

## News



A file photo shows the entrance to the Florida State Prison in Starke. James Duckett, who was convicted of raping and drowning an 11-year-old girl in 1987 while working as a police officer in a small central Florida city, and Dominick Anthony Occhicone, Jr., convicted for a 1986 double murder, were executed at the prison July 28, 2026. Florida last carried out a double execution on May 12, 1964. (OSV News/Reuters/David Manning)

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Tallahassee, Fla. — July 29, 2026

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Before Florida executed two inmates in one day July 28, the Catholic bishops of that state issued a pastoral letter urging Catholics to reflect on the Church's moral opposition to the practice.

The executions marked the first time since 1964 that Florida executed two inmates on the same day, according to a database from the Death Penalty Information Center. The inmates were James Duckett, 68, convicted for the 1987 rape and murder of 11-year-old Teresa McAbee, and Dominick Occhicone Jr., 80, convicted for the 1986 murder of Martha Artzner, the mother of his ex-girlfriend. Occhicone also received a life sentence for the murder of Artzner's husband, Raymond Artzner.

The Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops previously urged Gov. Ron DeSantis, who is Catholic, to stay the two executions.

Asked for comment, DeSantis' office referred OSV News to a Nov. 3, 2025, press conference by DeSantis during which he said, "My view is it's an appropriate punishment for the worst offenders."

On July 27, the Florida bishops' conference issued a pastoral letter describing capital punishment as part of "a culture of death."

In issuing the letter, they wrote, "We wish to remind Catholics of the teaching of our Church against the use of the death penalty in situations — like our own — where bloodless means are sufficient to punish offenders and protect public safety."

During DeSantis' time in office, Florida has taken steps to expand the use of capital punishment, such as enacting legislation to reduce the number of jurors needed to recommend a death sentence from 12 to eight.

Noting that legislation, among other steps Florida has taken to expand the practice, the bishops said, "As teachers and leaders of the Catholic Church in Florida, we invite a renewed consideration of this topic that looks beyond partisan lines to the teaching of the Church and her moral authority."

"In the end, while supporters of capital punishment — who may consider themselves pro-life — claim that it serves a presumed good of justice for the victims and their loved ones, it comes at a much greater expense to the common good of society, and our common humanity," the pastoral letter said.

As of July 28, Florida has conducted the most executions of any state in the nation in 2026, bringing its total to 12. Seven other executions were carried out by the same date in 2026 by a combination of Texas, Oklahoma and Arizona. The Death Penalty Information Center's 2025 year-end report found that Florida was one of four states that drove an increase in U.S. executions that year.

"Florida is once again leading the country with the number of executions it is conducting," Robin M. Maher, executive director of the Death Penalty Information Center, said in written comments to OSV News.

"State officials plan to execute two men on the same day for the first time in over 60 years despite serious concerns about one man's guilt and questions about whether the second (Occhicone), an elderly 80-year-old man, should be executed at all," Maher said.

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Duckett's previously scheduled execution was stayed by the Florida Supreme Court to allow for DNA testing of old evidence that wasn't conducted during his trial because of technological limitations at the time. However, the results came back

inconclusive, meaning that they neither exonerated Duckett nor proved a direct connection to the crime. Duckett's stay was lifted after judges allowed his conviction to stand.

Florida's Catholic bishops have routinely urged DeSantis to commute death sentences to life imprisonment, to no avail.

"No one has received clemency in Florida since 1983, even as the state now carries out executions at a pace no other state comes close to matching," Maher said.

The Catholic Church's official magisterium opposes the use of capital punishment as a violation of the inherent sanctity of human life, and advocates for the practice's abolition worldwide.

The late Pope Francis revised the Catechism of the Catholic Church in 2018 to clarify the church's teaching that capital punishment is morally "inadmissible" in the modern world "because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person."

In his 2020 encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, Francis cited the writings of St. John Paul II, writing that his predecessor "stated clearly and firmly that the death penalty is inadequate from a moral standpoint and no longer necessary from that of penal justice."

Earlier this year, Pope Leo XIV delivered a video message to Catholic death penalty abolitionists marking 15 years since the abolition of the death penalty in his home state of Illinois.

"The Catholic Church has consistently taught that each human life, from the moment of conception until natural death, is sacred and deserves to be protected," Leo said in his April message. "Indeed, the right to life is the very foundation of every other human right."

As of July 28, Florida's next execution is scheduled for Aug. 18, according to data from the Death Penalty Information Center.