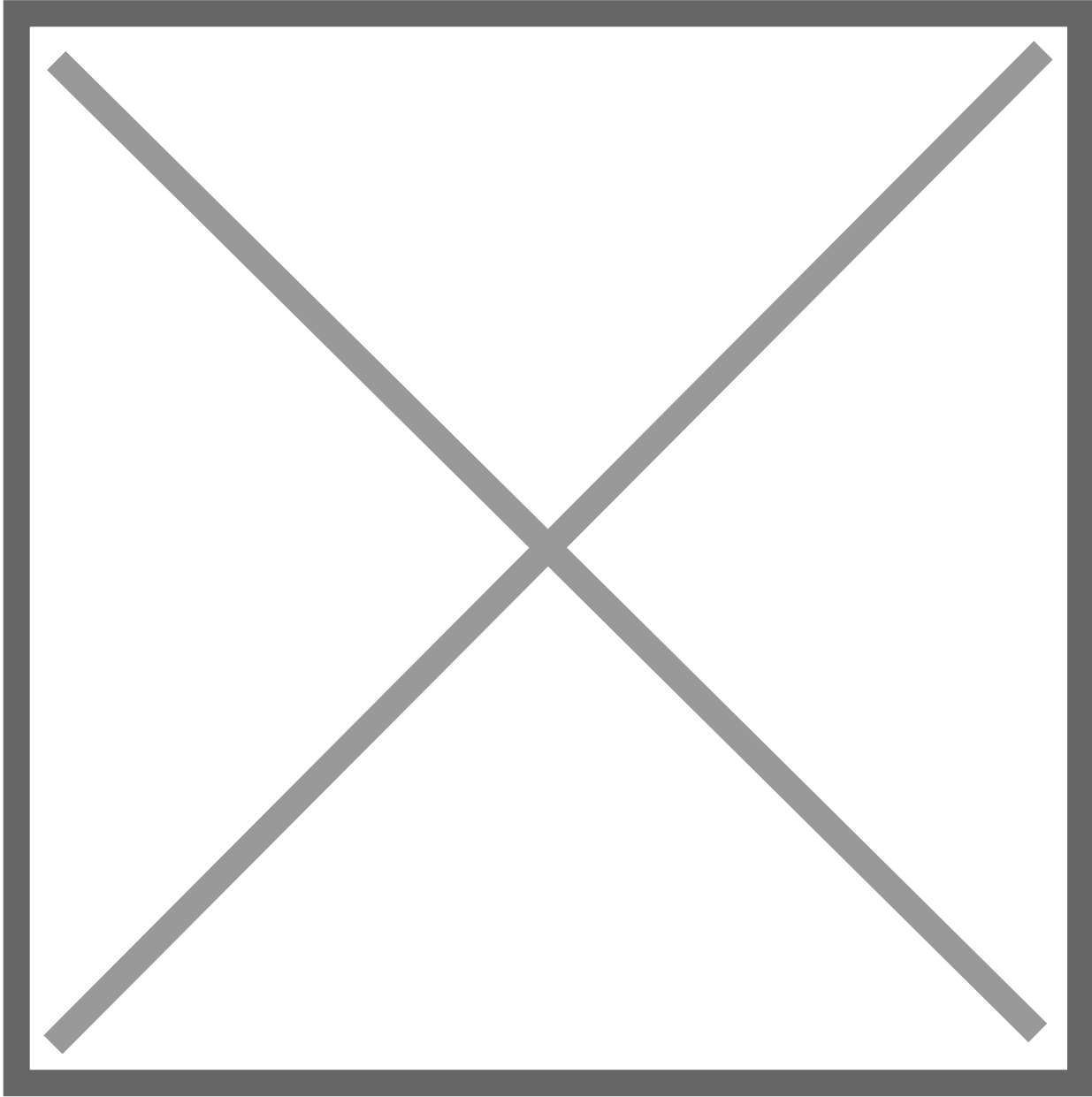


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The Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops in a July 21, 2026, letter urged Gov. Ron DeSantis to stay the July 28 executions of of James Duckett, left, and Dominick Anthony Occhicone, Jr. Duckett was convicted of raping and drowning an 11-year-old girl in 1987 while working as a police officer in a small central Florida city. Occhicone was convicted for a 1986 double murder. Florida last carried out a double execution on May 12, 1964. (OSV News/Florida Department of Corrections)

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Tallahassee, Fla. — July 23, 2026

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The Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops on July 21 urged Gov. Ron DeSantis to stay two executions scheduled for July 28.

James Duckett was convicted for the 1987 rape and murder of 11-year-old Teresa McAbee. Dominick Occhicone Jr. was convicted for the 1986 murder of Martha Artzner. Occhicone also received a life sentence for the murder of Raymond Artzner.

Duckett's previous 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.

If both executions take place as scheduled, it will be the first time since 1964 that Florida will have executed two inmates on the same day, according to a database from the Death Penalty Information Center.

In a July 21 letter to DeSantis, a Catholic, Michael Sheedy, executive director of the Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops, wrote that "the crimes of which these men were convicted are gravely evil," but called on DeSantis to halt the two executions and commute both sentences to life without parole.

"To punish with lifelong imprisonment is not to minimize the heinousness of these men's crimes," he wrote. "It is rather to recognize with awe that God is the author of life, and to reserve to him the taking of human life except where it is otherwise impossible to maintain the common good. Moreover, requiring state officers to kill two men on the same day seems especially callous. We appeal to you that it is possible both to uphold justice and to exercise mercy."

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Sheedy cited St. John Paul II's encyclical letter *Evangelium Vitae*, writing that the late pontiff in that document "reflected on the story of Cain and Abel."

"When Cain killed his brother Abel, this was a terrible sin: the taking of innocent human life. God did not ignore this crime or let Cain off the hook but imposed a severe punishment upon him. Nevertheless, God did not demand that Cain be put to death," the letter said. "Therefore St. John Paul II wrote, 'Not even a murderer loses his personal dignity.'"

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.

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.

In his 2020 encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, Francis addressed the moral problem of capital punishment by citing St. John Paul, 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."

"For this reason," he said, "only when a society safeguards the sanctity of human life will it flourish and prosper."