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Melissa Lucio is seen in this undated photo. (CNS photo/courtesy Melissa Lucio's defense tean

Melissa Lucio is seen in this undated photo. (CNS photo/courtesy Melissa Lucio's defense team via Texas Catholic Conference of Bishops)



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WASHINGTON — Texas Catholic bishops joined a broad coalition of faith leaders, Latino organizations, anti-domestic violence groups and the Innocence Project in urging state leaders March 22 to commute the death sentence of Melissa Lucio and conduct a meaningful review of her case.

The groups, along with Lucio's children, filed letters with the Texas Board of Pardons and Paroles, Texas Gov. Greg Abbott and Cameron County District Attorney Luis Saenz.

Lucio, a 53-year-old Catholic mother of 14 and a grandmother, was given the death sentence for the 2007 death of her 2-year-old daughter, Mariah, that Lucio has maintained was due to her daughter's accidental fall down a stairway. Her execution is scheduled for April 27.

An application for clemency submitted March 22 by her attorneys includes new evidence the jury never heard that shows Lucio was a victim of sexual abuse and domestic violence and that her daughter died of medical complications after the fall.

It also says her confession was just repeating what officers said during her five-hour interrogation and that she asserted her innocence more than 100 times during that interrogation. It also includes statements from four jurors who said they have grave concerns about evidence withheld from them at the trial.

The Texas bishops, in their March 22 letter, said they "continue to pray for everyone who has been touched by the tragic loss of Mariah's life, especially for the suffering Ms. Lucio and her family have endured."

"We are also fervently praying that clemency be granted to Ms. Lucio, not solely because of the church's opposition to the death penalty and the inherent dignity of every human life, but also due to the mitigating circumstances surrounding her case."

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The bishops said: "Justice was not served by Ms. Lucio's conviction and will not by served by her execution, considering her history as a victim of sexual abuse and domestic violence, her troubling interrogation by law enforcement and the unanswered questions regarding the manner of her daughter Mariah's death."

They also noted Lucio is a faithful Catholic on death row in the Diocese of Austin and that her spiritual adviser, Deacon Ronnie Lastovica, said she is helping lead others in their faith.

The bishops' letter also pointed out the case of Thomas Whitaker, who was granted clemency by the Texas governor in 2018.

"We urge you to follow that precedent, especially when there is a strong case for (Lucio's) innocence," they said.

The bishops also stressed that Pope Francis' call to abolish the death penalty "reminds us justice happens, not through punishment and vengeance, but out of a sense of responsibility beyond the present moment. Conversion, repentance and the desire to start life anew cannot be denied anyone, including those guilty of the most serious crimes."

"We beseech you to commute her death sentence and conduct a meaningful review of her case to enable this family to continue the hard work of restorative justice and healing," they added.

In late February, the Texas Catholic Conference of Bishops similarly pleaded with the governor and the state's Board of Pardons and Paroles to commute Lucio's death sentence.

The conference, which is the public policy arm of the state's bishops, agreed with a statement issued by Bishop Daniel E. Flores of Brownsville, where the Lucio family lives.

"One tragedy is not somehow made better by killing someone else. Justice is not suddenly restored because another person dies," Bishop Flores said. He added that "executing Melissa will not bring peace to her surviving children, it will only bring more pain and suffering."

The Brownsville bishop said Lucio's case "illustrates yet again why the Texas death penalty process cannot be trusted to provide justice to all. It is a deeply flawed process rife with human error and inconsistency."

Krisanne Vaillancourt Murphy, executive director of Catholic Mobilizing Network, similarly urged state officials in February to grant Lucio clemency, saying: "To do anything else would be an irreversible injustice."

In a court appeal filed in February, Vanessa Potkin, an attorney for Lucio and director of special litigation at the Innocence Project, said: "There is just too much doubt. We cannot move forward in this case and risk executing an innocent woman."

Attorneys for Lucio have sought relief multiple times to no avail. The U.S. Court of Appeals for the 5th Circuit said Lucio had been denied her right to fully defend

herself but that procedural rules barred the court from overturning her conviction. The Supreme Court has declined to take up Lucio's case.

The Innocence Project, in a brief filed with the Supreme Court, questioned the manner of interrogation used on Lucio about her daughter's death. "Interrogation may sometimes psychologically pressure even innocent people to confess to crimes they did not commit," it said, adding that the risk of a false confession is "heightened when the interrogated suspect is a battered woman."

If Texas goes through with her execution, Lucio will be the sixth woman to be executed in the United States in the past 10 years and the only Latina to be sentenced to death in Texas. Her case was the subject of a documentary: "The State of Texas vs. Melissa."