

**THE DEATH PENALTY: A VIOLATION OF
HUMAN DIGNITY?**
2022 Annual Symposium
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THE PRESIDENT’S WELCOME ADDRESS

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Thank you to all attendees for being here at St. Thomas University for this most important symposium brought to you by the STU College of Law. I want to welcome you to our beautiful campus here in Miami Gardens, Florida and to our St. Thomas University College of Law. I must recognize the indefatigable work of Law Professors Wiessner and Pati for constantly putting our students first in scholarship and human values. I want to thank all our speakers for their contributions to this most important topic, Frank Sexton, the leader of the Miami Catholic Lawyers Guild, for their participation and, especially, our students for their tireless work on this topic and putting this symposium together.

This topic goes to the heart of our Mission as a Catholic University where we uphold a consistent life view. St. Thomas University is a Catholic University with rich cultural and international diversity, committed to the academic and professional success of its students who go on to become ethical leaders in the global community. You will witness our faculty, staff, students and administration live that Mission every day. This symposium on the Death Penalty being a perfect example of student academic success and being ethical leaders in our global community.

^{*} David A. Armstrong, J.D., began his first year at St. Thomas University in August 2018, becoming the University’s 10th president. He is a dynamic leader driven by the quest for excellence. Armstrong, a nationally recognized speaker on future trends of higher education law and Title IX issues, has dedicated his career to making sure small, faith-based colleges and universities not only survive but also thrive in the new landscape of higher education.

Being Catholic means being a warrior for Human Dignity. Because without the gift of life, there is no dignity of the person. And we must all fight for the sanctity of life from beginning to end. For me, that means life is gifted to us by God, and only God has the ability to determine when it begins and ends.

My journey to a consistent life view was shaped by my faith and my desire to become a lawyer. As an undergrad at Mercyhurst College (now University), I interned with the foremost defense attorney in Erie, Pennsylvania, Dennis Williams. He was an excellent attorney, a Vietnam veteran and took on all the toughest defense cases when asked. I worked with him on a gruesome murder case where I prepared a suppression of evidence motion that, if successful, would have essentially allowed the defendant to go free. I worked feverishly and was elated when Attorney Williams submitted my motion with no edits. I was so proud of myself because I was now becoming a real lawyer!

Merrill Hogue was an eighteen year old murderer of an eighty-three year old woman. She was the last person in his neighborhood that would help him with odd jobs since everyone else had given up on his consistent criminal behavior. In an alcohol- and drug-induced rage he stabbed her over eighty times and killed her. Even worse, at the hearing on the motion to suppress, the local prosecutor surprised us with evidence that, in addition, the autopsy showed she was stabbed in her vagina three times. That night, I looked myself in the mirror with tears streaming down my face and vowed I would never represent such an evil person again. Because I could not live with myself if he was freed by my work after that heinous crime. I believed with all my heart the state had to put him to death.

At the end of my internship, I incredulously asked Attorney Williams how he could represent such people. He answered quickly "I believe in my soul that every person deserves a zealous advocate as stated in the Model Code, and I would rather see one thousand guilty people go free then to have one innocent man put to death!" I have always respected Attorney Williams for that courageous stance but I knew I could never again do what he did. The longer I live, the more I respect his stance as a zealous lawyer and a human being.

While attending Cleveland-Marshall College of Law, I had three life-changing experiences that led me down my path to a consistent life view. I was coaching high school football at my alma mater; I acquired an internship at a local municipality as an assistant to the prosecutor and tried over seventy cases; and one of my few elective classes was Professor Landsman's Legal Justice Class where my eyes were opened to the most egregious miscarriages of justice of innocent defendants. As a prosecutor, I was not having the positive impact I thought I would have because, in just two years, I saw the same people over and over again coming through the system, however, as a coach, I was having an immediate positive impact on young men's lives. That experience inspired me to enter collegiate coaching which in turn led me to a career in higher education where we transform peoples' lives and futures every day. Professor Landsman taught me of the inconsistencies in our criminal justice system, especially concerning the overwhelming statistics of people of color and lower socio-economic status on death row. The facts were starting to challenge my perception that the death penalty by the state and by the people was not the just penalty I believed it to be.

The seminal moment in my journey occurred when a childhood friend challenged me on my view of abortion. Like many, I was on the fence. I thought it was wrong, but as a man, I felt a woman had the right to choose. Bob Lees, now Principal at Tampa Catholic High School and at the time a High School Theology teacher, called me out directly and said as a Catholic you CANNOT be on the fence on this issue. Boom ... right between the eyes I was challenged on my inconsistent life view. After much reading, studying and self-reflection, I started to develop a logical and consistent life view. If I believed life is a Gift from God and begins at conception, how can I or any other human determine another person's existence?

The only answer is a consistent life view from conception to death determined by God and not man. Which, for me, is why this journey deepened my belief system as a Catholic. Because in my reflection it was obvious that the Catholic Faith has the most consistent life view. And it is that view that protects the dignity of life.

The first time I publicly espoused this journey to my consistent

life view, I was introducing Sr. Helen Prejean at a talk in the Thomas More College (now University) Seat of Mary Wisdom Chapel. As President, I was honored to welcome Sr. Helen to our conversation on the efficacy of the Death Penalty and star-struck by her intelligence and confidence. By the way, she looks nothing like Susan Sarandon who played her in “Dead Man Walking.” She is short, stocky with short hair and glasses, but as I came to know her better, her beauty outshines any Hollywood actress.

Her reasons for the abolishment of the death penalty were logical and powerful. Her stories of being with death row inmates to their final second were heartbreaking. To my utter amazement, several people who claimed to be staunch Catholics condemned her as the devil with fire in their eyes. I was shocked by the juxtaposition of Sr. Helen’s calm and loving demeanor to people who were calling for her condemnation to hell. My heart goes out to families destroyed by murder and other atrocities, however, the hate put forth in opposition to Sr. Helen’s life goal to abolish the death penalty as an affront to human dignity was shocking. Out of the utmost respect for Sr. Helen, I answered her call to speak at other Death Penalty symposia, as I am doing today for you as the President of St. Thomas University.

Remember who we are here for today: we are here to protect the dignity of every human life regardless of our sins. The sanctity of life and human dignity are God’s most precious gift. We must cherish it from beginning to end. Thank you for being an active participant in our Mission!

God Bless and Welcome to STU Law!