News



Sr. Helen Prejean, a death penalty abolitionist, is seen in Anaheim, California, calling for an end to the death penalty in this 2016 file photo. In a statement issued through the progressive group MoveOn, the Sister of St. Joseph said her mission was both to serve as Texas death-row inmate Ivan Cantu's spiritual adviser during his incarceration and "publicly share the injustice" of his execution Feb. 28, 2024. (OSV News/CNS file/The Tidings/J.D. Long-Garcia)

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Ivan Cantu was executed Feb. 28 by the state of Texas despite claims that the Texan's 2001 conviction for killing James Mosqueda and Amy Kitchen, his cousin and his cousin's fiancee, was based on false testimony.

In a statement issued through the progressive group MoveOn, Sr. Helen Prejean, a member of the Congregation of St. Joseph and death penalty abolitionist, said her mission was both to serve as Cantu's spiritual adviser during his incarceration and "publicly share the injustice of this execution."

"We took up the cause of this man because mistakes were made at his trial," Prejean said. "And we have a deficient and flawed appeal system that refused to review the substantive issues in this case. Ivan is a very brave man. In the final hours of his life, I granted Ivan peace as he readied himself to die. Ivan initiated more avenues in the pursuit of his exoneration than any single person I've counseled on death row."

Collin County Prosecutor Greg Willis said in a statement, "After over two decades of multiple state and federal courts comprehensively reviewing his conviction, Ivan Cantu has finally met with justice tonight."

"My hopeful prayer is for the victims' families, friends, and loved ones to find a long-awaited sense of peace," Willis said, arguing that "clear and powerful evidence" backed up the sentence.



Ivan Cantu, a Texas death-row inmate, was executed Feb. 28, 2024, despite claims that his 2001 conviction for killing his cousin and his cousin's girlfriend was based on false testimony. Cantu is pictured in an undated prison photo. (OSV News/Texas Department of Criminal Justice)

But multiple jurors from Cantu's original trial have said they did not support his execution, The Texas Tribune reported.

Cantu's case garnered national attention after allegations that false testimony contributed to his conviction. More than 151,600 people signed an online petition calling for a stay of his execution.

One such advocate was reality TV star Kim Kardashian, who has previously expressed interest in overturning cases with allegations of wrongful convictions. Kardashian circulated the petition prior to Cantu's execution, and afterwards wrote on X (formerly Twitter) that Cantu was "someone I believe is an innocent man."

"My prayers go out to his family and loved ones and everyone involved," she said.

Prejean said, "Ivan was grateful for everyone who supported him in his fight for a fair trial. Remember, by speaking up and taking action for Ivan together, we are bending the arc toward justice and are one step closer to ending the death penalty."

The Catholic Church teaches the death penalty is incompatible with the sanctity of human life. In his 2020 encyclical, "*Fratelli Tutti*," Pope Francis cited the writings of St. John Paul II, explaining his predecessor "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 (No. 2267) in 2018 to reflect that position.

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In a Feb. 29 statement, Jennifer Allmon, executive director of the Texas Catholic Conference of Bishops, called for people to "pray and petition our representatives for a reform of our death penalty due process."

"It is simply unconscionable that the courts have set an impossibly high threshold to present new evidence when a person’s life is at stake," she said.

Catholic Mobilizing Network executive director Krisanne Vaillancourt Murphy also released a Feb. 29 statement, saying Cantu's execution, "despite serious doubts about his guilt and newly discovered evidence," demonstrated how "our criminal legal system is more interested in vengeance than fairness."

She noted that since 1976, when capital punishment in the U.S. was restored, "196 people have been exonerated from death row after being sentenced to death for a crime they didn’t commit."