CENTER VALLEY – Another man must die. This week Governor Rendell signed an execution warrant for a Montgomery County man found guilty of committing multiple murders. Yet none of the previous 75 executions authorized by this state has been carried out.

In fact, 228 inmates are awaiting execution in Pennsylvania, which ranks our state fourth among the most populous of death rows. Yet, in a series of recent rulings, the state’s Supreme Court has upheld the validity of capital punishment even if the death sentences are rarely put into effect.

News reports routinely remind us of the ever-present reality of homicide, the rate of which is on the rise in some of our local cities. When murderous intent matches up with vicious acts, society is right to be repulsed. Atrocities against innocent life appear not only repugnant or reprehensible; the blood that is spilled in the commission of evil cries out for justice. And justice remains the hallmark of a well-functioning society.

Still, a question concerning the death sentence seems to loom larger now on our social consciousness. Recent considerations about the age or mental condition or physical health of the guilty have rendered capital punishment off limits to minors, the handicapped, and the sick. Even the constitutionality of lethal injections is in question, with a case currently before the U.S. Supreme Court that hinges on medical concerns about inflicting a pain too cruel even for the condemned (not that the guilty one gave equal consideration to his/her victims).

Beyond the procedural concerns, social debates today about capital punishment are reframing the issue in terms of moral legitimacy. It goes without question that legitimate public authority has the right and duty to inflict punishment commensurate with a crime, and every type of punishment involves some form of pain. Likewise conceded is the contention that capital crimes constitute a distinct category of social depravity; killing someone, duly and
adequately attributed to one’s willful responsibility, gives evidence of a callous disregard for any and all life.

Right order and public protection notwithstanding, vengeance of any kind, whether stirred in the soul or sanctioned by the state, can be a threat to social stability. Thus, the question today is whether or not capital punishment is really necessary.

New Jersey governor, John Corzine, after signing legislation to abolish the death penalty
(photo by Sarah Glover, Philadelphia Inquirer)

Who benefits from an execution? Obviously not the criminal – the finality of death renders totally impossible any change in that person, however unlikely reform or rehabilitation may be in those cases. Not other criminals – despite the educational aim of making execution a possible punishment, killers know the severity of the crime but just don’t care. Not the survivors – despite the psychological claim to closure, nothing will nullify the fact that a loved one has been unjustly taken from their midst. And not the state – despite any economic savings from not having to house a criminal for life, cost-benefit analyses that include elimination of a person as a line item in the budget open the cultural door to ever wider injustices.

Amid international pursuits to curtail or eliminate the death penalty, the Catholic Church has given strong voice to initiatives that put a moratorium on executions, but not because it is opposed to social justice or state’s rights. In fact, its teachings uphold governmental action that defends public order and ensure people’s safety. But only in cases where it is not possible otherwise to maintain that order and safety, does the execution of violent offenders remain morally justifiable.

Rather, Church teaching appeals to one’s conscience, as a matter of prudential judgment regarding our understanding of the inviolable dignity we share as human beings. Admittedly, strictly “right to life” arguments in opposition to capital punishment remain inadequate without the nuance that recognizes a distinction between ending guilty and innocent life. Nevertheless, as a Vatican official stated to the first world congress on this subject, the one whose life is terminated by capital punishment is still “one of us – a human person, a brother or sister, however cruel and inhumane his or her actions may appear.” Despite the social repugnance that rightfully attends such a reprehensible act, committing homicide does not render a person less human.

Justice demands our vigilant attention and courageous action, especially when it involves heinous crimes against innocent victims. But society is best served through punishments that both sufficiently protect and inalienably respect the life of all its citizens. As the Amish have tried to each us, only when justice is coupled with mercy will we be able to transcend the tragedy of human violence.