

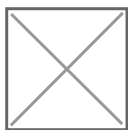
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A file photo shows the lethal-injection chamber at the federal correction facility in Terre Haute, Ind. (OSV News/Federal Bureau of Prisons)

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After Tennessee officials failed in their Sept. 30 attempt to execute death row inmate Christa Gail Pike for a 1995 murder, a number of faith leaders, including Tennessee's Catholic bishops, have called for her sentence to be commuted to life imprisonment.

The state's Gov. Bill Lee also halted the one remaining execution for the rest of the year pending an investigation, he said.

Officials administered two doses of a lethal drug to Pike, but her attorneys told media outlets that she remained "alive and loudly snoring" after the attempted lethal injection and was later taken by ambulance from the prison to a hospital.

Pike, now 50, the first woman Tennessee planned to execute in 200 years, was convicted of first-degree murder in 1996 for beating, torturing and killing Colleen Slemmer, who was 19 at the time. Pike admitted to the murder, which she carried out with her then-boyfriend, who received a life sentence without the possibility of parole.

"Carrying out a lawfully imposed sentence is among the State's most serious responsibilities, and the people of Tennessee expect it to be done in a manner that is not only legal and constitutional, but is effective," Lee said in a statement to The Associated Press.

But Richard Garnett, director of the Notre Dame Program on Church, State and Society, said in written comments, "The failed attempt to execute Christa Pike illustrates, yet again, the delusion that by making executions look more 'medical,' 'technical', or 'scientific' we are somehow changing what they are, namely, killings of helpless human beings — who have, to be sure, committed horrible crimes — by our governments, in our names."

In a letter to Lee dated Oct. 1, Tennessee faith leaders, including the state's Catholic bishops, urged him to commute Pike's sentence to life imprisonment in the wake of the incident.

The letter said they "respectfully and urgently ask you to commute the death sentence of Christa Gail Pike and ensure that the State of Tennessee does not

attempt to execute her again."

They said, "Such an act does not deny justice. It declares that justice need not become vengeance and that the State of Tennessee can choose restraint, human dignity, and mercy."

"We make this appeal mindful of the horrific murder of Colleen Slemmer and the immeasurable grief endured by her family and those who loved her," the letter said. "Nothing in our request diminishes the gravity of that crime, the preciousness of Colleen's life, or the legitimate responsibility of the state to hold those who commit violence accountable. Yet accountability need not require another death."

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Krisanne Vaillancourt Murphy, executive director of Catholic Mobilizing Network, a group that advocates for the abolition of capital punishment in line with Catholic teaching, said in a statement, "We are stunned and bewildered by this unprecedented news."

"We pray for Ms. Pike's current condition, and we pray for the victim Colleen Slemmer's family as this situation must surely be retraumatizing," she said.

"There is nothing normal about taking a life, and last night's horrifying events reminds us of that," Vaillancourt Murphy continued. "For Tennessee to have two botched executions in a matter of months is beyond alarming. It is the epitome of 'cruel and unusual punishment' under the Eighth Amendment."

Noting Lee's suspension of executions for the rest of the year pending an investigation, Vaillancourt Murphy said, "We pray this is the needed wake up call for Gov. Lee — in fact, for everyone — to recognize the barbarism of capital punishment."

"The Church teaches that the death penalty is 'inadmissible' because every human life is sacred, no matter the harm one has caused or suffered, and because we have more effective ways to protect society than to take another life," Vaillancourt Murphy said.

"Last night's events were particularly jarring, and another reason we should never accept state-sanctioned killing," she continued. "We don't make our communities any safer or deter any violence by perpetuating that cycle with executions."

The Tennessee Department of Correction said in a statement that it "followed every step of the State's lawful, established execution protocol approved by the Attorney General's Office."

"The lethal injection chemical in the protocol has consistently been effective, and the protocol does not allow for additional procedures beyond what was carried out this evening," the statement said. "Christa Pike has been transported to an off-site medical facility."

Shortly before the scheduled execution, Pike's lawyers filed last-minute legal challenges, arguing the courts did not consider Pike's history of trauma from sexual abuse in her sentencing; however, the Supreme Court ultimately allowed the execution to proceed.

But Valliancourt Murphy said, "It is sobering to know that were Ms. Pike sentenced today, she would not receive the death penalty because of how young she was when she murdered Ms. Slemmer."

"Ms. Pike's case had already attracted particular attention for being the first woman to face execution in Tennessee for 200 years, for the almost three decades she has spent in solitary confinement and today remains alive, surviving a botched execution at 50 years old," she continued.

Others pointed to a previous botched execution in the state in May, when officials paused an execution because they could not find a vein in which to administer the lethal injection.

Laura Porter, executive director of the U.S. Campaign to End the Death Penalty, said in a statement, "Since the botched execution in May of this year, people from diverse political backgrounds across Tennessee have called for a pause in executions to examine the problems with the execution process. These pleas were ignored."

"The state of Tennessee has shown the world it cannot be trusted to implement capital punishment in a way that preserves human dignity and the rule of law,"

Porter said. "This has to stop now."

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*, Pope 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," Pope Leo said in his April message. "Indeed, the right to life is the very foundation of every other human right."