News

Ron Desantis wears a suit jacket with no tie and speaks into a microphone while standing in f

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis speaks at a campaign event in Rochester, N.H., June 1, 2023. The Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops wrote a May 31 letter to DeSantis, who is Catholic, asking him to stay the execution of death-row inmate Duane Owen and commute his sentence to life without parole. (OSV News photo/Brian Snyder, Reuters)

Kate Scanlon

View Author Profile



OSV News

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

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

June 6, 2023

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Catholic bishops in Florida urged Gov. Ron DeSantis to stay the execution of a death-row prisoner as the governor embarks on a bid for the Republican presidential nomination in 2024.

The Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops wrote a May 31 letter to DeSantis asking him to stay the execution of inmate Duane Owen and commute his sentence to life without parole. Owen is scheduled to be executed June 15 for his conviction in the 1984 murders of Karen Slattery and Georgianna Worden in Palm Beach County, Florida.

In the letter to DeSantis, who is also Catholic, on behalf of the bishops of Florida, Michael Sheedy, FCCB executive director, recognized that Owen's "senseless and horrific acts tragically ended the lives of these young women and have caused immeasurable grief and suffering to the victims' families, loved ones and communities."

"However, taking Mr. Owen's life will not restore the lives of the victims," Sheedy wrote.
"Intentionally ending his life will do nothing but perpetuate violence in a society steeped in it. Society must be kept safe from Mr. Owen and those like him, but that can be done effectively without resorting to more violence."

Owen's attorneys have argued that he may be insane, leading to a temporary stay in the case in May.

In an executive order dissolving that temporary stay in the case, DeSantis wrote that psychiatrists who evaluated Owen determined he "has the mental capacity to understand the death penalty and the reasons why it is to be imposed upon him," rendering the stay "no longer necessary."

DeSantis' office did not immediately respond to a request for comment from OSV News on the bishops' letter.

DeSantis entered the race for the Republican presidential nomination May 24, formally declaring his long-speculated candidacy. DeSantis enters the GOP field as perhaps the most formidable challenger to former President Donald Trump, who launched his third bid for the White House last fall after losing to President Joe Biden in 2020. Prior to his announcement, DeSantis dipped in polling among GOP primary voters, trailing Trump.

Advertisement

DeSantis has sought to portray himself as tough on crime both in his tenure as governor and in his presidential bid. In a speech to the Florida Sheriffs Association in January, DeSantis proposed changing state law to allow juries to impose the death penalty without unanimous agreement. State lawmakers later filed -- and passed -- a bill to lower the threshold to eight out of 12 jurors, which DeSantis signed into law in April.

Out of 27 states that permit capital punishment, only three do not require a unanimous jury. Alabama allows a 10-2 decision, while Missouri and Indiana allow a judge to decide when there is a divided jury, according to the National Center for State Courts.

But DeSantis' position on capital punishment has previously placed him at odds with his state's Catholic bishops and the church's magisterium on the issue.

The bishops were among those who asked DeSantis to block the execution of Donald Dillbeck in February, but that execution was carried out the same month

In his 2020 encyclical, "Fratelli Tutti," Pope Francis cited the writings of his predecessor, St. John Paul II, who, he said, "stated clearly and firmly that the death penalty is inadequate from a moral standpoint and no longer necessary from that of penal justice."

"There can be no stepping back from this position," Francis wrote. "Today we state clearly that 'the death penalty is inadmissible' and the church is firmly committed to calling for its abolition worldwide."

Francis also revised the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC, No. 2267) in 2018 to reflect that position.