

Texas Evangelicals Warn Gov. Rick Perry Not to 'Cross Moral Line'

Dozens of evangelical Christian leaders from Texas and across the country have petitioned Texas Gov. Rick Perry to commute the death sentence of a man they say is too severely mentally ill to understand why he is being put to death.

Scott Panetti is scheduled to be executed on Dec. 3. But his advocates say he thinks he faces the death sentence for preaching the gospel—not for the murders of his wife's parents in 1992.

"As Christians, we are called to protect the most vulnerable, and we count Mr. Panetti—a man who has suffered from severe mental illness for over 30 years—to be among them," the evangelical leaders wrote in a letter to the governor that was signed by more than 50 people. "If ever there was a clear case of an individual suffering from mental illness, this is it. Mr. Panetti is a paranoid schizophrenic, which was apparent at his trial, where he represented himself with his life on the line."

At his trial, Panetti wore a cowboy outfit trimmed with purple and insisted on representing himself, which the judge allowed. He tried to call more than 200 witnesses, including the late John F. Kennedy, the pope and Jesus Christ.

"The fact that his trial was carried out in such a fashion is a mockery of the criminal justice system," the pastors and other Christian leaders wrote.

Joining the evangelical leaders in their request are the American Bar Association, the American Psychiatric Association "and a whole bunch of legal experts and lawyers," according to

a report on . They are asking either that Perry grant a stay of execution so Panetti can be given a more thorough psychiatric evaluation or for the Texas Board of Pardons and Paroles to commute his sentence to life in prison.

“Mr. Panetti’s severe mental illness is well-documented and began long before his trial,” the Christian leaders wrote. “In the decade before the offense, he had been hospitalized 12 times due to psychotic behavior and also diagnosed with chronic schizophrenia. In 1986—six years before the crime—the Social Security Administration declared Mr. Panetti to be ‘disabled’ as a result of his mental illness and granted him monthly benefits.”

The letter adds, “The execution of Scott Panetti would be a cruel injustice that would serve no constructive purpose whatsoever. When we inflict the harshest punishment on the severely mentally ill, whose culpability is greatly diminished by their debilitating conditions, we fail to respect their innate dignity as human beings.”