News

An older, masked man holds a sign that reads "Stop state killing" in the snow

A protester against the death penalty is seen in this file photo. By executive action, Oregon Gov. Kate Brown commuted the sentences of 17 people on death row to life imprisonment without the possibility of parole Dec. 13, 2022. (CNS photo/Bryan Woolston, Reuters)



Carol Zimmermann

View Author Profile

Catholic News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Washington — December 16, 2022

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Catholic and other opponents of the death penalty applauded Oregon Gov. Kate Brown's decision to commute the sentences of the state's 17 inmates on death row, changing their sentences to life in prison without the possibility of parole.

The decision, effective Dec. 14, was announced the previous day by the Democratic governor, who said she was using her executive clemency powers in this decision, stressing that she has "long believed that justice is not advanced by taking a life,

and the state should not be in the business of executing people -- even if a terrible crime placed them in prison."

Archbishop Alexander K. Sample of Portland was pleased with the announcement and said his "prayer is that a recognition of the true value of human life will take deep root in the minds and hearts of all Oregonians."

Krisanne Vaillancourt Murphy, executive director of Catholic Mobilizing Network, similarly praised the decision and said she hopes "other state leaders across the nation and the federal government will follow (Brown's) example in abandoning the antiquated, immoral and unjust system of capital punishment."

"Today's commutation action by Governor Brown further solidifies a growing rejection of capital punishment -- not just in Oregon, but in states across the country," she said in a Dec. 13 statement.

Sr. Helen Prejean, a Sister of St. Joseph and longtime advocate of ending capital punishment, simply tweeted: "Thank you, Governor Brown, for your courageous moral leadership!"

Brown's announcement spoke of victims' family members and said they experience "pain and uncertainty" while waiting for decades while prisoners sit on death row.

She also said she was dismantling the state's execution chamber, something that Frank Thompson, a former superintendent of prisons in Oregon, found particularly heartening.

Thompson, in a statement released by the advocacy group, Death Penalty Action, said: "This is a tremendous moment for me." He noted that in his role with the state prison system in the 1990s, he "oversaw the construction of Oregon's death chamber" and supervised two executions. The state has not executed a prisoner since 1997.

Advertisement

He described the death penalty as "a bad public policy on many levels" that "does a disservice to everyone it touches, including the state workers in our corrections department whose job it is to carry out executions."

"No employee of the state should have to take on the burdens that come with killing a defenseless human being," added Thompson, who currently serves on the board of directors of Oregonians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty and Death Penalty Action.

He described himself as one of a number of "former executioners who have been working to abolish the death penalty in Oregon and across the United States," and said he was grateful to "have lived to see this moment" in his state. His only wish now is to be present to personally watch the dismantling of Oregon's execution chamber.

Vaillancourt Murphy noted that across the county, 37 states have either outlawed the death penalty or have gone more than 10 years without an execution. "The small handful of states that continue to execute people are doing so over the growing protests at the local, state and national levels," she added.

In her statement, Brown noted that since taking office in 2015, she has continued the state's moratorium on executions "because the death penalty is both dysfunctional and immoral."

The governor, whose term ends in January, noted that unlike previous commutations she has granted to individuals who have demonstrated "extraordinary growth and rehabilitation, this commutation is not based on any rehabilitative efforts by the individuals on death row."

Instead, she said her decision "reflects the recognition that the death penalty is immoral."

"It is an irreversible punishment that does not allow for correction; is wasteful of taxpayer dollars; does not make communities safer; and cannot be and never has been administered fairly and equitably," Brown said.