

FAITH VATICAN DISPATCH

# Pope Francis: The death penalty is contrary to the Gospel

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Gerard O'Connell

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Pope Francis declared today that the death penalty is “contrary to the Gospel.” He said that “however grave the crime that may be committed, the death penalty is inadmissible because it attacks the inviolability and the dignity of the person.”

He did so in a major talk on Oct. 11 to an audience of cardinals, bishops, priests, nuns, catechists, and ambassadors from many countries on the 25th anniversary of the promulgation of the catechism, affirming that there has been a development of doctrine in the church and a change in the consciousness of the Christian people on the question of the death penalty. The pope’s comments and the timing of them suggest that a revision of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* may be forthcoming to reflect this new development in the church’s understanding.

“One has to strongly affirm that condemnation to the death penalty is an inhuman measure that humiliates personal dignity, in whatever form it is carried out. And [it] is, of itself, contrary to the Gospel, because it is freely decided to suppress a human life that is always sacred in the eyes of the Creator, and of which, in the final analysis, God alone is the true judge and guarantor,” Pope Francis said.

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Reiterating an observation in his Letter to the President of the International Commission against the Death Penalty, March 20, 2015, Francis said that “No man ever, not even the murderer, loses his personal dignity, because God is a Father who always awaits the return of the son who, knowing that he has done wrong, asks pardon and begins a new life.” For this reason, he said, “life cannot be taken away from anyone” and there must always be “the possibility of a moral and existential redemption that will be to the favor of the community.”

His statement is sure to be welcomed by bishops’ conferences and the overwhelming majority of the Christian faithful around the world, many of whom have long called for the church to take this stance. His predecessors have been slowly moving towards the position taken today by Francis. Every pope since St. John XXIII has appealed to governments worldwide on behalf of persons condemned to death, asking for clemency.

When St. John Paul II published the catechism in 1992 it still admitted the use of the death penalty (No. 2266). But strong reaction from bishops and the faithful in many countries led him to revise the text in 1997, with the help of then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. The revised text (No. 2267), however, still did not exclude the death penalty on moral grounds as Pope Francis did today; it said that given the possibilities the modern state has of rendering the criminal incapable of doing harm again, then “the cases in which the execution of the offender is an absolute necessity ‘are very rare, if not practically non-existent.’”

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Several times since becoming pope, Francis has made clear his total opposition to the death penalty, including in his speech to the U.S. Congress and to the United Nations in September 2015. But today he took a much greater step than any of his predecessors by declaring publicly on a solemn occasion, directly related to the

*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, that the death penalty is “contrary to the Gospel” and “inadmissible,” making clear that the catechism must address the question in this more complete way.

The Jesuit pope began his talk by recalling that at the opening of the Second Vatican Council on Oct. 11, 1962, John XXIII said, “It is necessary first of all that the church should never depart from the sacred patrimony of truth received from the Fathers. But at the same time, she must ever look to the present, to the new conditions and new forms of life introduced into the modern world which have opened up new avenues to the Catholic apostolate.” Moreover, Pope John added, “our duty is not only to guard this treasure, as if we were concerned only with antiquity, but to dedicate ourselves with an earnest will and without fear to that work which our era demands of us, pursuing thus the path which the church has followed for 20 centuries.”

Drawing on this, Francis said the church’s “task and mission” is “to announce in a new and more complete way the everlasting Gospel to our contemporaries” with “the joy that comes from Christian hope, fortified by the medicine of mercy.”

He recalled, too, that John Paul II, in his presentation of the catechism 25 years ago, said “it should take into account the doctrinal statements which down the centuries the Holy Spirit has intimated to his Church” and “it should also help to illumine with the light of faith the new situations and problems which had not yet emerged in the past.”

He described the catechism as “an important instrument” for presenting and helping the faithful understand better the faith and for coming close to our contemporaries by presenting the faith as “a significant response for human existence in this particular historical moment.”

In a highly significant statement, Pope Francis emphasized that “it’s not sufficient to find a new language to announce the faith of always; it is necessary and urgent that, faced with the new challenges and new horizons that are opening for humanity, the

church can express the new things of the Gospel of Christ that, while enclosed in the Word of God, have not yet come to light.”

He sought to contextualize the *Catechism* in the life of the church by explaining that “to know God” is not first and foremost “a theoretical exercise of human reasoning but an unquenchable desire impressed in the heart of every person. It’s the knowledge that comes from love, because we have met the Son of God on our path. The catechism is to be seen in this light of love, as an experience of knowledge, trust and abandonment to the mystery.”

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In this context, he turned to the question of the death penalty, which he said, “should find a more adequate and coherent space in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.”

Speaking of the way the church’s teaching on the death penalty is presented, Francis declared that “this problem cannot be merely reduced to a mere memory of historical teaching without bringing to the fore not only the progress in the teaching by the work of the last pontiffs but also the changed awareness consciousness of the Christian people, that rejects an attitude which consents to a punishment that heavily harms human dignity.”

Aware that some will question this radical change in the light of what happened in the Papal States and church in the past, Francis explained that “in past centuries, when faced with a poverty of instruments of defense and social maturity had not yet reached a positive development, recourse to the death penalty appeared as the logical consequence of the application of justice which had to be adhered to.”

“Sadly, too,” he said, “also in the Papal State there was recourse to the extreme and inhuman remedy, ignoring the primacy of mercy over justice.” Speaking as the Successor of St. Peter, he said, “We assume responsibility for the past, and we recognize that those means were dictated more by a legalistic than a Christian

mentality. The concern to fully preserve the powers and the material riches led to an overestimation of the value of the law, preventing a going in depth into the understanding of the Gospel.”

Turning to the present time, Francis said, “Today, however, to remain neutral [on this question] in the face of new demands for the reaffirmation of personal dignity, would render us guiltier.”

Clearly anticipating objections of a theological nature from some quarters, Francis explained, “Here we are not in the presence of any contradiction with past teaching, because the dignity of human life from the first instant of conception to natural death has always found in the church its coherent and authoritative voice.” Indeed, he said, “the harmonious development of doctrine requires putting aside positions in defense of arguments that already appear decidedly against the new understanding of Christian truth.”

In this light, he declared, “It is necessary therefore to restate that, however grave the crime that may be committed, the death penalty is inadmissible because it attacks the inviolability and the dignity of the person.”

Pope Francis concluded by saying: “Tradition is a living reality and only a partial vision can think of ‘the deposit of faith’ as something static. The Word of God cannot be conserved in mothballs as if it were an old blanket to be preserved from parasites. No. The Word of God is a dynamic reality, always alive, that progresses and grows because it tends towards a fulfillment that men cannot stop.”

This “law of progress,” he said, “appertains to the peculiar condition of the truth revealed in its being transmitted by the church, and does not at all signify a change of doctrine. One cannot conserve the doctrine without making it progress, nor can one bind it to a rigid and immutable reading without humiliating the Holy Spirit.”

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