

Why Commuting the Death Sentence Was the Right Decision

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President Joe Biden has commuted the sentences of 37 individuals on federal death row; a move that almost fulfills a longstanding request of the American bishops.

The White House announced on Dec. 23 that those 37 individuals – who were all convicted of murder – will have their sentences reclassified from execution to life without the possibility of parole. The decision leaves just three individuals on federal death row, who all carried out mass killings.

“President Biden has dedicated his career to reducing violent crime and ensuring a fair and effective justice system,” the White House said in a statement. “He believes that America must stop the use of the death penalty at the federal level, except in case of terrorism and hate-motivated mass murder – which is why today’s actions apply to all but those cases.”

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops had recently issued an action alert asking the faithful to contact Biden and urge him to commute all federal death sentences to terms of imprisonment for all of the 40 individuals on federal death row.

Reacting to Biden’s decision, Archbishop Timothy Broglio of the Archdiocese for the Military Services, USA, said the 37 commutations “are a significant step in advancing the cause of human dignity and respect for human life from womb to tomb in our nation.”

“My brother bishops and I unite in expressing our gratitude that President Biden has commuted the federal death sentences of 37 men,” Broglio, the USCCB president said in a statement. ... “As we continue to proclaim the Gospel in a broken world, this act of mercy is a step closer to building a culture of life.”

“We encourage all lawmakers to continue to work towards total abolition of the death penalty, and to redirect the energy and resources that currently go towards executions to provide compassionate and professional assistance to the families of victims,” he continued.

On the campaign trail in 2020, Biden spoke of his goal to end the federal death penalty. Legislation to that effect never came to fruition. However, Biden directed the Justice Department to issue a moratorium on federal executions, which has been in effect for his entire presidency.

Biden’s decision to commute the sentences of the 37 individuals prevents the President-elect Donald Trump from carrying out the execution sentences. Trump has vowed to restart federal executions in his second term. In his first, 13 prisoners on federal death row were put to death.

The three men who still face federal execution are Robert D. Bowers, Dylann Roof, and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev.

Bowers, 52, gunned down 11 worshippers at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh in 2018. Roof, 30, is a white supremacist who shot and killed nine Black Parishioners at a church in Charleston, South Carolina in 2015. And Tsarnaev, 31, is one of the two brothers who carried out the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013 that killed three and severely injured many others.

Krisanne Vaillancourt Murphy, the executive director of the Catholic Mobilizing Network that advocates for the abolition of the death penalty, said in a statement that Biden's "historic" decision advances the cause of human dignity and underscores the sacredness of all human life.

"This unparalleled action should mark a turning point in our nation's justice system and serve as a model for leaders at the state level to follow suit," Vaillancourt Murphy said, adding that Biden "chose mercy" ahead of Jubilee 2025 where Pope Francis has called for forgiveness worldwide.

On December 8, Pope Francis during his Angelus Address asked people to pray for the prisoners on death row in the United States, "that their sentence be commute [or] changed."

Many observers saw this was aimed at Biden as he approached the end of his term.

Vaillancourt Murphy also called for the sentences of the three individuals to be commuted.

The same problems that led us to call on the president to commute death sentences are present in the cases of those who remain on death row in the United States, including intellectual disability, mental incompetency, racial bias, prosecutorial misconduct, unfair sentencing disparities, innocence and more," she said. "As we move forward, CMN will not waver from our commitment to end the death penalty."