

# Mercy According to Blessed John Paul II

## Introduction

It is a pleasure to be with you this afternoon and I want to thank Governor Ehrlich for inviting me to offer a few words on the notion of mercy according to Blessed John Paul II.

As you know, John Paul II will be canonized later this month and I will be traveling to Rome (along with 4 million other people) for the event. I was a young priest and a doctoral student here at CUA at the time of his election and received the news while I was teaching a class. Pope John Paul II truly shaped my priesthood and ministry as a bishop and he has inspired many young people to follow Christ and to embrace their God-given vocations.

## His Role in Commuting Death Sentences

This saintly Pope affected many people's lives. Who can forget the picture of the Pope sitting in a prison cell with his would-be assassin, Mehmet Ali Ağca. It was a moment of mercy and reconciliation that captured the world's attention. When John Paul II visited St. Louis in 1999, he urged Missouri Governor Melvin Carnahan to commute the death sentence of Darrell J. Mease to life imprisonment. The Governor said that he did so because he was moved by the Pope's passionate appeal for mercy.

In one of the homilies he preached during his visit to St. Louis, the Pope said this: "In the Mass and in Eucharistic Adoration we meet the merciful God of love who passes through the heart of Jesus Christ ... " He went on to preach a homily that urged our nation to need this mercy and so become pro-life in every situation: abortion, euthanasia, assisted suicide, racism, poverty, capital punishment: "I renew the appeal I made most recently at Christmas for a consensus to end the death penalty which is both cruel and unnecessary ... Modern society has the means of protecting itself without definitively denying criminals the chance to reform."

When the Pope spoke those words, polls showed that a substantial majority of

Americans favored the death penalty. In recent years, those numbers have shifted. In any case, Pope John Paul II did not exercise his teaching office by the numbers.

### **Inadequate Notions of Mercy**

Through my many years as a priest and a bishop, I have heard many calls for the Church to become “more compassionate”. Presidents, Governors, legislators, and judges hear something similar. And indeed, we should be working to form a society where compassion and mercy are transformative values.

And we must admit that we have a long way to go. At times calls for compassion and mercy are put on the wrong foundation. Some years ago, Francis Cardinal George, the Archbishop of Chicago, pointed to a paradox in the approach of our culture to the question of mercy, over against the approach taken by the Church. He said that the Church does not permit everything but forgives everything whereas our secular culture permits everything and forgives nothing.

Moral relativism is a false foundation for mercy, the view that there is no such thing as an established moral order, no such thing as the natural moral law (the law etched on the human heart), and no such thing as objective right and wrong. Right and wrong is what the majority of citizens says it is or what judges, juries, and legislatures decree it to be. A merely positivistic view of the moral law leads to a harsher culture. It does not take into account human dignity and “the way things are” but rather only what the majority thinks is right and wrong. The morality of the ascendant – whoever they may be – is imposed on the rest of us whereas minority view, counter-cultural religious views, are excluded. The notion that there is no such thing as moral truth, while seeming to give a wide latitude to behaviors heretofore thought immoral, actually sets the stage for the strong to impose their views on the weak. Thus Pope Benedict spoke about “the dictatorship of relativism”.

There is something else that goes along with this. If we regard morality simply as rules not really connected with human dignity and with “the way things are”, then, in that context, forgiving simply means “forgetting” – saying, as it were, “what does it matter?” Mere rules can be changed; a morality etched on the human heart is another matter. Forgiveness does not mean sin doesn’t matter. It does damage to the sinner, to those around him, to the Church, & to society. It offends against

human dignity, weakens the Body of Christ, and detracts from the common good.

### ***Dives in Misericordia***

During his pontificate, Pope John Paul II issued an encyclical entitled *Rich in Mercy*. I hope you might have the opportunity sometime to read it. It is a beautiful reflection on God “who is rich in mercy” as Scripture says. The whole notion of divine mercy ran deep in Pope John Paul II’s spirituality. In the early part of the 20th century, a Polish nun, a mystic, Sr. Faustina Kowalska, was the Lord’s instrument in bringing about a rediscovery of the centrality of God’s mercy in the Catholic faith. I might add that she was the Lord’s providential instrument for she wrote her diary with messages on divine mercy as the bloodiest century in human history, the 20th, began to unfold. That message was needed as the horrors of the Holocaust and global wars raged; it is needed today amid the violence of our times: ‘God who is rich in mercy.’

In her life of intense prayer and holiness, she encountered the God who is love. And her writings and reflections had a deep and lasting impression on Karol Wojtyla as youth, a seminarian, a priest, and bishop. He knew that the world needed the message of divine mercy as never before. He also knew that it needed the authentic message, not a watered down version.

