

Death sentence for Tsarnaev - or mercy?

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Should Dzhokhar Tsarnaev be executed for his role in the Boston Marathon bombings? He was convicted in a federal trial on 30 charges, 17 of which are eligible for the death penalty. If the U.S. government executes him, we all have a hand in that.

His defense team acknowledged that Dzhokhar participated in the April 2013 Boston bombings, with his brother, Tamerlan, as the mastermind. Tamerlan died when he was shot in a firefight with police a few days later and his brother ran over him with a stolen SUV.

What would killing Dzhokhar accomplish at this point?

The death penalty smacks of revenge. It would not provide justice. It would not bring back the four people who were killed in the attack and aftermath. It would not repair the bodies of the 264 injured that day; the work of their doctors and their own persistence has helped many of them return to full functioning.

It would not mend the spirits of those who witnessed the explosions or responded to the terror.

It might slake the blood lust of some who are angry - angry at the Tsarnaev brothers, angry at terrorists, angry at Muslims in general. But killing Dzhokhar will not satisfy such anger. Not all Muslims are terrorists, just as not all white policemen are racist killers. Stereotypes don't advance the dialogue, and they don't help us heal.

It could, in fact, make Dzhokhar a martyr.

Instead, what could mercy accomplish?

First, it is important to distinguish that mercy does not mean releasing a convicted criminal. Although Dzhokhar claims that his brother essentially talked him into participating, it's clear that he was radicalized and helped build and place the bombs. He should never again be free to create havoc.

Mercy could allow Dzhokhar to live the rest of his days in contemplation of his

crimes. It would allow him time to be redeemed.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church acknowledges that our traditional teaching does not preclude capital punishment. But it notes that if the offender can be rendered “incapable of doing harm” – by life imprisonment without parole, for example, “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 non-existent’ “ (CCC 2267).

In his Bull of Indiction formally announcing the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy to begin Dec. 8, Pope Francis says, “If God limited himself to only justice, he would cease to be God, and would instead be like human beings who ask merely that the law be respected. But mere justice is not enough. Experience shows that an appeal to justice alone will result in its destruction. This is why God goes beyond justice with his mercy and forgiveness.”

He adds, “Mercy is not opposed to justice but rather expresses God’s way of reaching out to the sinner, offering him a new chance to look at himself, convert and believe.”

Executing Dzhokhar Tsarnaev isn’t justice. We can forgive, without forgetting his crimes. Let’s show him mercy and then hope and pray he, too, experiences God’s incredible mercy.

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