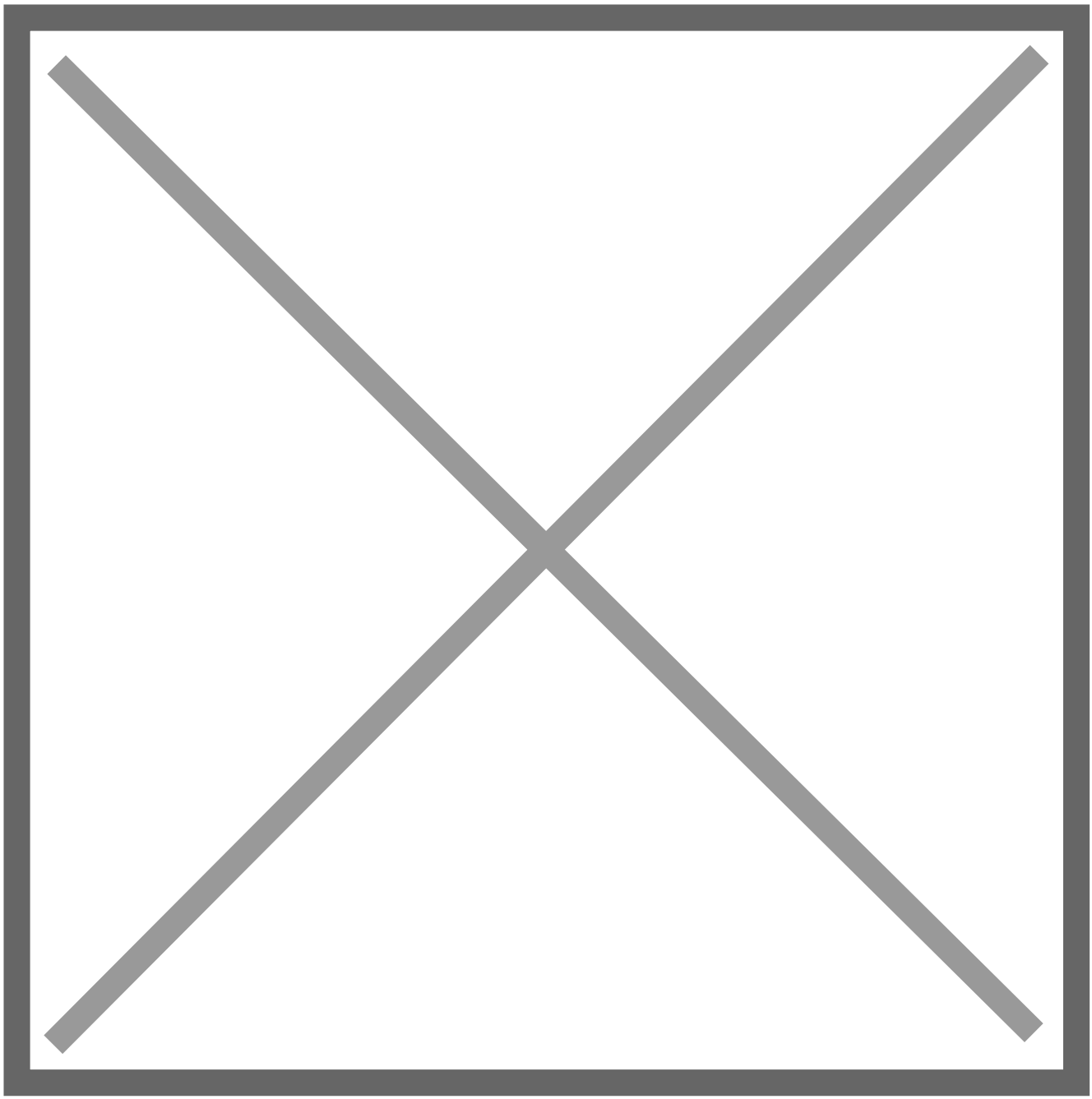


Bishop W. Francis Malooly of Wlimington, Del., Archbishop William E. Lori of Baltimore and Cardinal Wilton D. Gregory of Washington are seen in this composite photo. (CNS composite/photos by Paul Haring; Tyler Orsburn; Carol Glatz)



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Eight Catholic bishops serving Maryland dioceses urged President Donald Trump Dec. 22 to stop the planned federal execution of Dustin Higgs, a Maryland man on death row in Indiana.

The bishops, including Cardinal Wilton D. Gregory of Washington, Baltimore Archbishop William E. Lori and Bishop W. Francis Malooly of Wilmington, Delaware, also wrote to Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan seeking his support in fighting this execution, which is scheduled to take place Jan. 15.

In their letter to Trump, the bishops wrote: "Alternative sentences, such as life without parole, are punishments through which society can be kept safe. The death penalty does not create a path to justice. Rather, it contributes to the growing disrespect for human life and perpetuates a cycle of violence in our society."

They also quoted Pope Francis, who said: "Human justice is imperfect, and the failure to recognize its fallibility can transform it into a source of injustice."

In a letter to Hogan, a Republican, the bishops said they were proud of the state's leadership in ending the death penalty and urged him to "intervene with the Trump administration to ask that this execution be stopped."

The bishops also recognized the pain of victims and survivors, writing that they "grieve for the victims of violent crime and murder. We recognize the terrible suffering of their families and pray that God will provide them peace and healing."

Higgs, 48, is in federal prison in Terre Haute, Indiana. He was convicted of ordering the 1996 murders of three women on land owned by the federal Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Maryland.

The bishops' letter urging a stop to Higgs' execution was released by the Maryland Catholic Conference, the public policy arm of the state's bishops. It also was signed by two Washington auxiliary bishops, Bishops Roy E. Campbell and Mario E. Dorsonville, and auxiliary bishops of Baltimore, Bishops Adam J. Parker, Bruce A. Lewandowski and retired Bishop Denis J. Madden.

Shawn Nolan, Higgs' attorney, said in a Dec. 17 statement that Higgs has tested positive for COVID-19. "Now our client is sick," he said, adding he and other attorneys "have asked the government to withdraw the execution date and we will ask the courts to intervene if they do not."

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Another federal death-row inmate, Corey Johnson, scheduled to be executed Jan. 14, also has tested positive for the disease caused by the coronavirus.

Nolan said "clemency is warranted" in Higgs' case, pointing out that witnesses have agreed that Higgs was not the shooter in the crime for which he has served 20 years on federal death row and stressing that the co-defendant, who pulled the trigger, was sentenced to life without the possibility of parole.

The U.S. bishops have repeatedly called for an end to the death penalty and particularly to the federal executions that resumed this year under the Trump administration after a 17-year hiatus. Since July, there have been 10 federal executions.

Three executions are scheduled for January: Johnson, Higgs and Lisa Montgomery, who is scheduled to be put to death Jan.12. Montgomery is the first woman to face the federal death penalty in decades. She has asked for a delay in her execution because her attorneys have COVID-19.

These executions are scheduled to take place just days before the inauguration of President-elect Joe Biden, who has said he will end federal executions and plans to incentivize states to stop executions.

The push to execute federal inmates before the end of this presidential term is an "unprecedented execution spree by the federal government," said Krisanne Vaillancourt Murphy, executive director of Catholic Mobilizing Network.

The network, which seeks an end to the death penalty, is holding virtual prayer vigils for the upcoming federal executions.

A prayer vigil for Higgs, which participants can sign up for online at https://catholicsmobilizing.org/virtual-vigils. It is scheduled for 2-3 p.m. (ET) Jan. 15.