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Florida bishops say use of death penalty 'sanctions revenge'

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Using capital punishment to show that killing is wrong "sanctions revenge," Florida's seven Catholic bishops said in a letter to Gov. Rick Scott.

Asking that Scott commute the death sentences of inmates Elmer Carroll, William Van Poyck and Marshall Gore to life in prison, the bishops said the violence of capital punishment would do little to relieve the pain of the survivors of the men's victims or be helpful to society.

Scott recently signed warrants for the executions of the men over a span of 26 days starting Wednesday. Observers said the executions would be the most in such a brief period of time in more than two decades.

"Governor, will our citizenry be any safer, will Floridians be any better protected, if we execute these men? Will not the safety of persons and the preservation of public order be as secure if instead you commute these sentences to lifelong confinement?" the bishops asked.

"Killing people to show that killing is wrong is a piercing contradiction and one that touches our very souls," the church leaders added. "Executions coarsen us. We daily condemn the glorification of violence, but what example is set when our state legitimizes killing? What results can we expect?"

Signing the May 22 letter were Archbishop Thomas Wenski of Miami and Bishops Gerald Barbarito of Palm Beach, Frank Dewane of Venice, Felipe Estevez of St. Augustine, Robert Lynch of St. Petersburg, John Noonan of Orlando and Gregory Parkes of Pensacola-Tallahassee.

The letter comes as Scott considers the Timely Justice Act passed by the Florida Legislature in April. The act would speed up the state's death penalty process by requiring the governor to sign a death warrant within 30 days after all appeals are concluded and the governor has reviewed clemency. It also would reduce a death-row inmate's ability to file additional motions once the appeals process ends.

Scott has until mid-June to sign or veto the bill.

Sponsors of the bill pointed to the fact that 40 percent of the state's 406 prisoners awaiting execution have been on death row for at least 20 years. Detractors have said the act would give the state less time to recognize that an innocent person has been convicted.

Meanwhile, in Colorado, Archbishop Samuel Aquila of Denver urged legislators to repeal the death penalty.

The archbishop's call May 22 came after Gov. John Hickenlooper granted a reprieve to death-row inmate Nathan Dunlap, who was scheduled to be executed in August for the 1993 murders of four people in an Aurora, Colo., restaurant.

In announcing the reprieve, Hickenlooper called for a statewide conversation on the death penalty. The

announcement came weeks after Colorado lawmakers defeated a bill to abolish capital punishment, saying the topic needs more public debate.

Aquila agreed with the governor that Coloradans must give thoughtful consideration to capital punishment.

"The governor is correct. Coloradans should work together to end the practice of punitive killing -- for the sake of justice and the sake of human dignity," Aquila said in a statement.

"My support for the death penalty's repeal is rooted in my respect for the dignity of all human life," he said. "Every human being has a fundamental right to life. It is wrong to take life needlessly, either through execution or abortion or criminal acts of violence.

"When will Americans open their eyes to recognize that violence only begets violence?" he asked.

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