

# **Respect Life Week: Youth Night Resources**

## **Night Three: Restorative Justice and the Death Penalty**

Opening Prayer: Pray a decade or full chaplet of the [Chaplet of Divine Mercy](#).

### Introduction:

Introduce the topic as well as the Church's stance on it. Bad decisions cannot destroy the reality of the love of God. Solutions to crime and punishment must take into account the dignity of every person. The prison system in America is characterized by its emphasis on punishment and retribution. But, the Church rightly recognizes that mere punishment is not justice. In particular, long unfair sentences, solitary confinement, and the death penalty can be used in vengeful ways rather than helping the offender to correct the wrong done. Restorative justice emphasizes repentance, repairing the harm done. It allows for victims and families to forgive the offender, and allows the offender to seek that forgiveness.

### Opening Discussion:

- When have you faced consequences for your actions? Have they been fair? Unfair?
- What do you know about the current criminal justice system in the United States?
- Who decides what is 'just'? Who should decide?
- Why is it important to preserve and uphold the dignity of all people, even when they have done something wrong?

### Suggested Videos, Resources, and Discussion Questions:

- Watch [this video](#) on the current use of the death penalty in America.
  - What stands out to you?
- Discuss [this infographic](#) on the prison population in the US
  - What do you notice? What stands out to you?
- Listen to [Pope Francis speak](#) to world leaders working to end the death penalty.
  - Pope Francis outlines the moral argument against the current use of the death penalty. Ask students to explain his case. Consider discussing these points:
    - Death penalty is unnecessary as a means of defense, no matter how serious the crime
    - It is "an offense to the inviolability of life"
    - Contradicts God's plan for merciful justice
    - Does not render justice to victims but instead fosters vengeance
    - "Thou shalt not kill" applies both to the innocent and the guilty
    - Must also work for the improvement of prison conditions that respect the dignity of the criminal.
    - The basic purpose of all punishment is the rehabilitation of the offender.

- Punishment for its own sake, without room for hope, is a form of torture
- What would a just and dignity-oriented prison or rehabilitation program look like?

### Activity:

- Watch “[Inside Juvenile Prison](#)” video.
- Have students journal for 5 minutes about what they learned about life in the juvenile justice system.
  - How does a Juvenile Prison resemble adult detention centers? Do you think that is a good or a bad thing?
  - What stands out to you about these boys’ experience?
  - Encourage them to think about what they would most miss from their homes and families.
  - What can they imagine this experience would do to their sense of family? To their sense of their own self-worth?

### Discussion:

- What did you learn about the prison system in the United States?
- Are there a lot of people in prison or just a few?
- What is the general role of prison? What ought it to be?  
What is the death penalty used for? Is that a just use? What ought we to do instead, according to Pope Francis?

### Closing Prayer:

- Consider reflecting with a song like “[Reckless Love](#)” or “[Mighty to Save](#)”.
- Close in prayer:

Merciful Father, we ask your blessing on all we do to build a culture of life.

Hear our prayers for those impacted by the death penalty.

We pray for all people, that their lives and dignity as children of a loving God may be respected and protected in all stages and circumstances.

We pray for victims of violence and their families, that they may experience our love and support and find comfort in your compassion and in the promise of eternal life.

We pray for those on death row, that their lives may be spared, that the innocent may be freed and that the guilty may come to acknowledge their faults and seek reconciliation.

We pray for the families of those who are facing execution, that they may be comforted by your love and compassion.

We pray for civic leaders, that they may commit themselves to respecting every human life and ending the use of the death penalty in our land. Compassionate Father, give us wisdom and hearts filled with your love.

Guide us as we work to end the use of the death penalty and to build a society that truly chooses life in all situations.

We ask this Father through your Son Jesus Christ who lives and reigns with the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever.

Amen.