



Diane Foley, the mother of James Foley, who was kidnapped and beheaded by Islamic militants in 2014 while reporting on the conflict in Syria, speaks as Pope Leo XIV presides over a vigil prayer for the consolation of those who suffer, at The Vatican, Monday, Sept. 15, 2025. (AP/Gregorio Borgia)

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[Pope Leo XIV](#) on Monday praised the willingness to forgive after the [mother of slain American journalist James Foley](#) told a Vatican vigil about her process of healing following meetings with an [Islamic State group](#) fighter convicted in his beheading.

Diane Foley was one of the featured speakers at a special Vatican vigil service in St. Peter's Basilica on the eve of a Holy Year event honoring all those who suffer.

James Foley was among a group of mostly Western journalists and aid workers taken hostage and ultimately killed by a group of British-born Islamic State group militants in Syria during the group's [reign of terror](#). The militants, known as "the Beatles" because of their accents, released a [grisly video](#) showing Foley's beheading in 2014, saying it was retribution for U.S. airstrikes in Iraq.

In a 2024 book, Diane Foley recounted the face-to-face encounters she had with the British-born militant who was charged in connection with his death, Alexandra Kotey. On Monday, she told the story from the altar of St. Peter's, choking up at times and clutching her hand to her chest.

After her son was killed, she said anger and bitterness surged within her, and she asked God how he could have allowed it to happen.

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"I staggered under the weight of that loss, unsure if I could go on," she said. "In those dark moments I prayed desperately for the grace not to become bitter, but to be forgiving and merciful."

She said the meetings she had with Kotey "became moments of grace."

"The Holy Spirit allowed us both to listen to each other, to cry, to share our stories. Alexandra expressed much remorse. God gave me the grace to see him as a fellow sinner in need of mercy, like me," she said.

Leo, history's first American pope, thanked Foley for her testimony and assured her and others that God never abandons his children.

"The testimonies we have heard speak of a truth: that pain must not give rise to violence and that violence never has the final say, for it is conquered by a love that knows how to forgive," Leo said. "What greater freedom can we hope to achieve than that which comes from forgiveness?"

Nearly four years after Foley's 2014 murder at the age of 40, Kotey and a future co-defendant, El Shafee Elsheikh, [were captured by a Kurdish-led, U.S. backed militia](#). An American drone strike killed the militant actually responsible for Foley's killing, Mohammed Emwazi, known by the moniker "Jihadi John."

After legal wrangling, [the pair was brought to the U.S.](#) for prosecution in 2020 after the Justice Department agreed to forgo the death penalty as a possible punishment. He was sentenced to life in prison.