

The Death Penalty

Exaltation of the Holy Cross

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In the very first words of introduction in his book *The Crucified God*, theologian Jurgen Moltmann wrote, “the cross is not and cannot be loved.” (xix) As we gather this weekend to honor the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, we must be honest about what the cross was. The cross of Calvary on Good Friday was not a piece of artwork or religious decoration, but an ugly form of capital punishment. It was the means to execute Jesus as well as a warning to everyone in the crowd that the same thing could happen to them if they tried something similar. That is why Moltmann is right in saying ‘the cross is not and cannot be loved.’ It was a form of cruel and unusual punishment.

While we no longer use crosses, humanity has continued the practice of the death penalty. It is true that the Catholic Church historically approved of its practice provided that it was used as a last resort in order to keep the rest of the community safe. In 1995, Pope John Paul II clarified that since we now have ways to confine those who are an ongoing threat to the community, the death penalty should be ‘practically nonexistent.’ Two decades later, Pope Francis agreed and went a step further by introducing a new reason against the death penalty, the human dignity of each

person, even the guilty. In 2018, Pope Francis therefore changed the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* on the death penalty, which now states, “the Church teaches, in light of the Gospel, that the death penalty is inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person, and she works with determination for it’s abolition worldwide.” (#2267) Arguments in favor of capital punishment on grounds of public safety or that people can lose their human dignity no longer hold in the Catholic Church.

The recent developments in our Catholic understanding of the death penalty, while certainly challenging to all of us who are inclined to uphold the ancient practice of ‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,’ especially in a world of so much senseless violence, are much more in line with the Gospel. In today’s passage, we heard, “for God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten Son.” It goes on to say that Jesus did not come to condemn, but to save. Remember that on Good Friday, Jesus wasn’t executed alone, but with two criminals. Even though they admitted their guilt as they hung upon their crosses, Jesus did not condemn them. In fact, the opposite. He said, “this day you will be with me in paradise.” Applying this to our lives as disciples of Jesus, we can arrest, sentence, hold accountable, and even imprison, but we cannot take a life. Taking another person’s life is to condemn them and therefore a violation of the Gospel of life.

The cross invites us to be pro-life on the issue of the death penalty.

How can our recent papal teachings and the cross of Christ help refine my perspective on this issue?

As we continue with this mass on this feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, let us be careful not to celebrate an instrument of death. 'The cross is not and cannot be loved.' Rather, we celebrate the one who conquered the cross and invites us to do the same as we work with determination for the worldwide abolition of the death penalty.