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Florida bishops say life of death-row prisoner 'sacred,' must be spared

by Catholic News Service

Tallahassee, Fla. — Florida's Catholic bishops on Wednesday urged Gov. Rick Scott "to demonstrate mercy and commute" the death sentence of inmate William Frederick Happ and give him life in prison without the possibility of parole.

Happ, 51, is scheduled to be executed the evening of Oct. 15 at Florida State Prison near Starke.

He has been on Florida's death row for 24 years. Happ was convicted in 1989 in the kidnapping, rape and murder of 21-year-old Angela Crowley of Lauderdale Lakes. He received the death penalty as well as three consecutive life sentences.

In their statement, the bishops said the Catholic church "views all individuals, even those who have caused great harm, as possessing a human dignity that is sacred and instilled in us by God."

"A respect for all human life is recognized by those around the state who will gather prior to Mr. Happ's execution to pray for his victim, Angela Crowley, and all victims of violent crimes and their families, for persons on death row awaiting execution, and for the end of the use of the death penalty," they said.

The statement was released by the Florida Catholic Conference, based in Tallahassee. It is the public policy arm of the Catholic bishops.

Catholics and other members of the community were invited to "to gather in solidarity" and prayer at various services.

The statement included a schedule of prayers services taking place Oct. 13, 14 and 15 at various locations

in in the Miami archdiocese and the dioceses of St. Augustine, St. Petersburg, Orlando, Pensacola-Tallahassee, Palm Beach, and Venice. Parishes and various Respect Life offices were among the sponsors.

In the diocese of St. Petersburg, Spirit FM 90.5 WBVM, a Christian radio station in Tampa, scheduled time for prayer on the air.

"The vigils and prayer services held in each of Florida's dioceses prior to an execution demonstrate a growing sign of unity against state-sponsored killing," said Michael Sheedy, director of public policy for the Florida Catholic Conference.

"The bishops are hopeful that these activities will continue to grow, and a groundswell of those who oppose capital punishment will move our government leaders to rethink their position and take the steps necessary to end the use of the death penalty in Florida," he said.

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New reports said Happ told the Florida Supreme Court on Sept. 18 he did not want to fight his execution date and asked that no one file motions or appeals for a stay of execution on his behalf.

In 1989, he was extradited to Florida to stand trial for Crowley's murder after he spent three years in a California prison on a conviction of kidnapping and robbery. While in prison, authorities found evidence that tied him to the scene of Crowley's murder in Florida, so he was extradited to that state. His first trial ended in a mistrial. His conviction came at his second trial.

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