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## Italian Catholics changed my perspective on the death penalty

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By Nancy Oliveira

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I was not always against the death penalty. Like earthquakes, I accepted the death penalty as part of life in California.

Growing up as a Catholic in Modesto, and then attending college at UCLA, including attending services at the Newman Center, I never heard my parents, teachers or priests talk about the death penalty, and I never explored the issue on my own. I was focused on getting through school, holding down a part-time job, getting married, and busying myself with my children's needs and schooling.

On that rare occasion that I heard something about the death penalty, I truly accepted it as a given, just part of a civilized society. I thought that if someone was on death row, they probably deserved to be there.

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Then ten years ago, when my children were grown, I picked up and moved to Italy. I started volunteering in a soup kitchen run by a Catholic lay organization called the Community of Sant'Egidio, which began in Rome in 1968 to listen to and to put the Gospel into practice. One day, as I was serving up pasta to the homeless, I was approached by one of the Italian volunteers. He asked if I could help read some letters that they had received from death row prisoners in Texas and Georgia.

I was stunned. I wondered what they were doing with letters from American death row prisoners. I learned that they had been corresponding with death row inmates in America for 10 years, solely for the purpose of befriending them. And not only did they write letters, but they also included small amounts of money so that the condemned prisoners could buy stamps, paper and pencils. I learned that prisoners on death row are given nothing, and they are not allowed to work to have spending money like regular prisoners.

I was shocked. For 30 years I lived 15 minutes from San Quentin, which houses the largest death row in America, yet I knew virtually nothing about the reality of the death penalty.

I was very embarrassed that these hardworking Italians --- who, in addition to their regular jobs, volunteered thousands of hours to help the poor around the world --- knew everything about our death penalty, and I knew nothing.

In fact, these Italians even raised large amounts of money to help with the appeals of those they believed were innocent based on their own research.

It was from these kind-hearted Catholics that I began to learn the shocking facts about our death penalty system. They told me that 135 countries no longer use capital punishment; that the United States stands with the likes of China, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Sudan as the world's top executioners; and that 90 percent of the world's executions take place in these countries.

The most appalling fact I learned was that more than 100 innocent people had been released from death row after it was discovered that they had been wrongfully convicted. How had this happened in my very own country? And why hadn't I heard more about it?

These wrongful convictions are often attributed to incompetent defense lawyers, faulty eyewitness testimony, overzealous prosecutors, unethical law enforcement officers, false testimony from jailhouse snitches who received reduced sentences for their testimony, and false confessions extracted from suspects after tortuous hours of interrogation.

When I returned to the United States I began reading everything I could get my hands on about this issue. And the more I read, the more I realized that something was seriously wrong. Why were we wasting so much money and so many resources on a death system that was so inherently flawed and poses a real danger of executing innocent people when other alternatives, like life without parole, exist?

We urgently demand the recall of faulty cars and planes, harmful toys and risky prescription drugs that pose potential threats to the safety of our citizens --- we even recall tainted pet food. And yet our death penalty system has erred 128 times (that we know about), and we still send hundreds of people to death row each year. How could this be?

As Catholics, it is time for us to urgently work for the recall of the death penalty.

*Nancy Oliveira has been a resident of San Francisco for 35 years. She has served in various community leadership positions and now serves on the board of Death Penalty Focus. For more information on Death Penalty Focus, visit [www.deathpenalty.org](http://www.deathpenalty.org).*