

Defend society by defending weaker prison inmates

Joseph Reitz brings up the important point (CRJuly 31) of how to deal with murderers who continue to murder because they cannot be punished further when the death penalty is no longer an option. This draws attention to the often-overlooked statement in “*Evangelium Vitae*” where Pope John Paul II says “(the punishment) ought not go to the extreme of executing the offender except in cases of absolute necessity; in other words, when it would not be possible otherwise to defend society. Today however, as a result of steady improvements in the organization of the penal system, such cases are very rare, if not practically non-existent.”

The reality of today’s penal system, in the United States and elsewhere, is that there really are sociopaths with no semblance of a conscience, who will readily murder another inmate for trivial reasons. The “steady improvements” do not guarantee the safety of a weaker prisoner from such predators. If someone is sent up for auto theft but receives the “death penalty” at the hands of a violent murderer in prison, he’s every bit as dead as if the state had ordered his execution. But the “blame” lies elsewhere, and we citizens always turn a blind eye to the violence that goes on within prisons.

The pope’s phrase “not be possible to otherwise defend society” means that there has to be a coherently-functioning prison system in a society. As Reitz’s letter points out, the only remaining option that murderers serving life sentences fear is the death penalty. Abolishing the death penalty would make it impossible for prison authorities to protect their inmates. That option must be preserved, in order to defend society.