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In an Oct. 4 statement, the Catholic bishops of Indiana said the federal government's decision this past summer to end a 16-year moratorium on executing federal inmates is "regrettable, unnecessary and morally unjustified."

"We respectfully implore that the sentences of all federal death-row inmates be commuted to life imprisonment," said the statement, signed by the Indianapolis archbishop, three Indiana bishops and the diocesan administrator of the Gary Diocese.

The church leaders noted they were making this plea during the Catholic Church's celebration of Respect Life Month and because federal executions are primarily conducted in Indiana. Most of the federal death-row prisoners are at the U.S. Penitentiary in Terre Haute.

The bishops were responding to a July 25 announcement by the Justice Department that it would be reinstating the federal death penalty and that five inmates on federal death row will be executed from December of this year through next January.

In announcing this reinstatement, Attorney General William Barr said: "The Justice Department upholds the rule of law — and we owe it to the victims and their families to carry forward the sentence imposed by our justice system."

The last time there was a federal execution was in 2003.

In 2014, President Barack Obama directed the Bureau of Prisons to conduct a review of federal capital punishment cases and issues surrounding the use of lethal injection drugs. According to the July 25 announcement, that review is complete and the executions can proceed.

Currently, there are 62 inmates — 61 men and one woman — on federal death row, according to the Death Penalty Information Center. Among these inmates are convicted Boston Marathon bomber Dzhokhar Tsarnaev and Charleston, South Carolina, church shooter Dylann Roof.

When Barr announced the end to the moratorium on executing federal inmates, many Catholic leaders were vocal in their objection to it, including the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops; the Catholic Mobilizing Network, a group that champions restorative justice and an end to the death penalty; the Mercy sisters; and Sister Helen Prejean, a Sister of St. Joseph of Medaille, who is a longtime opponent of capital punishment.

The Indiana bishops reiterated this concern in their Oct. 4 statement.

They said the death penalty "continues the cycle of violence; it neither helps the victims who survive, nor does it mitigate the loss of a loved one. And it precludes the possibility of reconciliation and rehabilitation."

They also pointed out the problems they see in capital punishment, which they said are well-documented, such as "unequal application to minorities, the poor and mentally ill" and an impact on "correctional officers and those who are obligated to participate in taking a human life."

The state's bishops said their request does not "dismiss the evil and harm caused by people who commit horrible crimes, especially murder." They said they "share in the sorrow and loss of families and victims of such crimes. And we call upon our faith community and all persons of goodwill to stand with the victims and to provide spiritual, pastoral and personal support."

But they also stressed that "all life is a gift from God and each life has dignity," and quoted the Catechism of the Catholic Church, which says: "The death penalty is inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person."

"We join our brother bishops of the United States in calling for an end to the death penalty. Twenty-five states no longer use it as a form of punishment. We ask the federal government to continue its moratorium until it can be rescinded formally as a matter of law," they added.

The statement was signed by Archbishop Charles C. Thompson of Indianapolis; Bishops Kevin C. Rhoades of Fort Wayne-South Bend, Timothy L. Doherty of Lafayette-in-Indiana, Joseph M. Siegel of Evansville; and Father Michael Yadron, diocesan administrator of the Diocese of Gary, filling in after Bishop Donald J. Hying of Gary became the bishop of Madison, Wisconsin, in June.

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