation, and smooth reentry of

### I Want to Learn More. What Can I Do?

The MSJC Death Penalty and Restorative Justice Issue Team is happy to respond to any questions you may have on this discussion guide or to provide additional resources. To learn about becoming a member of this national issue team, please email us at [marianistsocialjustice@gmail.com](mailto:marianistsocialjustice@gmail.com).

**ACTION**



---

## CLOSING PRAYER

Merciful God,  
we pray for our communities, neighborhoods, and church.

Thank you for providing people  
in our communities to keep us safe.

Help us encourage them and work with them.

We pray for those who feel unsafe  
and for those who struggle  
with broken relationships as a result of crime.

Enable us to help those  
who need to learn to trust again.

Help us also to know how  
to welcome all people into our community  
and show your love and forgiveness to them.

Each one of us has offended in some way.

Help us seek forgiveness from those we have offended  
both individually and corporately as a church.

Give those who need to forgive the grace to do so.

Give us passion and compassion  
for those who may feel excluded in our communities.

Make us agents of renewal  
for justice, peace, and healing in all relationships.

Inspire us to work for the elimination  
of prejudice and segregation in our daily lives.

May our lives reflect  
Mary's love and compassion for the world,  
love and compassion that she in turn  
taught her son, Jesus.

---

## Additional Resources

Catholic Mobilizing Network (<https://catholicismobilizing.org/>) - mobilizes people to end the use of the death penalty, to transform the criminal justice system from punitive to restorative, and to build capacity to engage in restorative practices. The CMN's Restorative Justice, Restorative Living: Small Group Modules provide information on restorative justice, the circle process, and the criminal justice system that can be addressed at your own pace in your own community.

Death Penalty Information Center (<https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/>) - provides excellent analysis, in-depth reports, and information on issues related to capital punishment

National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty (<http://www.ncadp.org/>) - primary national organization advocating for abolition of the death penalty

Center for Justice and Reconciliation (<http://restorativejustice.org/>) - provides excellent background information on restorative justice

Most states in which the death penalty is legal have a statewide organization working for abolition, including Ohioans to Stop Executions (<http://otse.org>) and Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty (<https://tcadp.org>). Check the internet to find the abolition organization in your state.

---

### Endnotes

- 1 Pope Francis' revision of *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, § 2267.
- 2 *Circle Processes Course Syllabus*, Kay Pranis.
- 3 Adapted from *Restorative Justice, Restorative Living: A Lens for Learning and Action*, Catholic Mobilizing Network.
- 4 *Ten Ways to Live Restoratively*, <https://emu.edu/now/restorative-justice/2009/11/27/10-ways-to-live-restoratively/>.

---

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

Related resources available at [nacms.org](http://nacms.org) include:

*Things Marianist: How Do Marianists Do Social Justice?*, Jim Vogt

*The Marianist Founders and Social Justice*, Felipe Melcher, SM

*Introduction to Social Justice*, William J. Ferree, SM

*Marianist Charism and Our Life/Work Among the Poor*, Joseph Jansen, SM

Marianist Community Meeting Kits are provided for the Marianist Family by the North American Center for Marianist Studies, NACMS. Additional kits, as well as other Marianist Studies resources, are available at <https://nacms.org/>.

 | North American Center  
for Marianist Studies