News



Demonstrators in McAlester, Oklahoma, rejoice after Gov. Kevin Stitt granted clemency for Julius Jones Nov. 18, just hours before he was scheduled to be executed. (CNS/Reuters/Nick Oxford)



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Catholic opponents of the death penalty, including Oklahoma City's archbishop, praised the Nov. 18 announcement that the Oklahoma governor granted death-row inmate Julius Jones clemency — just hours before he was scheduled to be executed.

"It took tremendous courage in the face of intense pressure for Gov. [Kevin] Stitt to grant clemency in this case," said Archbishop Paul Coakley of Oklahoma City.

"I applaud his commitment to seeking justice while providing the condemned an opportunity for redemption," the archbishop said in a Nov. 18 statement.

Stitt reduced Jones' sentence to life in prison without parole, partially following a recommendation from the Oklahoma Pardon and Parole Board but veering from that recommendation, reached in a 3-1 vote Nov. 1, to reduce Jones' sentence to life in prison with the possibility of parole.

Jones was convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to die for the 1999 shooting death of a 45-year-old man, Paul Howell, during a carjacking. Jones was 19 at the time. His case gained some high-profile attention after it was featured in a 2018 ABC documentary "The Last Defense."

Jones' attorney, Amanda Bass, said the Oklahoma governor "took an important step today toward restoring public faith in the criminal justice system by ensuring that Oklahoma does not execute an innocent man."

"While we had hoped the governor would adopt the board's recommendation in full by commuting Julius' sentence to life with the possibility of parole in light of the overwhelming evidence of Julius' innocence, we are grateful that the governor has prevented an irreparable mistake," she said.

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Jones has claimed he was framed by the actual killer who was a former co-defendant and a key witness against him. The Innocence Project, a nonprofit legal group committed to exonerating individuals who claim they have been wrongly convicted, has said that Jones' murder conviction came "after a prosecution and trial marred by egregious failures by his defense counsel and police and prosecutorial misconduct."

"Little evidence pointed to Mr. Jones' involvement in the murder. He did not fit the description provided to the police. And he had an alibi," the group said on its website.

A statement by Catholic Mobilizing Network said: "Millions of advocates had urged Gov. Stitt to issue Jones' sentence commutation, citing the widely publicized issues with his case which include racial bias, withheld evidence, inconsistencies, poor representation, junk science and more."

Krisanne Vaillancourt Murphy, the group's executive director, noted that problems with Jones' original trial and conviction are "numerous and well-documented. We give thanks to God that Julius will not be executed today," she said.

She also added that the "broken system of capital punishment revictimizes and retraumatizes the loved ones of victims and those condemned to death. Today we hold in prayer the families of both Paul Howell and Julius Jones and ask God for their continued healing."

St. Joseph Sr. Helen Prejean, a longtime opponent of capital punishment, has been calling for support for Jones on social media.

Right after his sentence was commuted, she tweeted: "While Julius Jones's death sentence was commuted to life without parole on condition that he can never again apply for a pardon or commutation, this does not preclude Julius from pursuing legal exoneration in state or federal courts."

She followed this with another tweet emphasizing that his fight is not over.

"The commutation order and its conditions have no effect on Julius's right to challenge his conviction in the courts. Now that execution is off the table, Julius's legal team will have an opportunity to pursue legal exoneration," she said.

Jones' execution date was one of seven scheduled recently by the state of Oklahoma. These dates were set amid ongoing litigation surrounding the constitutionality of Oklahoma's lethal injection protocol; the case is set for a trial in federal court in February.

Oklahoma carried out the first of these executions Oct. 28, with the execution of John Grant, which turned out to be problematic because Grant convulsed repeatedly and vomited before his death.

Grant's execution was the first in the state since the 2015 execution of Charles Warner, which used the wrong drug and took place just a year after the botched execution of Clayton Lockett.