



International Commission
against the Death Penalty

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Navanethem (Navi) Pillay

Vice Presidents

Ruth Dreifuss

Ibrahim Najjar

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(1939-2014)

Asma Jilani Jahangir

(1952-2018)

Bill Richardson

(1947-2023)

Robert Badinter

(1928-2024)

Federico Mayor Zaragoza

(1934-2024)

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North-South Prize
of the Council of Europe

SARIA PREMIO

René Cassin

Madrid, 25 April 2025

ICDP 07/2025

Statement by the International Commission against the Death Penalty: ICDP mourns the passing of His Holiness Pope Francis, a powerful moral voice against capital punishment

The International Commission against the Death Penalty (ICDP or Commission) expresses its deep sorrow at the passing of His Holiness Pope Francis on 21 April 2025. He was 88.

“We mourn the loss of His Holiness Pope Francis—one of the most courageous and consistent global voices against the death penalty. His unwavering commitment to the dignity of every human being transformed both doctrine and debate, within the Church and beyond. We were deeply honoured by his support for our work. His vision of a world without executions, rooted in mercy, human rights, and justice, will continue to guide our path. Our heartfelt condolences go out to all Catholics and all those who were inspired by his moral clarity and compassion,” said ICDP President Judge Navi Pillay.

His strong abolitionist voice was underlined when in October 2014, Pope Francis unequivocally declared that “all Christians and people of good will are thus called today to struggle not only for abolition of the death penalty... but also to improve prison conditions, out of respect for the human dignity of persons deprived of their liberty.” In this spirit, he spoke for the respect and protection of the poor and marginalised, including immigrants and refugees.

ICDP had the honour to meet Pope Francis twice at the Vatican. On 20 March 2015, then-ICDP President the late Federico Mayor Zaragoza met with His Holiness in a private audience. During the meeting, he presented a [letter addressed to ICDP](#), declaring that the death penalty is “inadmissible, no matter how serious the crime committed,” citing the possibility of judicial error and also raising broader concerns about structural violence and state responsibility.

“On 17 December 2018, I led a delegation of ICDP Commissioners for a private audience with Pope Francis. In a meeting which revealed his warmth, wisdom, generosity for humanity, he reiterated that his strong belief that the death penalty is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person. We congratulated the Pope for his [historic revision of the Catechism](#) of the Catholic Church which echoed his sentiment. The meeting was important as it took place on the day the UN General Assembly was voting for the resolution on a moratorium on the death penalty,” said President Pillay. ICDP notes that he further developed his position against the death penalty in his encyclical [Fratelli Tutti](#) and, most recently, he reaffirmed his abolitionist views in the April 2024 declaration [Dignitas Infinita](#), which stated that “the firm rejection of the death penalty shows to what extent it is possible to recognize the inalienable dignity of every human being.”

More recently, Pope Francis called for clemency of the people facing the death penalty in the United States in December 2024 reportedly twice. On 8 December, he publicly appealed for U.S. authorities to commute the sentences of people facing the death penalty during his weekly Sunday prayer in St. Peter's Square, urging the faithful to pray for them and for their sentences to be changed. He then reportedly raised the issue directly with President Joe Biden in a conversation on 20 December. Days later, on 23 December 2024, President Biden commuted the sentences of 37 of the 40 people facing the death penalty at the federal level—an enduring testament to Pope Francis's unwavering advocacy for mercy, compassion, and human rights.



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As the Commission honours the extraordinary legacy of Pope Francis, we celebrate his profound contribution to the global movement for the abolition of the death penalty. His unwavering call for mercy, his defence of the dignity of all persons—including those sentenced to death—and his ability to unite faith, human rights, and justice leave behind a moral legacy that will resonate for generations. As we carry forward the mission to end capital punishment worldwide, the vision and compassion of Pope Francis will remain a guiding light and a source of hope.

Background

The International Commission against the Death Penalty is currently composed of 25 Commissioners of high international standing following highly respected careers in public service and representing all regions of the world. The Commission acts with total independence under the leadership of President Judge Navi Pillay, the former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. The Commission promotes the abolition of capital punishment in law in States that observe a *de facto* moratorium on the use of the death penalty and promotes moratoriums on executions in States that retain capital punishment.

ICDP works with the United Nations and other international and regional organizations, governments and nongovernmental organizations to advocate for worldwide abolition of the death penalty. The work of ICDP is supported by a geographically diverse Support Group of 24 Member States who are committed to the abolition of the death penalty. Its Secretariat is based in Madrid and is responsible for the day-to-day work of the Commission.