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Death penalty opponents praise Oregon governor's moratorium

Ed Langlois Catholic News Service | Nov. 28, 2011

PORTLAND, Ore. -- Catholic and other opponents of the death penalty praised Oregon Gov. John Kitzhaber for placing a moratorium on the use of the death penalty for the rest of his term.

"Those of us who respect the dignity of human life from conception to natural death applaud this decision," said Portland Archbishop John G. Vlazny.

"This is what we have been praying for and asking for," said Ron Steiner, a member of Queen of Peace Parish in Salem and an organizer for Oregonians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty.

Kitzhaber announced his decision Nov. 22, saying he regretted allowing two men to be executed during his first time in office in the 1990s. A Democrat, he was out of political life for eight years before being elected again in November 2010. His new term began in January and ends in January 2015.

Having received letters and petitions from Oregon Catholic leaders and other foes of capital punishment, the governor said he is morally opposed to the practice and supports life without parole as the most serious sanction for aggravated murder.

With the moratorium in place, Oregon joins 16 other states and the District of Columbia that do not have the death penalty. Of those 16, Illinois is the most recent one to abolish it, in 2011.

His decision halts for now the planned execution of double-murderer Gary Haugen, who was set to die by lethal injection Dec. 6.

Haugen, who had sought his own death, is one of 37 men on Oregon's death row. All now have at least a temporary reprieve. Kitzhaber, his voice trembling, sounded as if he wished he had established the ban 15 years ago, before the executions of Douglas Wright and Harry Moore in 1996 and 1997. Like Haugen, the two men refused to continue legal appeals.

"I do not believe those executions made us safer," Kitzhaber said during a news conference. "Certainly I don't believe they made us nobler as a society. And I simply cannot participate once again in something I believe to be morally wrong."

Kitzhaber, made it clear he was not commuting Haugen's sentence and has no compassion for killers. He called Oregon's death penalty system "broken" and an "expensive and unworkable system that fails to meet basic standards of justice."

In a statement parallel to a letter sent to him in November by 1,000 death penalty opponents, the governor said, "I do not believe for a moment that the voters intended to create a system in which those condemned to death could determine whether that sentence would be carried out."

Backers of the death penalty criticized Kitzhaber for thwarting the will of voters. Josh Marquis, Clatsop County

district attorney, called the action "arrogant and presumptuous."

Haugen was serving a life sentence for bludgeoning his former girlfriend's mother, Mary Archer, when he stabbed fellow inmate David Polin 84 times in 2003. It was for that second murder that he received a death sentence.

Kitzhaber's voice halted when he said he had spoken to victims' families and knows his action will delay closure for them.

Calling for a statewide conversation about the death penalty, Kitzhaber said he will support any ballot measure that comes forward to make it illegal.

Oregon's death penalty, part of the state constitution, can only be repealed by a vote of the people. Oregonians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty, a coalition that includes Catholic officials, will organize members to lobby legislators about referring a ballot measure for the next election.

"We can be confident that we are on the right side of this question, and that Oregonians will respond as we present them with more cost-effective, restorative and humane ways to respond to violent crime," says coalition organizer David McNeil.

The Catholic Church long taught that capital punishment was allowable as a regrettable last resort if safety could be ensured in no other way. But as Pope John Paul II taught in "Evangelium Vitae," a 1995 encyclical on the sanctity of life, modern methods of incarceration have made the death penalty unnecessary in almost all cases.

In a written statement, Steiner of Oregonians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty said the governor's action will help an ongoing effort to educate the public.

"It is our contention that when all the facts are known, it is difficult to support a death penalty," Steiner wrote.

Meanwhile, supporters of the death penalty planned to defend it.

"This will make passion rise on both sides," said Father Tim Mockaitis, associate director of the Archdiocese of Portland's Office for Life, Justice and Peace. Saying he was "pleased and surprised" at the Nov. 22 announcement, Father Mockaitis noted that Kitzhaber's statement was about morals, not legal issues.

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