

"A hidden death penalty"

By [Tobias Winright](#)

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Many Catholics and others against capital punishment have often suggested life in prison without parole as an alternative for dangerous criminals such as murderers. Some, however, have noted that life without parole is problematic as well. I have had "lifers" write to me about how they are merely warehoused, without any sense of hope or meaning or purpose. In short, as I saw someone put it on Facebook, it is "execution by calendar."

Yesterday, in an [address to a group of representatives of the International Association of Penal Law](#), Pope Francis called on all

Christians and people of good will...to struggle not only for the abolition of the death penalty, whether it be legal or illegal and in all its forms, but also to improve prison conditions, out of respect for the human dignity of persons deprived of their liberty. And this, I connect with life imprisonment. Life imprisonment is a hidden death penalty.

On capital punishment, Pope Francis's statement is consonant with current Catholic teaching as found in the Catholic catechism, as I recently explained [in the Century](#). That is, executions are morally justified only when they are "the only possible way of effectively defending human lives against the unjust aggressor." As for such instances, the catechism echoes Saint Pope John Paul II in *Evangelium Vitae* (The Gospel of Life): they "are very rare, if not practically nonexistent." Pope Francis's words about a "penal populism" fueled by politicians and others who promote "violence and vengeance" remind me of *Evangelium Vitae*'s warnings about a "culture of death."

Also noteworthy is Francis's reference to how criminal punishment—not only capital punishment—often reflects a tendency to offer up "sacrificial victims" or scapegoats for crimes that have harmed the community. Similarly, in 2004 and 2005, Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa—the preacher to the papal household—[referred in some Lenten homilies](#) to how in the Eucharist we remember that Jesus, with his death on

the cross,

unmasks and tears apart the mechanism of the scapegoat that canonizes violence, making himself innocent, the victim of all violence... Christ defeated violence, not by opposing it with greater violence, but suffering it and laying bare its injustice and uselessness.... The believer [thus] has another reasons—Eucharistic—to oppose the death penalty.

Cantalamessa has been preacher to the papal household during the papacies of John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and now Francis. I doubt it is a coincidence that during this time, the catechism was revised to limit executions to only those ("rare, if not practically nonexistent") cases where it is necessary to protect society. And I believe this is why when the catechism refers to the death penalty it calls it "legitimate defense" rather than "capital *punishment*." The execution of a murderer cannot be regarded as a form of expiation or atonement or sacrifice. Jesus's death did away with all sacrifice, whether grain or animals or criminals.

Pope Francis's comments about life imprisonment are also significant. James Samuel Logan wrote a few years ago about the lamentable situation of the U.S. prison system/industry, in [a book I reviewed for the *Century*](#), and this situation remains. Much needs to be done—with heavy doses of imagination and creativity—to change all of this and to make it congruent with what Francis calls for, respect for the human dignity of the imprisoned. Even perpetrators should be treated as people, even if they did not treat their victims as such.

While the pope calls for outright abolition of life imprisonment, I'd maintain that there are some dangerous individuals who probably should never be permitted back into society. But even for them, is there more that could be done to make maximum security prison a place where they might do something constructive?

In this address, Pope Francis mentions a number of other issues he sees as interrelated, including torture, human trafficking, and corruption. It's only an address, not a more authoritative encyclical. But in my view it's consistent with the recent trajectory of official Catholic teaching, and it may be a hopeful sign of things to come.

This post was corrected on October 24, 2014.