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U.S. Bishops react to revival of federal death penalty

The Catholic Bishops of the United States express concern over the U.S. Justice Department's announcement scheduling the executions of five people on death row.

By Vatican News

The last time the U.S. federal government executed someone was 16 years ago. Over the past two decades, an informal moratorium on the death penalty at the national level in the United States has seen the annual number of death sentences decrease by 85%. 

Justice Department announcement

On Friday, U.S. Attorney General William Barr, announced that five death-row inmates would be executed by lethal injection within the next six months. "We owe it to the victims and their families to carry forward the sentence imposed by our justice system", he said.

Catholic Bishops' reaction

The Chairman of the USCCB Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development is Bishop Frank Dewane of Florida. In a statement reacting to Mr Barr's decision, he said the Catholic Bishops of the United States are "deeply concerned" by the move and urge the Trump Administration to reconsider.

Pope Francis and the death penalty

"In 2015 Pope Francis, echoing the views of his predecessors, called for 'the global abolition of the death penalty'", reads the statement. At that time, the Pope added that a "just and necessary punishment must never exclude the dimension of hope and the goal of rehabilitation".

In August last year, Pope Francis made a formal change to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, declaring the death penalty to be "inadmissible" and describing it as "an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person".

U.S. Catholic Bishops and the death penalty

In 2005, the United States Catholic Bishops Conference issued a statement echoing the position of the popes and the catechism, and entitled "A Culture of Life and the Penalty of Death". "In light of these long held and strongly maintained positions", says Bishop Dewane, "I am deeply concerned by the announcement of the United States Justice Department that it will once again turn, after many years, to the death penalty as a form of punishment, and urge that these federal officials be moved by God's love, which is stronger than death, and abandon the announced plans for executions".

According to Amnesty International, 170 countries have already abolished the death penalty in law or in practice, while Pope Francis continues to call for the Church to work "with determination for its abolition worldwide".

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