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Tallahassee, Fla. — August 20, 2019
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The executive director of the Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops asked Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, himself a Catholic, to stay the Aug. 22 execution of Gary Ray Bowles, who pleaded guilty to a 1994 murder and was sentenced to death.

"Each of us is more than the worst thing we have done," said the Aug. 14 letter from Michael Sheedy. "Mr. Bowles is more than a man who committed multiple murders. He is a human being who survived many years of childhood abuse and, after escaping his stepfather's violence as a young teenager, endured years of homelessness and child prostitution."

Sheedy added, "Neuroscientific research has found that such traumatic experiences severely affect a child's developing brain, and thus affect subsequent behavior." He noted, "Premeditated, state-sanctioned homicide of Mr. Bowles would only perpetuate the cycle of violence that victimized him, and which he later perpetuated."

In the letter, Sheedy said, "Intentionally ending Mr. Bowles' life is unnecessary. Society can remain safe from any future violent actions of his through lifelong incarceration without parole." He added, "Killing him will only further erode the sense of the sacredness of human life and implicate us all – the citizens of the State of Florida – in his death."

The letter was written on the feast of St. Maximilian Kolbe, a Polish priest at a Nazi concentration camp during World War II who asked his captors to spare the life of a young husband with two children who had been condemned to death, saying he would substitute himself for the man. The soldiers complied with the request and put the priest to death.

Bowles, after being arrested for the murder of Walter Hinton in 1995, confessed to that killing and that of five other men. He also received death sentences in three of the other murders. He had been on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted list of fugitives.

More than 30 prayer vigils were established by the state's seven dioceses to, in the words of the Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops, "pray for the victim and aggressor, their families, for our society which continues to impose violence in return for violence, and for an end to the use of the death penalty." Some vigils were held as early as Aug. 16, but most were scheduled for Aug. 21 and 22, closer to Bowles' scheduled execution.

Two bus caravans also were arranged to take vigil participants to the state prison in Starke, where Bowles was set to be put to death.

The Catholic conference in Tallahassee is the public policy arm of the state's Catholic bishops in the Archdiocese of Miami and the dioceses of St. Augustine, St. Petersburg, Orlando, Pensacola-Tallahassee, Palm Beach and Venice.

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