

As Christians preparing for the holy days of Christ's suffering and death on the cross, we speak out with renewed urgency against the death penalty. Torture and execution is always a profound evil, made even more abhorrent when sanctioned by the government in the name of justice when other means of protecting society are available. All who reverence the sanctity of human life, created in the image of God, must never remain silent when firing squads, lethal injections, electric chairs and other instruments of death are viewed as morally acceptable.

We urge governors, prosecutors, judges and anyone entrusted with power to do all that they can to end a practice that diminishes our humanity and contributes to a culture of violence and retribution without restoration. We especially ask public officials who are Christian to join us in the solidarity of prayer this week as we meditate on the wounds of injustice that sicken our society. In many ways, capital punishment is the rotten fruit of a culture that is sown with the seeds of poverty, inequality, racism and indifference to life. We silence our hearts in prayer for those killed and families who mourn their loss. We can never know your pain and anger. Let us work together for healing, restorative justice and a system that punishes criminals without bringing more darkness and death into our world. As Pope Francis has reminded us, capital punishment is "cruel, inhumane and degrading" and "does not bring justice to the victims, but only foments revenge."

It remains a shameful reality that the United States is one of the few developed nations in the world that still executes its citizens. Last week, the governor of Utah signed a bill that will bring back firing squads. Missouri recently executed a prisoner with severe brain damage. In Georgia, hundreds of clergy and other faith leaders have asked the state to commute the death sentence of Kelly Gissendaner, a Christian and student of theology, to life without parole. Several botched executions in recent years have pulled back the veil on this inhumane and ineffective practice. We are heartened by polling that shows Americans are increasingly opposed to the death penalty. Now is a critical time. The U.S. Supreme Court recently announced it would take up an appeal by a Florida death-row inmate challenging the state's capital sentencing procedure, which permits inmates to be executed even when the jury is not unanimous. In April, The Supreme Court will hear a case that will decide the constitutionality of lethal injection protocols in Oklahoma.

In this sacred season of suffering, death and new life, we pray that our simple Christian witness is received with open hearts.

In faith,

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