

JUSTICE MUST INCLUDE MERCY

In May 1981, Pope John Paul II was shot and seriously wounded by a Turkish Muslim terrorist named Mehmet Ali Agca. The Pope barely survived a six-hour operation and was hospitalized for 77 days. In December of 1983, the Pope visited his assailant in prison. The Pope forgave him for the shooting. He embraced his enemy and pardoned him. The act was profoundly Christian, a passionate and powerful display of forgiveness.

Pope John Paul II's example of forgiveness demonstrates the word of Christ. Closure and healing begin with forgiveness, which leads to true peace. Punishing criminals is just, but vengeance can never be justified through Christian values. Just punishment of criminals includes a show of mercy. Jesus begged forgiveness and mercy for his persecutors as he took his final breaths on the cross.

Pope John Paul II explains the Church's teachings on the death penalty in the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

"...The traditional teaching of the Church does not exclude recourse to the death penalty, if this is the only possible way of effectively defending human lives against the unjust aggressor. If, however, non-lethal means are sufficient to defend and protect people's safety from the aggressor, authority will limit itself to such means...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... - the cases in which the execution of the offender is an absolute necessity 'are very rare, if not practically non-existent' (*Evangelium Vitae* 56)." (2267)

The death penalty is justified only if there is no other way to protect society. The criminal justice system in the State of Montana has a non-lethal option of life without parole to protect its citizens. Death should not be used unnecessarily to solve problems in a setting already characterized as a "culture of death."

The thirst for revenge does not bring healing, but creates more pain and suffering for the victim. True justice brings relief and closure to victims, and restores communities to wholeness. Revenge creates a cycle of pain, not only for the victim but also for others. Justice must lead to restoration, and not be reduced to merciless retribution.

The purpose of the paschal mystery, the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus, is the forgiveness of sin and the promise of new life. Jesus understood mercy as a redemptive power that heals, restores and reconciles. True mercy heals hearts, renews relationships and re-creates communities.

In Genesis 4:13-15, Cain said to the Lord: "My punishment is too great to bear. Since you have now banished me from the soil, and I must avoid your presence and become a restless wanderer on the earth, anyone may kill me at sight." "Not so!" the Lord said to him. "If anyone kills Cain, Cain shall be avenged sevenfold." So the Lord put a mark on Cain, lest anyone should kill him at sight."

As Catholics we call for a model of justice that is shaped in the image of Christ because justice must include mercy. We follow Pope John Paul II's example of forgiveness and reconciliation because only in forgiveness can victims find true peace. Lastly, as Catholics we are encouraged to promote a dialog that promotes Christ's true meaning of justice.

A Pastoral Statement for the People of Montana issued during Respect Life Month, October 2002, from:

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