

Divine Mercy and the Death Penalty

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“The greater the misery of a soul, the greater its right to My mercy. . . . On the cross, the fountain of My Mercy was opened wide by the lance for all souls—no one have I excluded!” (*Diary of St. Maria Faustina Kowalska: Divine Mercy in My Soul*, 1182)

“Help us O God of our salvation; . . . according to thy great power, preserve those doomed to die!” (*Psalms 79:9, 11*)

In January of 1999, Pope John Paul II made a pastoral visit to St. Louis. When he met with Governor Mel Carnahan of Missouri, the Holy Father asked him to commute the death sentence of Darrell Mease, who was scheduled to be executed in the next weeks. Carnahan granted the Pope’s wish, saying he was moved by the Pope’s appeal for mercy.

The Pope did not request a reevaluation of the merits of the condemned man’s case. Rather, he presented a simple and straightforward petition for mercy. The sentence was changed from death by lethal injection to life imprisonment without parole. The common good of society remained protected from the perpetrator. Justice was not confounded, but a higher purpose was served in putting aside the irreversible remedy of death.

The Church’s stance on capital punishment has always been based on the responsibility to protect society. St. Thomas Aquinas says that the legitimate civil authority is obliged to defend people from a dangerous criminal. At the same time, he cautions, “The execution of the wicked is forbidden wherever . . . the wicked are not clearly distinguished from the good.”¹ Besides reminding us of well-known cases where innocent people were condemned to die, this should remind us that as Christians we are urged not to see anyone as irredeemably wicked.



An Alternative to the Death Penalty

Prior to his intervention in St. Louis, Pope John Paul had laid out his case for the limitation of the use of the death penalty in his encyclical *The Gospel of Life (Evangelium Vitae)* (1995) and in his extraordinary 1997 modification of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)*. He still allowed for the application of the death penalty as a just choice that authority may make in its responsibility to safeguard society from the unjust aggressor. Yet the revised text goes on to say: “Today, in fact, as a consequence of the possibilities which the state has for effectively preventing crime, by rendering one who has committed an offense incapable of doing harm—without definitively taking away from him the possibility of redeeming himself—the cases in which the execution of the offender is an absolute necessity ‘are very rare, if not practically nonexistent.’”² The sworn responsibility of

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authority to secure the common good is not easily laid aside. But here the Church, convinced that society can be protected without executing dangerous criminals, charges us to look to a less violent, less final remedy. The Catechism directs us to a solution that preserves the common good without definitively curtailing the individual good of the perpetrator, offering him the opportunity for redemption. Each man, no matter how sinful and flawed, has a final purpose and call to salvation, one that we ought not too easily or unnecessarily preempt.

The above is the “ought” for laying aside the death penalty: legitimate authority can fulfill its responsibility using lesser but sufficient means for protecting the common good. But we should add that the argument of Divine Mercy, while never violating justice, transcends the human “ought.”

Mercy Surpasses Justice and Heals Hurts

The correct dispensing of justice always seeks to provide something which is well suited to the person and the circumstance. Justice is giving each person his “due.” (CCC, *no. 1807*) When Jesus freely submitted to human “justice,” He provided by means of His Cross an act of justification that, because He was divine, satisfied all our sins.

God did not abolish justice. Rather, He intended by the offering of His Son to purge human justice of any sense of wrath or revenge. Time and again we see that violence begets violence in a seeming unending spiral. God told St. Faustina that “Mankind will not have peace until it turns with trust to My mercy.”³

In the Divine Mercy, God receives and quenches human vengeance in Jesus’ own wounded Heart. In this Heart, which is an abyss of love, mercy overcomes hatred. Mercy brings healing that is impossible on a merely human level. Divine Mercy can restore hope, because it flows from the heart of the Risen Christ who, once and for all, has vanquished the finality of death. The deep truth that faith teaches is that only in the context of mercy—God’s Mercy and our own forgiveness and mercy—can we, as wounded human men and women, find healing and hope. “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy” (Mt 5:7).

A Prayer of Reparation

The Chaplet of Divine Mercy, which God gave to the world through St. Faustina, is a beautiful prayer that has a powerful efficacy to repair the hurt wrought by sin. As we respond to God’s call to continuing conversion, the invocations of the Chaplet may be offered as a litany of reparation. With our hearts turned to the Father, we use the Chaplet to profess and invoke God’s Mercy accomplished in Christ’s sorrowful Passion. We unite ourselves with the sacrifice of His Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity, in atonement for our sins and those of the whole world.

When human efforts seem futile and human solutions leave us empty, we pray the Chaplet to beg for a new beginning: the healing of the damage done by our sins and those of others. Our plea for Mercy will not fail to reach the Father.

Christ’s Execution and the Gift of Divine Mercy

The Church’s annual novena to the Divine Mercy begins on Good Friday, the day of the execution of Jesus. The hour of mercy is the hour of His saving sacrifice. This is when blood and water gushed out for our salvation. “On the cross, the fountain of My Mercy was opened by the lance for all souls—no one have I excluded.” (*Diary*, 1182) This is the moment that shook the world and stirred the faith of the pagan centurion to say, “Truly, this was the Son of God.” (Mt 27:54)

As we seek a reason to put aside the practice of the death penalty, perhaps the best motive is our desire to imitate God in His Mercy toward those for whom Jesus died. Mary, Mother of Mercy, pray for us and teach us to show mercy to others.

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1 *Summa Contra Gentiles*, V. Bourke (trans.). NY: Hanover House, 1955-1957, Book III, c. 146.

2 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [USCCB], 2001), no. 2267.

3 *Diary of St. Maria Faustina Kowalska: Divine Mercy in My Soul* (Stockbridge, MA: Marian Press, 1987), 300.