News



U.S. President Joe Biden speaks at the White House, in Washington, Dec. 8, 2024. The U.S. Catholic bishops, a multi-faith coalition, and Pope Francis have raised their voices in asking Biden, a Catholic, to commute the death sentences of 40 men on federal death row, before he leaves office. (OSV News/Ken Cedeno, Reuters)

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The U.S. bishops' conference was among the groups that urged President Joe Biden on Dec. 9 to commute existing federal death sentences before President-elect Donald Trump, who has sought to expand the use of capital punishment, returns to the White House.

Opponents of capital punishment have argued that Biden, a Catholic and the first U.S. president to have campaigned on an openly anti-death penalty platform, should follow through with concrete action in the post-election lame-duck period.

Pope Francis also indicated support for that effort, writing in a Dec. 8 post on X, formerly Twitter, "Let us #PrayTogether for those on death row in the United States. Let us pray that their sentences may be commuted, changed. Let us think of these brothers and sisters of ours and ask the Lord for the grace to save them from death."

An action alert from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops stated, "As President Biden prepares to leave office, please urge him to commute all current federal death sentences to terms of imprisonment before his term ends."

It stated, "President Biden has an extraordinary opportunity to advance the cause of human dignity by commuting all federal death sentences to terms of imprisonment and sparing the lives of the 40 men currently on federal death row."

The message added the U.S. Catholic bishops "have long called for an end to the use of the death penalty," citing a 1980 statement calling for its abolition, as well as the conference's vote in 1974 to oppose the practice.

"They outlined concerns with the death penalty that remain relevant today, including that the death penalty extinguishes possibilities for reform and rehabilitation; the imposition of capital punishment involves the possibility of mistakes; the legal imposition of capital punishment in our society involves long and unavoidable delays; carrying out the death penalty brings with it great and

avoidable anguish for everyone involved; and that capital punishment is carried out in an unfair and discriminatory manner," the USCCB action alert said.

The Catholic Church's official magisterium opposes the use of the death penalty as inconsistent with the inherent sanctity of human life, and advocates for the practice's abolition worldwide. In his 2020 encyclical "Fratelli Tutti," Francis addressed the moral problem of capital punishment by citing St. John Paul II, writing that 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. Echoing the teaching he clarified in his 2018 revision of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the pontiff said, "Today we state clearly that 'the death penalty is inadmissible' and the church is firmly committed to calling for its abolition worldwide."

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In a separate message, a bipartisan coalition including Catholic Mobilizing Network, former prison officials, family members of homicide victims, civil rights advocates and pro-life advocates circulated a joint effort urging Biden to commute existing death sentences.

"As Catholics, we understand that every person is made in the image of God and that our Heavenly Father does not shut the door on anyone," Krisanne Vaillancourt Murphy, executive director of CMN and Sister Rita Ann Teichman, a member of the Sisters of St. Joseph and chair of the group's board of directors, wrote in the letter. "By commuting these sentences, you could use your constitutional authority in a way that would mirror the spirit of reconciliation during this special Jubilee 2025 year."

"The death penalty has for generations been a veiled extension of our national legacy of racial terror and lynchings," said Jamila Hodge, CEO of Equal Justice USA, another group involved in the effort, in that group's message. "President Biden, like me a person of deep faith in God, has a historic opportunity to demonstrate mercy and the belief that we are all redeemable, by preventing an execution spree that will not make us safer, while moving us closer to reckoning with a system that unfairly targets Black people."

Joia Thornton, founder and national director of the Faith Leaders of Color Coalition (flocc), said in the group's letter that Biden "has a deep-rooted relationship with Black faith communities, and flocc represents more than 500 Black faith leaders, conventions, congregations and convocations in America."

She said, "Commuting the federal death row would be an incredible milestone for those who believe life has value, mercy is encompassing and grace covers a multitude of sin."

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