In a 2002 Pew Research-sponsored presentation at the University of Chicago, Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia was asked if he thought the use of the death penalty would ever lead to the execution of an innocent person. His answer was “...of course it will. I mean, you cannot have any system of human justice that is going to be perfect.”

Justice Scalia was not speaking in 2002 as a member of the Supreme Court on the legal merits of the death penalty; rather, he was speaking as a Roman Catholic on the question of whether he thought the death penalty was morally acceptable. His reply is contrary to the teaching of Pope John Paul II, who three years earlier stated during his Homily at the Papal Mass in St. Louis:

“The new evangelization calls for followers of Christ who are unconditionally pro-life: who will proclaim, celebrate and serve the Gospel of life in every situation. A sign of hope is the increasing recognition that the dignity of human life must never be taken away, even in the case of someone who has done great evil...I renew the appeal I made...for a consensus to the end of the death penalty, which is cruel and unnecessary.”

This admission of inherent flaws in the death penalty system by Justice Scalia should greatly trouble those of us who believe that all human lives are precious and must be protected, especially the innocent. As Catholics, we reiterate our belief that the use of the death penalty in our country must be stopped.

The church’s teaching on the use of the death penalty has evolved over time. The early church believed that the state had the right, and sometimes the duty, to impose the death penalty. For centuries, the death penalty was seen as necessary to the maintenance of law and order. However, after World War II, due in part to the legacy of Nazi, Fascist, and Communist governments, many European countries began to question the state's right to impose death on its citizens. By 1976, the same year that the U.S. Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty, the Papal Commission on Justice and Peace expressed opposition to its use.

The opening chapters of the Book of Genesis teach that every life is a precious gift from God. We are created in God’s image and redeemed by Jesus Christ, who himself was executed by the death penalty. Each of us is called to respect the life and dignity of every human being. Even when people deny the dignity of others, we must still recognize that their dignity is a gift from God and is not something that is earned or lost through their behavior. Respect for life applies to all, even the perpetrators of terrible crimes. Punishment, therefore, should be consistent with the demands of justice and with respect for human life and dignity.

You can learn more about the national effort to end the use of the death penalty on the Catholic Mobilizing Network (CMN) website: www.catholicmobilizing.org. You can also visit www.TXcatholic.org for Texas-based resources on the death penalty.