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Soldiers hold a candlelight vigil at Fort Hood, Texas, Friday, Nov. 6, 2009, after a mass shooting event that killed 13 people at Fort Hood. (AP/LM Otero)

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October 12, 2026

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Archbishop Paul Coakley, head of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, is joining evangelical faith leaders and others in condemning plans by the Pentagon to livestream the execution of the man who shot and killed 13 people at Fort Hood in 2009, with the Catholic prelate calling the military's proposal a "barbaric promotion of a culture of death."

The outcry Friday (Oct. 9) follows the announcement that the Pentagon will livestream the execution of Nidal Malik Hasan, an Army officer who also wounded 32 people during the 2009 shooting. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth had previously stated that the execution, which will be conducted by a firing squad, will be "public."

"We'll make sure that people are able to watch it," Hegseth [said](#) Thursday.

Coakley railed against the news in a statement Friday morning.

"Our God is the God of life," Coakley's statement read. "In no way can Hasan's actions be condoned, but this decision is a barbaric promotion of a culture of death and must be reconsidered. The word of God exhorts us: 'Do not repay anyone evil for evil' (Romans 12:17). The public execution even of one who has done grave harm will only further undermine the moral fabric of our nation and be a blight on the conscience of its people."

Coakley added: "I pray for the intercession of Our Lady of Good Counsel that we as a nation may always choose life even in the most trying times and circumstances."

If the Pentagon goes through with plans to livestream the killing of Hasan, the U.S. will join Iran and Saudi Arabia as one of [very few countries](#) that still conduct public executions. The last government-sanctioned execution in the U.S. took place in 1936 in Kentucky, when a Black man was [hanged in front of a crowd of 20,000 people](#). The practice was banned in the state less than two years later.

[According to The New York Times](#), Hasan is also slated to be the first soldier put to death by firing squad since World War II and the first killed by the military justice system since 1961.

A White House spokesperson directed questions about the execution to the Department of Defense. A DOD official declined to respond directly to the USCCB's statement, only confirming the execution will be livestreamed and that details are forthcoming.

Krisanne Vaillancourt Murphy, executive director of the Catholic Mobilizing Network — a group that advocates against the death penalty — also spoke out against the public execution plans.

"We undermine our own humanity when we treat another person's death as something to watch, celebrate or use for entertainment," Murphy said in a statement.

While Catholics have long been generally opposed to the death penalty, Pope Francis [changed the Catechism of the Catholic Church](#) in 2018 to clarify that the church views the death penalty as "inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person," adding that Catholics will work "with determination for its abolition worldwide."

Similarly, Pope Leo XIV [celebrated efforts to](#) abolish the death penalty in parts of the U.S. before becoming pope, and he [told reporters](#) last year that "someone who says I'm against abortion but is in favor of the death penalty is not really pro-life."

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Other faith leaders have also been outspoken critics of the death penalty, such as Shane Claiborne, one of the founders of the group Red Letter Christians. In an interview with Religion News Service, Claiborne compared the public execution plans to "lynchings and hangings and all the other ways that we've made a spectacle of death in our own history."

He also lamented that the plans are being implemented by figures such as Hegseth, who has spoken often of his Christian faith and attends a church led by Pastor Doug Wilson, a self-described Christian nationalist.

"I don't think there's any way that you can follow Christ — the Prince of Peace, the one who blessed the merciful and interrupted an execution by saying 'let the one who is without sin cast the first stone' — and then champion executions," said

Claiborne, an evangelical Christian.

Rabbi Jonah Dov Pesner, senior vice president of the Union for Reform Judaism and head of the denomination's Religious Action Center, said in a statement that he prays for "comfort for the loved ones of all 13 service members horrifically murdered at Fort Hood in 2009" but condemned the decision to hold a public execution.

"Jewish tradition, led by sages such as Rabbis Tarfon and Akiba, has found the death penalty repugnant and the Reform Jewish Movement has called it a 'stain on society,'" Pesner's statement read. "The Defense Department's reprehensible decision to livestream his execution only compounds this tragedy."

Walter Kim, president of the National Association of Evangelicals, told RNS that while he affirms the "need for justice" regarding Hasan's crime, "at the same time, a live-streamed execution by firing squad risks turning one of the state's most solemn responsibilities into a public spectacle, promoting a culture of death, rather than a culture that upholds the dignity of every human being."

The Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal church, the Most Rev. Sean Rowe, voiced similar disapproval.

"The Episcopal Church has long formally opposed the death penalty, and more recently we have called for an immediate moratorium on its use," Rowe said in a statement. "The idea of live-streaming a firing squad execution is reprehensible in the extreme and will cause moral injury to everyone involved. We need to ask ourselves who we have become as a nation when senior officials decide to make a spectacle of state-sponsored violence."

Vice President JD Vance, himself an adult convert to Catholicism, also appeared to suggest discomfort with the move.

"Whatever the controversy is about the method of the execution, I hope that people don't forget that this is a guy who brutally murdered a lot of innocent people," Vance said, [according to News Nation](#). "Now that said, I mean, look, if it's ultimately livestreamed, I'm not gonna be watching it."

Other faith groups, such as the Islamic Society of North America and the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the execution plans. But a range of religious

groups and denominations, have already [publicly condemned](#) capital punishment in general over the years, with denominations such as the United Methodist Church [openly advocating](#) for governments to end the practice.

Faith leaders have often emerged as leaders in the movement, such as the Rev. Sharon Risher, whose family members were killed by a white supremacist who opened fire at Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, in 2015. Risher has been [credited](#) with helping push former President Joe Biden to commute the sentences of 37 death row inmates at the end of his presidency.

Among the general public, support for capital punishment has fluctuated over time, with 61% of Americans overall favoring keeping the death penalty legal in all or most cases, [according to a 2025 the Public Religion Research Institute survey](#). The same poll found that, among religious groups, the death penalty is most popular among white evangelical Protestants (75%) and least popular among Black Protestants (53%).

Some Christian leaders expressed support for livestreaming Hasan's execution. In a statement to RNS, Wilson — who oversees the [controversial church Hegseth attends](#) — said he prefers "public executions to those conducted in the recesses of a prison somewhere in the middle of the night," adding, "executions in the Scriptures were public."

"With that said, one of the things that turns people away from the death penalty at all is when public executions turn into a circus, and a ghoulish atmosphere develops," he said. "So if the Pentagon takes steps to discourage that kind of thing, then I think this is a welcome development."

Pastor Robert Jeffress, a longtime supporter of President Donald Trump who leads First Baptist Church in Dallas, told RNS he supports Hegseth's decision.

"Capital punishment is commanded by God in Genesis 9:6 to remind people of the sanctity of human life," Jeffress, a Southern Baptist, said in an email. "Life is so valuable, God said, that whoever takes a life should pay with his own life. The more people that can see that truth illustrated through a public execution, the better."

But Claiborne argued that Wilson, Jeffress and others who share their view "misunderstand scripture." He said murder must have consequences but noted that famous Christ leaders such as the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. opposed the death

penalty, and he pointed to examples from the Bible. He noted that when Cain killed his brother Abel, an incident framed in Christian scripture as the first murder in human history, "God didn't kill Cain."

"We miss the whole point of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection if we end up defending death rather than championing life," he said.