News



An undated photo shows straps on an execution table. Florida executed Edward James March 20, 2025, at the Florida State Prison in Raiford, Fla., more than three decades after he killed an 8-year-old girl and her grandmother. (OSV News/Courtesy of Florida Department of Corrections)



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STARKE, Fla. — March 28, 2025

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It was an all too familiar scene in Starke during the March 20 execution of Eddie James. Two groups trying to make sense of proper punishment of a man who murdered two people — a grandmother and a child.

One group was within the walls of Florida State Prison where the death chamber is situated. That group included members of the victims' family — of 8-year-old Toni Neuner and her grandmother, 58-year-old Betty Dick — along with representatives of the prison and others familiar with the case who supported the execution.

Outside those prison grounds and across the street a group of about 100 death penalty opponents held a prayerful vigil in response to state-sanctioned murder happening behind the prison walls.

At 8:15 p.m., the press secretary for the Florida Department of Corrections told the media the execution occurred without incident. Jere Pearson Jr., Toni Neuner's oldest brother, spoke for the family stating James' crime has altered lives and no one should judge the family for accepting the death penalty as punishment. He added he hopes people will keep his family in their prayers, along with the family of James.

"We lost generations by his actions," Pearson said. "How some people can say he deserves mercy is beyond our understanding."

Across the street, vigil participants were doing just as Pearson asked — they prayed for Toni Neuner and Betty Dick, they prayed for the family of Eddie James. But they also prayed for James himself.

"I believe that everyone has a soul and is a good person when they are born, and we need to pray for that soul," said Cathy Hackett, a parishioner of Our Lady of Lourdes Parish in Daytona Beach.

And the mercy Pearson questioned for James is a mercy from a pro-life standpoint.

"The death penalty shows no dignity and respect for life," said Fr. Phil Egitto, pastor of Our Lady of Lourdes who accompanied Hackett along with four dozen other parishioners and members of the parish school to Starke for the vigil.

"We know we have to stand up for life. It is important we say to the governor (premeditated murder) should not be done in our name. We need to spread the word that we believe in the sanctity of all life," the priest told the Florida Catholic, news outlet of Florida's Catholic dioceses.

There is no doubt that James' crime was brutal, horrific. But was putting him to death really a just punishment for his actions? While the victims' families might say "yes," the vigil participants prayerfully disagreed.

"Murdering someone for murdering is not something that holds them accountable for their crime," said Armando Garcia, director of organizing for Floridians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty, or FADP. "There is nothing about killing a person for their crimes that helps repair the harm done, and it doesn't make society safer in any way."

The alternative to the death penalty is life without the possibility of parole. Maria DeLiberato said James pled guilty to the murders 30 years ago. In doing so, he waived his right to a jury trial on his guilt, and asked for a life without parole sentence. But the state secured a non-unanimous jury recommendation for death.

"Justice is not premeditated murder; justice is punishing someone for their crime, having them take accountability, and having the process come to a finality. Justice could have happened 30 years ago, but, instead, the state insisted on getting the pound of flesh from (James)" she said, adding, "Life without the possibility of parole punishes the action and does not dehumanize us further by taking another life."

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The death penalty also takes away the possibility of redemption. DeLiberato said James found something in prison he had never experienced in his life before — a community. He said he "matured in prison" and found "fellowship and friends and for the first time of his life a community and he could live out the rest of his days here."

The vigil allowed death penalty opponents the opportunity to pray as a community for all those victimized by the crime 30 years ago and the execution. Along with members of Our Lady of Lourdes and FADP, a bus load of Latino evangelical pastors from Mission Talk arrived in Starke for their first execution vigil.

The day before the execution, Catholic legislative advocates gathered in Tallahassee for the annual Catholic Days at the Capitol. During the event, participants met with their local legislators about four specific topics set by the Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops. One topic was calling for opposition to Senate and House bills (S.B. 984/H.B. 693) that expand the scope of the death penalty in Florida.

As advocates met with representatives, Abe Bonowitz of the national organization Death Penalty Action asked to meet with Gov. Ron DeSantis to present to him more than 1,000 signed petitions asking him to stay the March 20 execution.

Bonowitz, founding director of FADP and current board member, had been in Louisiana earlier in the week opposing the death penalty.

On March 17, Louisiana executed a man by nitrogen gas, the state's first execution in 15 years. Louisiana joined Alabama as the only two states to use nitrogen gas to put a prisoner to death. Alabama has executed four inmates using nitrogen gas, with the last one taking place in February.

Two days before that, on March 19, Arizona executed Aaron Gunches shortly after 10 a.m. for the 2002 murder of Ted Price, a former longtime boyfriend of Gunches' girlfriend. He was the first person killed by the state of Arizona since 2022 and the fourth since 2014.

On March 7, Brad Sigmon became the first person executed by firing squad in the United States in 15 years when he was put to death in South Carolina. Including Sigmon's execution, a total of four inmates (including three in Utah) have died from a firing squad execution since the death penalty was reinstated in 1976.

After a botched lethal injection attempt on a death-row inmate in 2024 in Idaho, its governor recently signed a bill into law that makes the firing squad the state's primary execution method.
For this method, an inmate is usually bound to a chair and is shot through the heart by a group of prison staffers standing 20 to 25 feet away.

Before any execution, Florida's bishops and archbishop send a letter to the governor asking for a stay of execution. Such was the case before James' execution.

In the letter, the bishops — through the Florida Conference of Catholic bishops, the lobbying arm of the church in Florida — stated how the Catholic Church teaches that all human life is sacred and in our modern penal system, executions are unnecessary.

"Even people who have committed terrible acts and caused great harm possess a human dignity instilled by God, our Creator," the statement read. "Life-long incarceration without the possibility of parole is a severe yet more humane punishment that ensures societal safety, allows the guilty the possibility of redemption, and offers closure for victims of crime and their families."

A similar statement will most likely be sent in early April, as Michael Tanzi is set to be executed April 8 at 6 p.m. He was sentenced to death in 2003 for the 2000 death of Janet Acosta. He was convicted of kidnapping and sexually assaulting her and later strangling her to death.

And the all too familiar scene of opponents gathered in prayer across the street from the prison will offer their presence so that Tanzi will not die alone.