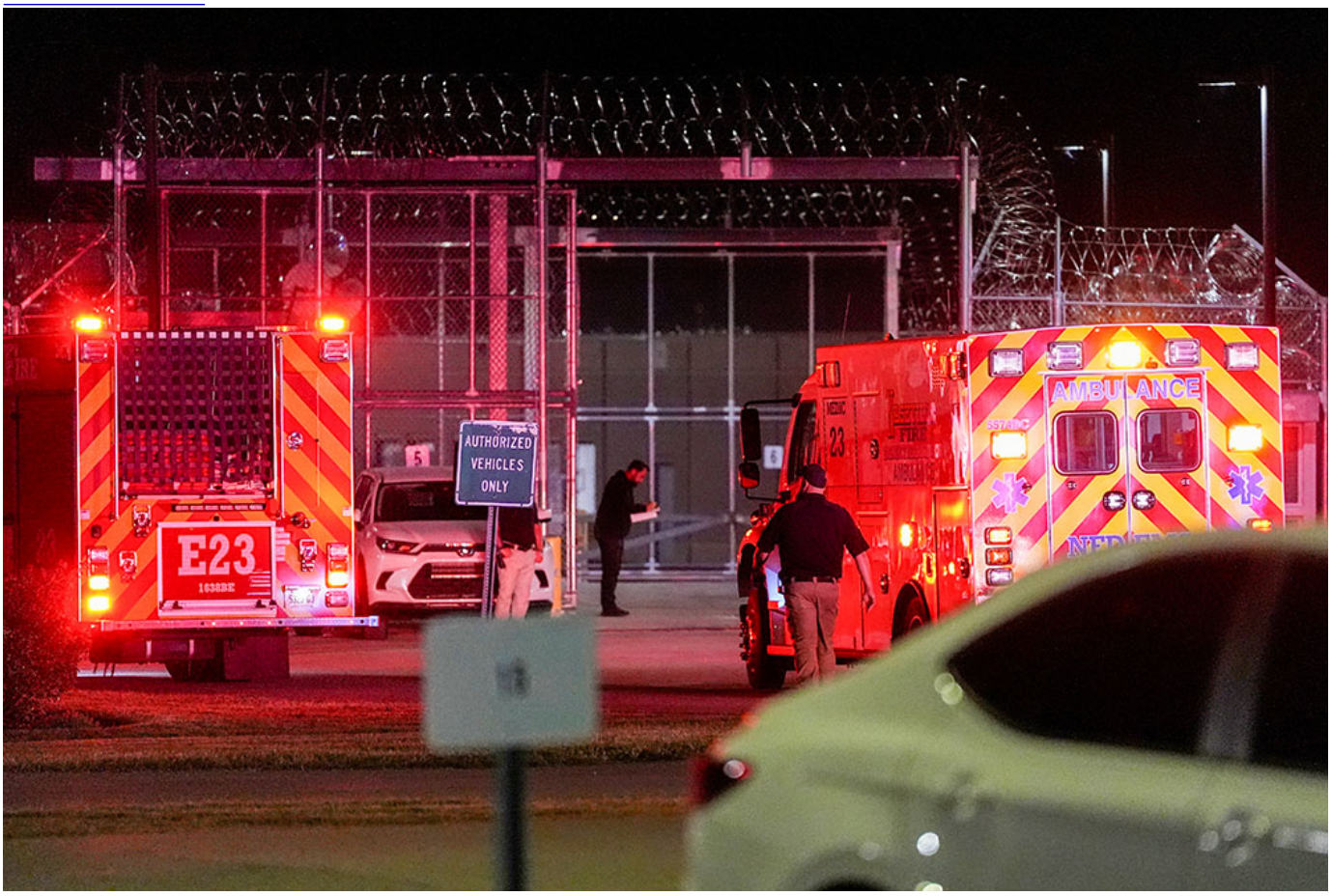
Opinion
Guest Voices



Emergency vehicles arrive at Riverbend Maximum Security Institution after the execution of Christa Pike was halted Sept. 30, 2026, in Nashville, Tenn. (AP/George Walker IV)



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On the night of Sept. 30, 2026, the state of Tennessee attempted to execute Christa Pike, 50, for the 1995 murder of 19-year-old Colleen Slemmer. Pike's executioners strapped her onto a gurney and injected pentobarbital into her arm, but instead of dying, she experienced excruciating pain, asking them if it was "supposed to hurt so much" and saying that it felt like her arm was "going to burst."

Eventually, she lost consciousness, but witnesses described her continuing to move and kick her blanket while audibly snoring. Pike remained alive until the execution was finally abandoned, at which point she was taken by ambulance to a local hospital where, as of this writing, she remains in critical condition and on a ventilator.

While this attempted execution was taking place in a Tennessee prison, I was in my parish basement, reading a children's book about St. Thérèse of Lisieux to the second graders in my faith formation class, because Sept. 30 is the eve of St. Thérèse's feast day. One story from Chapter V of *Story of a Soul* came back to me later that night, as I texted with my adult daughter about what had just happened to Pike.

