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Demonstrators hold signs protesting capital punishment in front of the U.S. Supreme Court bu

Demonstrators hold signs protesting capital punishment in front of the U.S. Supreme Court building in Washington June 29, 2022. (OSV News photo/Kevin Lamarque, Reuters)

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Gov. John Bel Edwards, D-La., called for an end to the death penalty in Louisiana during his final State of the State address, April 10, in an impassioned call for lawmakers to adopt legislative proposals reflecting its identity as a "pro-life state."

"For the first time, I'm calling on the legislature to end the death penalty," said Edwards, who is term-limited and cannot seek re-election to a third consecutive term in the governor's mansion.

Edwards, a pro-life Catholic Democrat who signed into law the state's six-week abortion ban, told lawmakers that while he was "on the topic of being a pro-life state," he wanted them to "look at the death penalty in Louisiana in 2023 with fresh eyes and an open mind."

"In short: it is difficult to administer -- one execution in 20 years. It is extremely expensive -- tens of millions more spent prosecuting and defending capital cases, and tens of millions more spent maintaining death row over those same 20 years," he said. "Our criminal justice system is far from perfect. Over the same 20 years there have been six exonerations from death row and more than 50 reversals of sentences and/or convictions."

"It doesn't deter crime," he said. "It isn't necessary for public safety; and more importantly, it is wholly inconsistent with Louisiana's pro-life values as it quite literally promotes a culture of death."

At the start of a new legislative session, the governor also tasked lawmakers with being "good and faithful servants this session," and argued that being a pro-life state also includes passing paid family leave.

"One thing we can all agree on is that Louisiana is a pro-life state," he said. "That's something I'm proud of, and I know many of you are proud of it as well. But we have to ask ourselves what does that mean? Do the policies we've enacted support the position we've taken? Do we truly support families? What does it mean if we let mothers and fathers work full time without being able to afford to feed and house their children?"

Louisiana is one of 27 U.S. states where the death penalty still exists at the state level, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. Southern Louisiana also contains the largest Catholic population in the South, according to Louisiana State University's sociology department.

"We applaud Gov. Edwards for calling upon Louisiana's Legislature to stop perpetuating a culture of death and finally abolish the death penalty," Krisanne Vaillancourt Murphy, executive director of the Catholic Mobilizing Network, a group that opposes capital punishment, told OSV News.

"His public appeal is an important reminder that governors have an influential role to play in stopping executions and urging death penalty repeals in their states," Vaillancourt Murphy said.

Vaillancourt Murphy noted that Louisiana's use of the practice of capital punishment has "tapered off in the past decade."

"The last lethal injection in Louisiana took place in 2010," she said. "It is long past time for Louisiana to take capital punishment off its books."

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Virginia became the first Southern state to abolish capital punishment in 2021, Vaillancourt Murphy noted.

"Louisiana could be the second to do so, sending an important signal to other Southern states that the death penalty is an archaic and inherently flawed relic," she said.

"There is a growing awareness in the South that capital punishment is not consistent with pro-life values; it does not deliver justice and healing," Vaillancourt Murphy said. "As Catholics, we uphold that every person is endowed with a God-given dignity, regardless of the harm one has suffered or caused. The repeal of Louisiana's death penalty would be an important step toward protecting that sacred dignity of life."

Louisiana's next gubernatorial election is scheduled for Oct. 14, 2023. Unlike Edwards, Shawn Wilson, the Democratic candidate, has shied away from running on a pro-life platform. He faces an increasingly crowded Republican field. The Cook Political Report, a non-partisan group that analyzes state, federal and presidential elections, has as of March ranked that race as "Lean Republican."