

Pending executions face church objections

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WASHINGTON -- As Florida's Supreme Court lifted a stay of execution for Manuel Valle, clearing the path for him to be put to death Sept. 6, the state's Catholic bishops urged Gov. Rick Scott to stop it.

The unanimous court lifted the stay Aug. 23, upholding a lower court finding that a new drug to be used for execution meets constitutional standards. Florida, like other states, has had executions put on hold over the last couple of years while new drugs were sought to replace one that has become unavailable for executions.

In their letter to the governor, Florida's bishops urged Scott to stay Valle's execution on the grounds that: "Killing someone because they killed diminishes respect for life and promotes a culture of violence and vengeance."

The letter, which was dated Aug. 3 and released publicly Aug. 23 by the Florida Catholic Conference, conceded the state's right to impose the death penalty "when absolutely necessary, that is when it is otherwise impossible to defend society. However, given the ability of Florida to protect its residents by incarcerating inmates for life without possibility of parole, we pray you will exercise that option."

Valle, 61, was sentenced to death for killing Coral Gables police officer Louis Pena in 1978 following a traffic stop.

Meanwhile, in Oregon, opponents of the death penalty continued to press for a stay of execution for Gary Haugen, whose August execution was stayed by the state Supreme Court so Haugen could undergo a mental health evaluation.

"When we mistake vengeance for justice and kill those who have devalued human life, we become complicit with killers," said Mary Jo Tully, chancellor of the Archdiocese of Portland. "As Americans, I believe that we are better than that."

The Catholic Sentinel, newspaper of the Portland Archdiocese, reported that Haugen, 49, was to be executed by lethal injection Aug. 16, but the Oregon Supreme Court in early July ordered a better psychological evaluation.

Haugen, who murdered a fellow inmate in 2003 while serving a life sentence for the 1981 beating death of his ex-girlfriend's mother, has stopped seeking appeals of his execution.

Oregon Gov. John Kitzhaber has said he was looking closely at the issue, the Sentinel reported. Kitzhaber favors a repeal of the death penalty but did not stop executions in 1996 and 1997 during his earlier terms in office. Those two inmates also decided to end their appeals.

The Florida bishops in their letter to the governor reiterated many of the arguments against capital punishment made by Pope Benedict XVI and Pope John Paul II as well as other Catholic bishops.

"Willful murder is a heinous crime; it cries to God for justice," they said. "Yet, God did not require Cain's life

for having spilt Abel's blood. While God certainly punished history's first murderer, he nevertheless put a mark on him to protect Cain from those wishing to kill him to avenge Abel's murder.

"Like Cain, the condemned prisoner on death row -- for all the evil of his crimes -- remains a person. Human dignity -- that of the convicted as well as our own -- is best served by not resorting to this extreme and unnecessary punishment. Modern society has the means to protect itself without the death penalty."

They said that Pena's death caused great suffering and pain for his family and prayed for their consolation. But "an execution reopens the emotional wounds of victim's families and does not bring back or honor their loved one. True peace can only be achieved by forgiveness," the bishops said.

The letter was sent by the Florida Catholic Conference, the public policy arm of the state's bishops. It was signed by: Miami Archbishop Thomas G. Wenski and Bishops Robert N. Lynch of St. Petersburg; John G. Noonan of Orlando; Gerald M. Barbarito of Palm Beach; Frank J. Dewane of Venice and Felipe J. Estevez of St. Augustine.

The Florida court ruled it was constitutional to switch from sodium thiopental to pentobarbital as the first drug in the three-drug sequence used to execute condemned prisoners. Pentobarbital has become the preferred substitute for states to replace sodium thiopental, after its only U.S. manufacturer, Hospira, stopped production in 2010. A British supplier, Dream Pharma, was distributing the drug in the United States until Britain banned its export late in 2010.

Lundbeck, the Danish manufacturer of pentobarbital, opposes its use in executions but has declined to stop its distribution in the United States because it is commonly used to treat severe epilepsy. Lundbeck announced in July that it would restrict the drug's distribution in the United States to prevent its use by prisons to carry out executions.

[Contributing to this story was Ed Langlois in Portland.]

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