In the summer of 1887, when Thérèse was 14 and living in Lisieux, France, she heard about the sensational trial of Henri Pranzini then taking place in Paris. Pranzini had been sentenced to die by guillotine for brutally killing two women and a 12-year-old girl earlier that year. Despite the abundant evidence pointing to his guilt, Pranzini remained unrepentant.

Thérèse relates in her autobiography that she "longed to avert this irreparable calamity" of the criminal dying without having received pardon from God. So she prayed fervently:

> *My God, I am quite sure that Thou wilt pardon this unhappy Pranzini. I should still think so if he did not confess his sins or give any sign of sorrow, because I have such confidence in Thy unbounded Mercy; but this is my first sinner, and therefore I beg for just one sign of repentance to reassure me.*

The next day, she read in the morning newspaper that as Pranzini was being dragged to the guillotine, he had suddenly turned around and kissed the crucifix being offered to him by a priest. Thérèse took this as a sign that, despite his guilt and even without a confession, he had been pardoned by a merciful God. And she rejoiced that her prayers for the murderer had "been granted to the letter."

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I can't help but think Thérèse would surely have prayed fervently for Pike too, who, unlike Pranzini, did confess to her crime and came to an understanding of the horrendous and irreparable thing she had done. Although Pike's young life had involved almost incomprehensible experiences of trauma and violence of all kinds, she did not use those experiences to excuse herself. She knew that what she did, regardless of the trauma she experienced as a child, was horrific, brutal, and wrong.

It is precisely the guilt of people like Pranzini and Pike that makes the Catholic Church's teaching on the death penalty so difficult for so many Christians to accept, Catholics included.

In 2018, Pope Francis approved a revision to Paragraph 2267 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, which had formerly allowed for the possibility of the death penalty under limited circumstances. The revised text states clearly that the death penalty is always "inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person," a dignity that "is not lost even after the commission of very serious crimes."

In his 2020 encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, Francis made the point again, quoting Pope John Paul II with the words "not even a murderer loses his personal dignity," then going on to affirm that the inalienable dignity of every human being extends even to "the worst of criminals."

The church's now categorical opposition to the death penalty represents a significant and quite recent development in Catholic teaching. For many centuries, the church accepted capital punishment, and ecclesiastical institutions participated in systems that condemned heretics and others to their deaths, most notoriously during the inquisitions.

And yet, Catholicism also contains a longstanding tradition that complicates this history. This deep tradition involves stories in which the condemned are known to be guilty of their crimes, but in which divine mercy nonetheless intervenes on their behalf.

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St. Thérèse praying for the soul of Pranzini is well-known enough to be included in Catholic children's books, but there are other much older resources as well, which have been all but forgotten. For example, in medieval compendia of *exempla*, which were short religious stories that medieval preachers used to illustrate moral and theological teachings, we learn about surprising and supernatural acts of mercy for the condemned. These *exempla* aren't exactly fables or folktales, but were meant to be understood by Christians as events that really happened.

In one of these stories, recorded by the Dominican preacher Étienne de Bourbon in the 13th century, a "certain robber" is sentenced to hang for his crimes, although he "had much good in him" because whenever he went out to steal, "he always said, '*Ave Maria*,' asking [the Virgin Mary] not to permit him to die in that sin." The prayerful robber was eventually captured and hung for his crimes, but after three days, he remained alive and "could not die."

The robber called to passersby for a priest, and when he was finally cut down from the gallows, a priest asked him how he had survived his attempted execution. The robber explained that the Virgin Mary herself had been holding him up by the feet throughout those three days. The story concludes, "Promising reform, he was let go free."

Note that this strange old tale contains no argument against capital punishment. Its intended medieval audience inhabited a Christian society in which execution was routine and was routinely accepted, even by the church. And note also that the storyteller does not make his robber innocent of his crimes in order that he would be worthy of Mary's merciful intervention. He is guilty and still the story imagines the Mother of God caring enough to stand beneath the gallows and hold his feet up for days in order to save him.

Tennessee's Catholic bishops have now joined other Christian leaders in asking Gov. Bill Lee to commute Pike's sentence to life in prison. That is the church's clear

teaching, and the bishops are right to uphold it. But these other stories are important too, because they give voice to a tradition that predates the current teaching — a tradition that has long remembered that a criminal and, yes, especially a guilty one can never lose his or her human dignity.

I do not believe St. Thérèse intervened to save Pike from death on the eve of her feast any more than I believe the Virgin Mary once spent three days holding a robber by his feet underneath a medieval gallows. But I do believe these stories can and must remind us of something essential about the Catholic understanding of mercy.

Neither St. Thérèse nor the medieval preachers required the condemned to be innocent before imagining that they ought never be abandoned. In the Catholic tradition, Colleen Slemmer's dignity does not require Christa Pike to lose her own, just as the women and child murdered by Henri Pranzini were not further harmed because St. Thérèse prayed for their killer.

The medieval robber was guilty. Nevertheless, Mary stood under the gallows and held his feet.