News



Pope Leo XIV greets visitors and pilgrims from the popemobile as he rides around St. Peter's Square at the Vatican before his weekly general audience June 25, 2025. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



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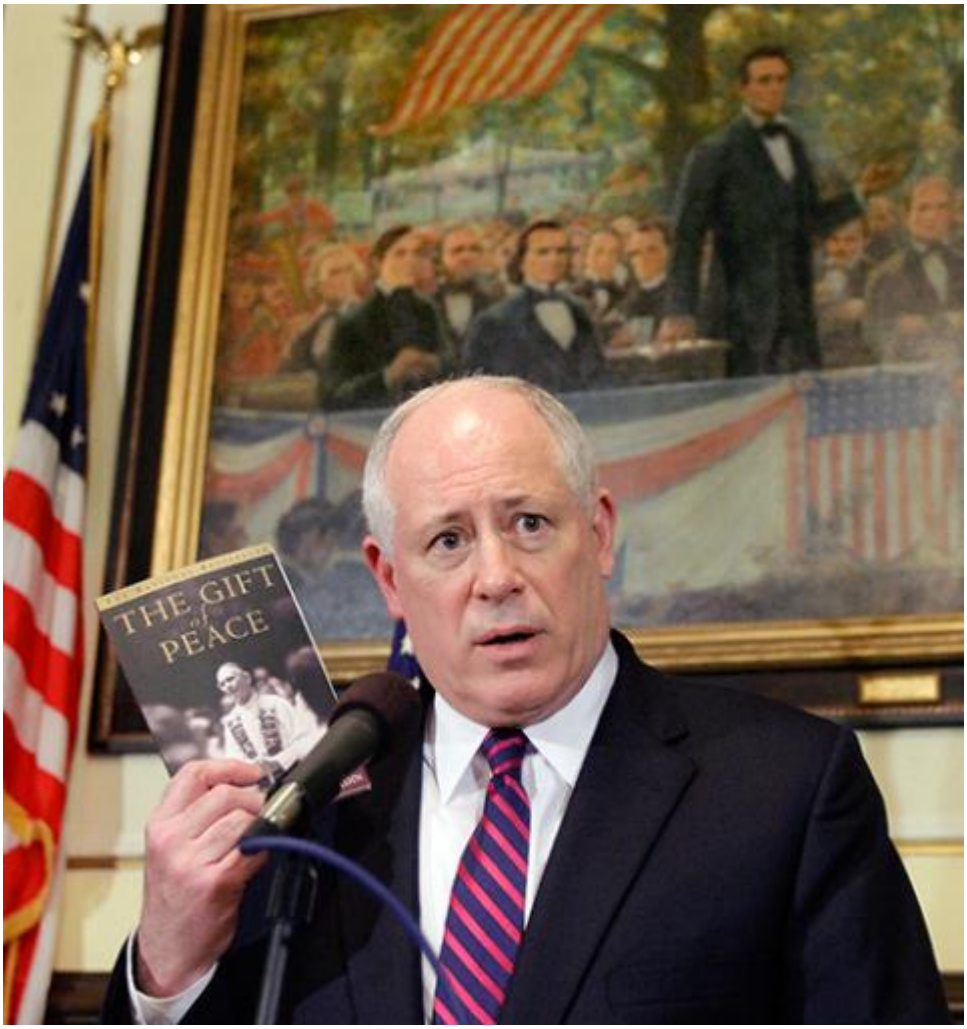
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Before he became Pope Leo XIV, Robert Francis Prevost had already made his views on one key moral issue unmistakably clear: the death penalty.

Newly uncovered documents show that in 2011, as Illinois was preparing to abolish the death penalty, the Chicago-born future pontiff took the time to personally thank then-Gov. Pat Quinn for the move.

"Dear Governor Quinn, THANK YOU," Prevost began in a message submitted through the Illinois governor's website, "for your courageous decision in signing into law the elimination of the death penalty. I know it was a difficult decision, but I applaud your vision and your understanding of the very complex matter. You have my full support! Sincerely, Robert F. Prevost."



Holding a book by the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago, Illinois Gov. Pat Quinn speaks with reporters in his office after signing legislation abolishing the state's death penalty, at the Illinois State Capitol in Springfield, March 9, 2011. (AP/Seth Perlman)

According to the Chicago Sun Times, the message was sent on the day Quinn signed the law — March 9, 2011.

