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Retired Bishop Felipe J. Estévez of St. Augustine, Fla., joins people from across Florida for a prayer vigil outside Florida State Prison in Raiford on Feb. 13, 2025, held one hour before the scheduled execution of James Ford. While peacefully protesting the use of the death penalty, participants prayed for Ford and his victims, Gregory and Kimberly Malnory. (OSV News/Fran Ruchalski, courtesy St. Augustine Catholic)

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As the state of Florida moves forward with yet another scheduled execution — this time set for June 10 — retired Bishop Felipe J. Estévez of St. Augustine is making a public appeal for mercy over retribution, calling the death penalty "a failure of mercy and moral imagination."

"Executions are carried out one after another," the bishop said, "as if violence can somehow bring justice or peace. But state-sanctioned killing is not justice. It is not who we are called to be."

Bishop Estévez, who retired in 2022, continues active ministry by visiting inmates on Florida's death row. His experience in prison ministry has deepened his conviction that every human life is endowed with dignity and the potential for redemption.

"Modern prisons are secure," he said. "Life imprisonment without parole guarantees that the public remains safe. The death penalty is no longer necessary to protect society — and more importantly, it is morally indefensible."

The bishop's message comes as Florida prepares to carry out the execution of Anthony Wainwright, who was convicted in 1994 for the kidnapping, sexual assault and murder of 23-year-old Carmen Gayheart. Bishop Estévez did not downplay the gravity of Wainwright's crimes or the pain inflicted on the victim's family. Rather, he emphasized that taking another life does not restore what was lost.




The entrance sign to Florida State Prison in Raiford is pictured on Feb. 13, 2025, just hours before the execution of James Ford. Ford was convicted in the 2001 murders of Gregory and Kimberly Malnory in Duval County and spent nearly 24 years on death row. Florida State Prison is the site where all state executions are carried out. (OSV News/Fran Ruchalski, courtesy St. Augustine Catholic)

"We do not honor her memory — or uphold her dignity — by taking another life," he said. "True justice is not found in death. It is found when we affirm, even in the darkest circumstances, that every human being has worth beyond measure."

Since January, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis has overseen five executions. The upcoming June 10 execution would mark the sixth so far in 2025, putting Florida among the leading states in capital punishment activity this year.

The bishop pointed out that the death penalty contradicts Catholic teaching on the sanctity of life and the hope of conversion. Pope Francis was an outspoken critic of capital punishment, calling it "inadmissible" in all cases and affirming that the church works for its abolition worldwide.

"Punishment must never exclude the dimension of hope and the goal of rehabilitation," Pope Francis wrote in *Fratelli Tutti*. Bishop Estévez echoed this teaching, noting that the irrevocable nature of the death penalty forecloses any opportunity for redemption.

He also emphasized the practical cost to taxpayers. According to the Death Penalty Information Center, the average death penalty case costs taxpayers over $1 million more than a comparable case resulting in life imprisonment without parole. The extended appeals process, heightened security and complex litigation all contribute to these costs.

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"Time and again, we see that we are spending more to achieve less," he said. "It is fiscally irresponsible and morally bankrupt."

Bishop Estévez also challenged the belief that the death penalty brings closure to victims' families. "Violence provokes more violence," he said. "Executions do not bring healing — they prolong suffering and entangle us in a cycle of vengeance. We must ask ourselves what kind of society we wish to be: one that clings to an outdated model of justice rooted in retribution, or one that chooses life, even when it is difficult?"

In a heartfelt appeal to the people of Florida, Bishop Estévez urged citizens to contact DeSantis and demand an end to executions carried out in their name.

"If you do not believe that taking another life brings justice or healing to victims' families, make your voice heard," he said. "We must not remain silent as our state continues to pursue death as a form of punishment. There is a better way."

The bishop concluded with a direct call to the governor to halt this cycle of violence: "Governor DeSantis, I urge you to commute the June 10 execution — and all death sentences. Florida must choose life, not death."

Bishop Estévez's words reflect not only the teaching of the church but also a consistent life ethic that values every human person from conception to natural death.

"Justice without killing is not weakness," he said. "It is the moral imperative of our time — and a call we must not ignore."