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Protesters opposed to the death penalty are pictured in a file photo demonstrating outside a

Protesters opposed to the death penalty are pictured in a file photo demonstrating outside a Georgia state prison for men in Jackson. (OSV News/Reuters/Tami Chappell)



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Vatican City — April 24, 2026
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The Justice Department announced April 24 it will adopt firing squads and reauthorize a single-drug lethal injection protocol on the same day that Pope Leo XIV publicly voiced support for efforts to abolish the death penalty in the United States.

The policy shift, part of a broader push by the Trump administration to expand capital punishment, marks the first time firing squads will be permitted for federal executions and restores the use of pentobarbital in lethal injections after the drug was withdrawn from federal protocol under the Biden administration over concerns about causing pain and suffering.

In an unrelated message released just hours after the administration's death penalty moves, the pope reiterated the Catholic Church's teaching that the death penalty is "inadmissible."

"We affirm that the dignity of the person is not lost even after very serious crimes are committed," Leo said in a video message to participants at an event at DePaul University marking the 15th anniversary of Illinois' abolition of the death penalty.

During a news conference aboard the plane flying back to Rome after leaving Equatorial Guin

During a news conference aboard the plane flying back to Rome after leaving Equatorial Guinea, April 23, 2026, Pope Leo XIV said he condemned capital punishment. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

The first U.S.-born pontiff said that he joined attendees at the Chicago-based Catholic university event "in celebrating the decision made by the Governor of Illinois in 2011, and I likewise offer my support to those who advocate for the abolition of the death penalty in the United States of America and around the world."

The pope's April 24 message shows "the closeness of the Holy Father Pope Leo to the Church’s indefatigable work across the nation to end this death-dealing practice," said Krisanne Vaillancourt Murphy, executive director of Catholic Mobilizing Network, which works to end the death penalty. "Pope Leo makes it crystal clear that the death penalty is a priority for the universal Church.”

Leo expressed his support for Pope Francis' 2018 decision to change authoritative church teaching to say that the death penalty is "inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person."

That historic move marked the first change to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the official compendium of Catholic teaching, since it was revised in 1997.

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"We affirm that the dignity of the person is not lost even after very serious crimes are committed," Leo said in the message. "Furthermore, effective systems of detention can be and have been developed that protect citizens while at the same

time do not completely deprive those who are guilty of the possibility of redemption."

"This is why Pope Francis and my recent predecessors repeatedly insisted that the common good can be safeguarded and the requirements of justice can be met without recourse to capital punishment," he continued.

Thirteen people were executed during the first Trump administration, more than under any other modern president, and each using pentobarbital. Under the Biden administration the sentences of 37 prisoners on federal death row were commuted in a move widely praised by Catholics, including senior members of the U.S. church hierarchy.

On his return flight to Rome following a 11-day tour of North and Central Africa on April 23, Leo directly criticized capital punishment when asked about executions carried out by the Iranian regime.

"I condemn all actions that are unjust. I condemn the taking of people's lives. I condemn capital punishment. I believe that human life is to be respected and that all people — from conception to natural death — their lives should be respected and protected," he said to reporters. "So when a regime, when a country, takes decisions which take away the lives of other people unjustly, then obviously that is something that should be condemned."

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