

[Opinion](#)

[Guest Voices](#)



A file photo shows demonstrators holding signs protesting capital punishment in front of the U.S. Supreme Court building in Washington. (OSV News/Reuters/Kevin Lamarque)



Thomas Reese

[View Author Profile](#)

Follow on Twitter at [@thomasreeseSJ](#)

Religion News Service

[View Author Profile](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

January 7, 2025

[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

In the final hours of 2024, North Carolina's outgoing governor, Roy Cooper, commuted 15 death sentences, reducing by 10% the fifth-largest death row in the country — 121 of the state's prisoners still await execution.

Days earlier, just before Christmas, outgoing President Joe Biden [commuted](#) the executions of 37 prisoners, responding to pleas from Pope Francis and other death penalty opponents. Three infamous murderers did not have their executions commuted: the bomber who killed three and injured a dozen more at the 2013 Boston Marathon; the gunman who killed 11 worshippers at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh in 2018; and the white supremacist who killed nine parishioners in 2015 at a Black church in Charleston, South Carolina.

Since some people hope to become famous through shocking crimes, I purposefully do not name the murderers. Those whose death sentences were commuted in North Carolina and on federal death row will spend the rest of their lives in prison with no possibility of parole.

Supporters of the commutations included religious and civil rights leaders, family members and friends of those killed, as well as some police and those who have worked on death row.

Other family members and law enforcement officials objected.

Advertisement

The Catholic view of capital punishment has evolved over time. For centuries, the hierarchy and theologians defended it. There were numerous executions in the territory governed by popes prior to the unification of Italy. The Vatican City State did not abolish the death penalty until 1969.

The first edition of the Catechism of the Catholic Church in 1992 discouraged the use of the death penalty but permitted it. Pope John Paul II, however, turned against it, calling it "both cruel and unnecessary." In 1997, the second edition of the Catechism said legitimate cases for executions "are very rare, if not practically non-existent." In 2011, [Pope Benedict XVI](#) called on world leaders "to make every effort to eliminate the death penalty."

Pope Francis in 2013 affirmed his opposition to the death penalty in a [speech to the International Commission against the Death Penalty](#). He told the commission that "The death penalty is always inadmissible because it offends the inviolability and dignity of the person."

Popes are always concerned about contradicting earlier church teaching, so John Paul and Benedict argued that they were not changing church teaching but that the circumstances had changed so executions are no longer necessary.

Francis seemed to have thrown caution to the wind by saying, "The death penalty is always inadmissible." However, in a 2017 [speech](#) to the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization, the word "always" disappeared, as it did in the 2018 version of [The Catechism of the Catholic Church](#), which reads: "The Church teaches, in the light of the Gospel, that 'the death penalty is inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person.' "

Even this language was found objectionable by some as contradicting traditional church teaching.



Indianapolis Archbishop Charles Thompson offers an opening prayer at a rally Nov. 17, 2024, on the grounds of the Indiana Statehouse in Indianapolis to call on Indiana Gov. Eric Holcomb to halt the execution of Joseph Corcoran scheduled for Dec. 18. The state put 49-year-old Corcoran to death by lethal injection early Dec. 18, carrying out its first execution in 15 years. (OSV News/The Criterion/Sean Gallagher)

My own views of the death penalty are mixed.

As a Catholic, I support the pope. I also agree with all the pragmatic arguments against capital punishment: We have executed people who were wrongly convicted; if we permanently imprison someone, we do not need to kill them to protect society.

Both faith and reason support abolishing capital punishment.

On the other hand, I am also a child of American culture in which the killing of criminals is celebrated. I grew up on "Dirty Harry" and "Death Wish." Vengeance films are still popular today; the only difference is women now get to take vengeance as well.

I always laugh when conservatives accuse Hollywood of being liberal and woke. Over the years, films about vengeance and taking the law into your own hands have made billions for Hollywood because we Americans love them. Hollywood worships guns.

I was not surprised when the CEO of a health insurance company was murdered in cold blood. Everyone in America considers themselves a victim and wants vengeance. Hollywood has shown us how to do it; the gun lobby has made sure that we have the weapons to do it.

I have my own list of people who should be executed by the state but not by vigilantes: bankers who caused the Great Recession; pharmaceutical executives who enriched themselves on the opioid crisis; lawyers and accountants who help organized crime hide and launder ill-gotten gains; oil executives who knew about global warming but prioritized their own profits; politicians who took us to war on the flimsiest of excuses, waged war badly and refused to pull us out when we were losing.

We have executed people who were wrongly convicted; if we permanently imprison someone, we do not need to kill them to protect society.

[Tweet this](#)

All of these were responsible for widespread suffering or even mass killings but were never punished. All were college-educated whose crimes were calculated, not crimes of passion or desperation like those committed by most of the people who are prosecuted.

But my faith tells me that we should not take vengeance. "Vengeance is mine, says the Lord." While the Old Testament clearly allows executions, it is hard to believe that Jesus would execute anyone. Instead, he taught us, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Jesus' message was one of compassion and mercy, even as he hung on the cross.

As a result, although my emotions want vengeance, faith and reason tell me that it is wrong.

Biden did the right thing in commuting the death sentences of 37 federal prisoners. He should have done it for the remaining three, but I understand why he did not. But there are still over 2,000 prisoners on death row in state prisons. These sentences need to be commuted to life in prison.

We have to stop thirsting for blood as individuals and as a society. We have to stop cheering for the avengers. Responding to violence with violence simply perpetuates the cycle.