Opinion
Guest Voices
This undated photograph shows the execution chamber where lethal injections were carried c

This undated photograph shows the execution chamber where lethal injections were carried out at San Quentin State Prison in California. In 2019, California Gov. Gavin Newsom suspended the state's death penalty. (CNS /Courtesy of California Department of Corrections)



by Krisanne Vaillancourt Murphy

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For centuries, Catholics have prayed the Stations of the Cross throughout Lent.

This solemn Christian season and particular prayer practice prepare our hearts and mind to journey with Christ through the desert and from his death to his Resurrection.

But as we venerate the cross and walk the Via Crucis, do we pause to notice that the death we commemorate is a state-sanctioned death, not unlike the executions that are still carried out across the United States?

Reflecting on Christ's own execution reminds us that this kind of violence and suffering did not end at Calvary but continues in the system of capital punishment today. Venerating the cross invites us to confront the violence we find in our time.

And we are compelled to act.

In this Lenten spirit, I urge California Gov. Gavin Newsom to commute the sentences of the more than 500 men and women sentenced to death in California, changing their sentences to life in prison without the possibility of parole. Doing so would complete Newsom's important efforts to dismantle the system of capital punishment in the state. Most importantly, such a courageous act would definitively save the lives of hundreds of individuals.

California Gov. Gavin Newsom speaks during a news conference July 16, 2025. (OSV News/Re

California Gov. Gavin Newsom speaks during a news conference July 16, 2025. (OSV News/Reuters/Daniel Cole)

Every step of Christ's Passion invites us, here and now, to reckon with the inequities and injustices built into our modern system of capital punishment. In California, which has held the largest death row in the country for decades, many of the men and women sentenced to die do not even have lawyers assigned to advocate for them. An inordinate number of those people on death row have intellectual disabilities, serious mental illness, or find themselves victims of a racially biased system.

This immoral system also ensnares the innocent. As of February, 202 people — including eight in California — have been exonerated from America's death rows. The death penalty is a fatally flawed system. And we believe that no matter the harm one has caused or suffered, every person deserves to be treated with human dignity.

Though needles and gurneys replace the nails and thorns of Jesus' time, capital punishment today is no less cruel or barbaric than what we witness on Calvary.

It is true that Newsom holds some public policy positions that are at odds with church teaching. However, on the issue of the death penalty, his stance falls consistently in line with clear Catholic teaching. In fact, in 2018 Pope Francis revised the Catechism of the Catholic Church, asserting "the death penalty is inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person."

I recall vividly when Newsom, early in his tenure seven years ago, suspended the death penalty in California. On March 13, 2019, he signed an executive order which

placed a welcome moratorium on state executions, and I remember seeing pictures in the newspaper of prison officials physically removing the death chamber. In 2022, Newsom helped to establish a process for death row inmates to receive relief from convictions or death sentences obtained "on the basis of race, ethnicity, or national origin." And in 2023, Newsom dismantled the physical death row at San Quentin and began the process of reintegrating these individuals into general prison populations throughout the state. Today, the infamous prison which housed the largest death row in the country is a facility dedicated to restoration, healing and rehabilitation.

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Newsom's efforts to turn away from the death penalty have been praised and supported by the Catholic Church — including people in the pews; to national groups like my own organization, Catholic Mobilizing Network; to the Catholic bishops of California; and all the way up to the Vatican.

Newsom's actions on capital punishment have demonstrated how justice can be rooted in mercy and restoration instead of death and retribution. This is the restoration realized on Easter Sunday, triumphing over the vengeance on display on Good Friday.

Newsom has made strides in advancing this kind of restoration regarding the death penalty in the state of California. But so long as these more than 500 death sentences exist, lives remain at risk and in the hands of a future administration.

Some may think California will never return to executions. We once thought that was true of the federal government, but we were proved wrong. While the California death chamber was dismantled, San Quentin continues to be legally designated as the site for executions. Its execution equipment may be considered a vestige of the past, but, in fact, it sits in the basement, waiting for the day it may be used. As long as people are sentenced to death in California, they remain at risk of execution because of changing political winds.

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In this Lenten season I wonder: Will Newsom tolerate this injustice as Pontius Pilate did and wash his hands of the issue, doing nothing more than what is required of him? Or will he take another courageous step and boldly act with executive authority to save the lives of hundreds of people?

A choice lies before him. He can remain in the death of Good Friday, or he can continue the good work he's already done, and take steps toward the restoration of Easter Sunday. On this Lenten journey, I pray that Newsom chooses the latter.

Jesus himself teaches us to embrace compassion, forgiveness, and love over vengeance. On the road to Calvary, Jesus shows us what it looks like to "love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). The final words he leaves us with are, "Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do."

When we walk in Jesus' footsteps in the Way of the Cross this Lent, we have the chance to learn from his example and do our part to contribute to the end of state-sanctioned death in our time.

Newsom has an opportunity to lead with mercy. I encourage him to act soon.