Opinion
Editorial



California Democratic gubernatorial candidate Xavier Becerra, right, stands on stage with Gov. Gavin Newsom during a campaign event on Sunday, Nov. 1, 2026, in the Hollywood section of Los Angeles. Becerra will succeed Newsom as governor. (AP/Jill Connelly)

by NCR Editorial Staff

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November 6, 2026
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The Nov. 3 election opened a door to a more decent America. Those elected must now decide how to use the power voters have placed in their hands. The promise of that election will be measured by how they govern.

Outgoing California Gov. Gavin Newsom has offered an example. His move to commute the death sentences of 548 people affirms a conviction central to Catholic teaching: Human dignity endures even amid terrible wrongdoing. Hundreds of those commutations still require approval from the California Supreme Court. But the moral direction is clear. Government can protect the public, hold people accountable for grave crimes and refuse to take another human life.

The Democrats elected to succeed Republican governors in Texas, Ohio, Nevada, Georgia and Iowa should take notice. Their victories create opportunities to respect life, restrain cruelty and attend to people whose suffering seldom reaches a campaign platform.

We should claim no more for an election than it can bear. Voters act from many motives. A Democratic victory confers no certificate of virtue; Republican affiliation does not establish its absence. Decency must be demonstrated through the exercise of power.

Capital punishment offers an immediate test.

Recent published counts identify more than 350 people on death row in Texas, Ohio, Nevada and Georgia. Iowa has abolished the death penalty. Add the 548 people covered by Newsom's announcement, and the potential reach of comparable action approaches 906 lives. These counts will change. The responsibility they place before public officials remains.

The legal authority varies by state. Ohio's incoming governor, Amy Acton, can grant commutations after receiving a nonbinding recommendation. Texas Gov.-elect Gina Hinojosa needs a favorable recommendation from the state's pardons and paroles board. Nevada Gov.-elect Aaron Ford will share clemency authority with other members of the state's pardons board.

In Georgia, that authority belongs exclusively to the pardons and paroles board. Gov.-elect Keisha Lance Bottoms cannot commute death sentences herself. Moral leadership requires knowing the law and identifying who has the power to act.

Governors can state their convictions, support abolition legislation and urge those responsible for clemency to give every case careful consideration. They can help build public will for change. Limited authority does not relieve them of responsibility.

For Catholics, the foundation is clear. The catechism declares the death penalty inadmissible and commits the church to its abolition. Human dignity is inherent. Neither a terrible crime nor a popular demand for retribution can erase it. The Gospel reaches into the prison cell, including the cell of someone whose actions we find abhorrent.

That commitment also requires sustained care for victims' families. They deserve assistance, counseling, respect and honest answers. Their grief belongs to them. It must never be conscripted into a political argument. Government's obligation to these families continues long after the cameras leave.

The consequences can extend well beyond death row. A willingness to recognize the humanity of prisoners can inform decisions about immigrants, people living in poverty, those without health care, and even political opponents. Through such decisions, leaders establish what the public can expect of government and whose lives it will protect.

Catholic leaders should press this work across party lines, praising humane decisions and challenging cruelty. Respect for life must shape budgets, laws, and institutions. Nov. 3 opened a door. Newsom has shown one way through it. The newly elected governors now have an opportunity to raise the nation's moral standards through the patient work of governing.

A victory for decency becomes real when people can live because of it.

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