Prevost's opposition to capital punishment surfaced again in 2015, when he tweeted: "It's time to end the death penalty."

The tweet, posted on March 5, 2015, and later preserved in screenshots after his account was deactivated, coincided with a widely read editorial calling for an end to the death penalty in the United States.

In the editorial, the editors of four Catholic American news outlets — National Catholic Reporter, America, National Catholic Register, and Our Sunday Visitor — urged the readers and all American Catholics "to stand with us and say, 'Capital punishment must end.' "

NCR spoke about it with Krisanne Vaillancourt Murphy, the executive director of Catholic Mobilizing Network (CMN), the leading Catholic organization in the U.S. advocating for the abolition of the death penalty. This interview was edited for brevity and concision.

***NCR*: How did you react first after you read that story in the Chicago Sun Times about the then-superior general of the Augustinians, Robert Francis Prevost, Augustinian friar, thanking the then-governor Quinn of Illinois about the abolition of the death penalty? Were you already aware of that?**



Pope Francis addresses participants at an encounter marking the 25th anniversary of the Catechism of the Catholic Church at the Vatican Oct. 11, 2017. The death penalty is "contrary to the Gospel," he said in his speech. (CNS/Paul Haring)

Vaillancourt Murphy: When it came out, it was news to me. I hadn't heard it before the story was published, but I was absolutely delighted. Pope Francis was such a champion of ending the death penalty, and for a moment, I could not imagine that we would have another champion quite like Pope Francis.

So when I see these affirmations about Pope Leo and his commitment to ending the death penalty, they are consolations about the passing of Pope Francis, but it's also just an affirmation, a reminder that God's got this covered. God's on our side about ending the death penalty. I'm happy and I'm energized by it.

Can you already share with us some of your first impressions of the first weeks of Pope Leo XIV's papacy regarding the issue that you care the most, which is the death penalty? Have you already done some research about his position before?

My sense of Pope Leo in this early chapter in his papacy is that he is a man of continuity of much of what we have seen from Pope Francis and the pope before him. He is a man of the church. He is pro-life in all ways. He's about human flourishing. And you can see that in the way that he immediately started taking meetings and started interacting with the public, and just wanted to engage the public witness of the church.

He doesn't just have to speak about the death penalty for me to feel affirmed or for me to be encouraged in the work, because I see that he's fighting for human dignity and human life in every corner of the globe. I'm delighted by what I see. He doesn't need to be making it his No. 1 issue.

There's so many priorities right now, so much woundedness, so much suffering in the globe. But my gut instincts tell me that he's wanting to accompany this abolition movement.

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As of today, what is the situation with the death penalty in the U.S. and political activism calling for its abolition?

You're getting me on a day when we have an execution tonight in the state of Florida. It's a grim day. We have an execution tomorrow in the state of Mississippi. These are dark days. This will be the sixth for this month alone. And right now we're tracking here at the middle of the year — almost consistent with last year, where we were for the whole year in executions — there have been an uptick in executions, and I think it has to do with the fact that there was kind of a backlog in cases with COVID.

Then there were just some questions about some scheduling issues that backlog, and also the rhetoric. That's disturbing and discouraging.

The long-term trajectory of ending the death penalty is on our side. And so what we know is that we're keeping executions at historic lows no matter what.



Krisanne Vaillancourt Murphy, executive director of Catholic Mobilizing Network, speaks at a news conference presenting Pope Francis' World Peace Day message at the Vatican Dec. 12, 2024. (CNS/Carol Glatz)

Do you think that's a positive sign to look at?

Half the states have no death penalty anymore, and the states that have it are some of the ones that we always predicted would be difficult. So long term, this fight is on our side. Short term, we are having some fierce battles right now.

What can everyday Catholics do to advance the abolition of the death penalty, or at least to have it in the public arena as a topic?

There's a lot of noise right now. There's so many fires, so much woundedness, so much suffering. There's war, there's hunger. We've got troubles, and so it's hard for any particular issue just to rise to the surface when there's just so much happening at once.

When people keep raising their voice that this is a life issue, that everyone deserves to be treated with dignity, then we have this Gospel story to tell. We're living in this year of hope, the Jubilee Year. Death doesn't have the last word, we are a people of life and we should be witnessing our public officials writing personal letters to governors or boards of pardon about our opposition to executions, or even just letters to local papers.

We have work to do. We will keep doing this work until it ends.

Related: Q&A with Sr. Helen Prejean, on Pope Francis' fight against the death penalty