### **The Interior Transformation of the Person**

In his exhortation on divine mercy, Pope John Paul II gathers together much of what Scripture and Tradition teaches regarding God’s mercy. And for that reason, his thoughts focus on Christ who came not to impose some arbitrary law upon us but rather to reveal and restore our wounded human dignity – a dignity that flows from our creation in the image of God and from our calling to share his friendship eternally.

John Paul II never tires of repeating that when the Son of God took on our human nature and died on the Cross and rose from the dead to accomplish our salvation, he revealed the Father’s love for us and at the same time ‘he revealed us to ourselves’ – he showed us how highly God regards us – to what lengths God the Father has gone to restore our dignity wounded by sin and to make us worthy of friendship with him. Pope John Paul II championed the notion that every person has not only an

instrumental worth and dignity – i.e., a dignity that is tied to what a person owns or what he or she can do – but rather an intrinsic and transcendent dignity, i.e., an inherent, inviolable dignity granted by God that perdures even when a person is sick, incapacitated, and morally corrupt. Accordingly, for John Paul II mercy is more than the commutation of sentence; it has to do with the interior transformation of the person who is the subject and the recipient of divine mercy. Recall that in his homily in St. Louis where he spoke against the death penalty, John Paul II urged American society not to deny criminals the chance to reform.

Central to Pope John Paul II's notion of mercy is the interplay of justice and mercy. Pope John Paul II does not reject the demands of justice. He does not say that they should simply be set aside, that punishment for crime has no place in our judicial system or that repentance for sin has no place in the Christian dispensation. (Please know I do not wish to conflate sin and crime). Justice, after all, ought to be based on the truth of the situation: whether a crime or a sin were committed; by whom was it committed and in what circumstances; who was harmed and how, and what the short and long term consequences are likely to be.

Mercy does not bypass justice but passes through it, so to speak. Or, to put it another way, mercy must confront justice so that mercy might accomplish its own particular task. That task is not to assure the miscreant and the sinner that he escaped by the skin of his teeth, that he dodged the bullet, or that he otherwise worked the system. The task of mercy is to forgive in a transforming kind of way and for that to take place justice must come into play.

Justice, in the fullest sense of that term, means seeing one's misdeeds as God sees them. A more common but not unrelated understanding of justice is the ancient notion of the *lex talionis*, the law of retaliation, "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth". Put another way, the punishment must fit the crime. This notion of justice, flawed as it may be, fraught as it may be with philosophical problems, may not be bypassed on the way to mercy. How to conceive of and achieve some measure of equivalency between the crime committed and punishment meted out, remains a challenge. I won't solve that problem today except to add that deep down, something tells us that such equivalency exists, makes sense, and at some level is just. The upshot for our purposes is that one who is the subject of mercy must confront sin,

call it by its proper name, acknowledge the harm it does to his relationship with God and others and to the world around him, and admit that he is deserving of some form of punishment. Justice sets in relief what is owed to those who have been harmed. It suggests ways in which such harm might be remediated. It forces the sinful miscreant to confront his sin.

And why is that important? Popular culture would suggest that this is simply a matter of Catholic guilt, that we Catholics peddle guilt and wallow in it. Yet the first step in transformation is the honest recognition of what's wrong. Without that step the reform of the sinner and/or the criminal will be little more than a sort of "Pavlovian" impulse control.

### **Mercy Trumps Justice**

In the thought of Pope John Paul II, mercy trumps justice but what does that really mean? As we have seen, it does not mean there is no need for repentance or reparation. Rather we must confront the true nature of the wrong committed and the punishment that it deserves.

Mercy trumps justice, however, because it knows what it forgives. It does not trivialize sin or for that matter crime but instead grasps how such misdeeds wound human dignity – that of the agent and that of any and all victims. He who gazes into mercy's mirror sees a reflection of the wrong he has done. (Indeed, the greatest saints had the clearest understanding of their own sinfulness). Justice opens one's heart to one's need for healing and forgiveness. Mercy is that healing and forgiveness for which the human spirit longs, that healing and forgiveness which Christ came to bring, indeed, in the teaching of Bl. John Paul II he is "Mercy Incarnate".

Blessed John Paul II and even yours truly understands that the criminal justice system can't operate like a confessional or a church tribunal. However, the sense of human dignity and the role of justice and mercy may have something to say to our criminal justice system which seems to alternate between harshness and leniency without sufficiently addressing the need for interior transformation – A transformative mercy that passes the way of justice is much needed in the quest to make of our culture 'a civilization of truth and love.'

Thanks for listening. God bless you!