News



President Joe Biden speaks in Washington, D.C. Dec. 16, 2024. Biden announced Dec. 23 that he would commute 37 federal death sentences to life in prison. (OSV News/Reuters/Kevin Lamarque)



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Catholic opponents of the death penalty praised President Joe Biden's decision to commute the sentences of all but three of the 40 inmates on federal death row, a decision the White House said will stop President-elect Donald Trump from resuming stalled executions.

"Today's historic decision by President Biden advances the cause of human dignity and underscores the sacred value of every human life," said Krisanne Vaillancourt Murphy, executive director of Catholic Mobilizing Network.

Since the election, Catholic voices, led by Pope Francis, have called on America's second Catholic president to issue the commutations. The Catechism of the Catholic Church, revised by Pope Francis in 2018, calls the death penalty "inadmissible" and "an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person."

Catholic Mobilizing Network and other faith groups have been urging the president to pardon the 40 inmates on federal death row. The U.S. Catholic bishops similarly joined this appeal a few weeks ago, as did Francis. A Dec. 3 National Catholic Reporter editorial appealed to Biden's faith in calling for the action, which was taken on Dec. 23.

Archbishop Timothy Broglio, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, called the president's action a "significant step in advancing the cause of human dignity and respect for human life from womb to tomb in our nation."

"My brother bishops and I unite in expressing our gratitude that President Biden has commuted the federal death sentences of 37 men," he said. "We encourage all lawmakers to continue to work towards the total abolition of the death penalty and to redirect the energy and resources that currently go towards executions to provide compassionate and professional assistance to the families of victims."

> 'This is a turning point for capital punishment in the United States.'
>
> —Krisanne Vaillancourt Murphy
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Francis, in his Dec. 8 weekly address from the Vatican, had urged that the lives of death row inmates in the United States be spared. "Let us pray for their sentence to be commuted, changed," the pope said. "Let us think of these brothers and sisters of ours and ask the Lord to save them from death."

Biden spoke with Francis Dec. 19, just before a White House announcement that the two men will meet at the Vatican in January before Biden leaves office.

Sr. Helen Prejean, a longtime opponent of capital punishment, has been asking followers on social media to write and call the White House urging the president to commute the death sentences. On Monday, the Sister of St. Joseph said on X, "This is a milestone in the fight to shut down the death penalty — thank you!"

Vaillancourt Murphy said in an interview with NCR that the "national and international attention of this historic decision" highlights the failures of capital punishment but is also an "an extraordinary gift and relief that feels like a Christmas miracle."

"Our death penalty abolition work will continue but these federal commutations allow us to direct our efforts on states that are pursuing repeal of the death penalty or fighting against executions," Vaillancourt Murphy said. "This is a turning point for capital punishment in the United States."

Vaillancourt Murphy said the importance of the president's Catholic faith was a key factor. "It's not lost on any of us that an important aspect of his motivation to commute these sentences rests on his appreciation of the dignity of human life," she said.

Biden let stand the death sentences of three inmates found guilty of terrorism or hate-motivated mass killings: Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, one of the bombers in the 2013 Boston Marathon that left three people dead and wounded more than 250; Robert Bowers, the attacker at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh in 2018, killing 11 people; and Dylann Roof, who killed nine people in 2015 at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina.

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"In good conscience, I cannot stand back and let a new administration resume executions that I halted," Biden said in a statement.

Biden cited his experience as a public defender early in his career and his four decades in federal office. "I am more convinced than ever that we must stop the use of the death penalty at the federal level," he said.

He said the commutation of the death sentences of the 37 men, who will now serve life imprisonment sentences without parole, are "consistent with the moratorium my Administration has imposed on federal executions, in cases other than terrorism and hate-motivated mass murder."

"Make no mistake: I condemn these murderers, grieve for the victims of their despicable acts, and ache for all the families who have suffered unimaginable and irreparable loss," the president said.

In his 2020 presidential campaign, Biden promised to end the federal death penalty but a proposed measure to do so failed to pass in Congress. In 2021, the Department of Justice issued a moratorium on federal executions while the federal death penalty was being reviewed.

During Trump's previous term, 13 prisoners on federal death row were executed after a nearly 20-year pause on federal executions.

Catholic Mobilizing Network urged legislation to abolish capital punishment. "We will continue to pray fervently that President Biden's bold move will spur legislative action that ultimately leads to the abolition of the death penalty at every level of government throughout the United States," the group said in a statement.