News

Death-row inmate Michael Duane Zack, 54, pictured in an undated prison photo, was executed Oct. 3, 2023, at the Florida State Prison near Raiford, Fla. Zack's lawyers had asked a federal appeals court for a stay of execution because they say he was "shut out" of a clemency process that could help spare him and suffers from intellectual disabilities due to fetal alcohol syndrome because his mother drank alcohol when pregnant with him. (OSV News photo/Florida Department of Corrections)

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## Join the Conversation

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Before he became Florida's sixth inmate to be executed in the state this year, convicted murderer Michael Duane Zack concluded his final statement Oct. 3 with a message: "To Governor DeSantis and the Clemency Board: I love you. I forgive you. I pray for you."

Zack, 54, was pronounced dead at 6:14 p.m. by lethal injection at the Florida State Prison in Starke. He was sentenced to death for killing two women, Ravonne Smith and Laura Rosillo, in 1996 during a nine-day crime spree near Tallahassee.

As they fought for a last-minute commutation of his sentence to life in prison without parole, his lawyers and death penalty foes said he suffered from intellectual disabilities and carried a deep sense of remorse.

In a Sept. 11 letter to Gov. Ron DeSantis on behalf of the bishops of Florida, Michael Sheedy, executive director of the Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops, recognized that Zack's "heinous and horrific crimes" have caused "untold suffering" to his victims' families, friends and communities, but urged DeSantis to commute his sentence to life without parole.

"In taking the life of Mr. Zack, the state will do nothing to restore the victims' lives," Sheedy said. "Rather, state-sanctioned killing will only further fuel the growing societal disrespect for the dignity of human life. The death penalty merely perpetuates the cycles of violence and vengeance that permeate our culture."

Less than two weeks before his execution, Zack's lawyers had asked a federal appeals court for a stay of execution because they say he was "shut out" of a clemency process that could help spare him. They filed a 26-page emergency motion Sept. 19, at the 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, after U.S. District Judge Robert Hinkle a week before rejected the clemency arguments. On Sept. 21, the Florida Supreme Court in a unanimous ruling also refused to block his execution.

"Twenty-seven years ago, I was an alcoholic and a drug addict. I did things that have hurt a lot of people -- not only the victims and their families and friends, but my own

family and friends as well," Zack said in a final statement. "I have woken up every single day since then filled with remorse and a wish to make my time here on earth mean something more than the worst thing I ever did."

"I make no excuses. I lay no blame. But how I wish that I could have a second chance, to live out my days in prison and continue to do all I can to make a difference in this world," Zack said. He also said, speaking to people who work to fix the juvenile justice and child welfare systems, "I hope my story will inspire you to make a difference in a child's life. You have the power to save another child from my fate."

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Among reactions to Zack's final statement, released on X (formerly Twitter) by Floridians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty, or FADP, was a posting by a friend of Ravonne Smith. "He took my friend Vonnie.. in the most vicious and violent way. His words seem empty to me.. just like the spot where Vonnie used to be. I dopray pray mercy on my soul because I find it so hard to pray for mercy on his."

Zack's lawyers, his family members and death penalty opponents said Zack's history of trauma and abuse was well documented. As a child, he was a victim of abuse at the hands of his alcoholic mother and his stepfather. According to an FADP statement released Oct. 3 after Zack's execution, he and his sisters "endured an unimaginable childhood of horrors. Michael grew in his alcoholic mother's womb and was born prematurely after her car accident. His birth father left shortly thereafter, and his mother's next husband was sadistically abusive toward Michael and his sisters."

"Michael's life started with violence and ended with violence," Maria DeLiberato, FADP's executive director, said in a separate statement Oct. 4.

According to DeLiberato, a record number of vigils and protests were held across the state demanding Zack's death sentence be commuted to life in prison without parole, and petitions signed by over 5,000 people and letters from faith leaders asking the same were delivered to DeSantis and the Florida Board of Executive Clemency.

"I am angry. I am sickened that it took going to death row to finally give Michael the stability he was so cruelly deprived of as a child," DeLiberato said in her statement. "And yet, I am proud of the man he became in there, and proud of all of you for committing to tell the truth about the human beings we are executing."

Catholic Mobilizing Network, which led a vigil for Zack outside the Florida State Prison that included Bishop Emeritus Felipe Estévez of St. Augustine, posted on X Oct. 3, "We stand in solidarity with all of those throughout the state of Florida who are holding vigils, protesting and bearing witness to the sanctity of #MichaelZack's life."

The network's website notes two upcoming executions, both in Texas: Jedidiah Murphy Oct. 10, and William Speer Oct. 26. The website also notes that Oct. 10 is World Day Against the Death Penalty, when people across the globe will advocate for ending capital punishment.

In the U.S., at least 14 faith-based events will mark the day, including: recitation of the rosary and a peaceful protest in Raleigh sponsored by Catholics for Abolition in North Carolina; a vigil at the Georgia Capitol in Atlanta co-sponsored by the Catholic Archdiocese of Atlanta; and a prayer vigil at the Louisiana Department of Corrections in Baton Rouge, which includes the Equal Justice Initiative, Jesuit Social Research Institute and Catholic Mobilizing Network among its sponsoring organizations.