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Krisanne Vaillancourt Murphy, executive director of the Catholic Mobilizing Network, speaks at the Vatican Embassy in Washington Oct. 10, 2022, during an awards ceremony on the World Day Against the Death Penalty. The event was sponsored by her organization, a national Catholic network working to end the death penalty and promote restorative justice. (CNS photo/Rick Reinhard, courtesy Catholic Mobilizing Network)



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At an Oct. 10 ceremony at the Vatican Embassy in Washington, Catholic advocates working to bring an end to the death penalty acknowledged leaders in the fight against capital punishment in the U.S.

They also vowed to remain committed to the ongoing work of building the culture of life.

About 200 people attended the event, held on World Day Against the Death Penalty and sponsored by Catholic Mobilizing Network, a national Catholic organization working to end the death penalty and promote restorative justice.

The apostolic nuncio, Archbishop Christophe Pierre, welcomed guests to the "house of the pope" and called it fitting that they gathered there because of the pope's support of their work and his own statements against the death penalty.

The nuncio pointed particularly to Pope Francis' revision of the Catechism of the Catholic Church four years ago to say capital punishment is "inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person."

The archbishop urged those involved with the work of Catholic Mobilizing Network not to give up. "Keep going! Be bold!" he told them, emphasizing that "together we can build a culture of life."

During the event, Catholic Mobilizing Network officials presented Washington Cardinal Wilton D. Gregory with the "Archbishop Fiorenza Dignity & Life Award" for his longtime commitment to raising awareness of capital punishment as a critical life issue for U.S. Catholics.

The award is named in memory of Archbishop Joseph A. Fiorenza of Galveston-Houston, a longtime death penalty abolitionist who died in September at age 91.

Gregory said it was an honor to accept the award because he was "privileged to call Archbishop Fiorenza a cherished friend and mentor." He said the archbishop spoke out against the death penalty even as the state of Texas, where he ministered, continued to use it.

"If he were he with us this evening, he would encourage the members of Catholic Mobilizing Network to continue with your advocacy to end the death penalty," the cardinal said.

Gregory added that he would continue to lend his voice to the chorus of many others, including the pope, to end this practice.

The group also presented Vicki and Syl Schieber, a Catholic couple, with the "Reimagining Justice Award." The couple's daughter Shannon was murdered in 1998 and they launched a successful campaign against pursuing capital punishment in her case even though the district attorney had initially wanted to pursue it.

Since then, the couple has continued to publicly advocate against the death penalty.

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Vicki Schieber said she and her husband would not have been at the evening's event or receiving the award without the support that many in the room had given them over the years.

Syl Schieber said he and his wife had relied on their faith to sustain them and to respond as they did after their daughter's death.

He said they had both prayed the Lord's Prayer "thousands of times" and knew that the message of asking for forgiveness required "that we forgive those who trespass against us," but it wasn't until they went through their ordeal that they truly understood what it meant to forgive others.

"We both realized that if we could not stand by our principles when it was difficult, then they were simply not our principles," he said.

Syl Schieber joked that the American philosopher of baseball fame, Yogi Berra, noted that "when you come to a fork in the road, take it."

"There were no directional signs at our fork in the road, but our faith turned us in the right direction even as the police and the prosecutors were pushing us in the other direction," he said.

He also noted that many people they have met in the same predicament "have chosen the other path," of seeking the death penalty, and have waited decades, or are still waiting, for executions -- which takes its toll on family relationships and mental health.

"If we can help survivors in these cases choose the better path when they are at their fork in the road, it would be a tremendous tonic for their long-term welfare and accelerant for further elimination of the death penalty," Syl Schieber said, adding

that he was grateful that God had given him and his wife the "vision to see the better path."

In closing remarks, Krisanne Vaillancourt Murphy, executive director of Catholic Mobilizing Network, noted the group is "the only national faith-based organization dedicated to ending the death penalty."

Over the past 13 years, she said, its work has been to "wade into the murkiest depths of the criminal legal system and proclaim the good news Jesus came to share -- that another way of doing justice is possible."

She said so many churchgoing Catholics "still cling to revenge as a way to tolerate or justify the practice of the death penalty" but opponents of the death penalty also are not alone.

For example, she said earlier that day a group of Catholic leaders sent a letter to Oklahoma Gov. Kevin Stitt urging him to stop the state's plan to execute one person a month for the next two years.

Vaillancourt Murphy said advocates of ending the death penalty should be energized and emboldened in the work they are doing together and also be encouraged by signs of hope including Virginia's outlawing of the death penalty last year.