Pope Francis is at it again. One of his favorite pastimes seems to be taking potshots at anyone who diverges from the "gospel according to Bergoglio," be that young people who love the Traditional Mass, Cardinals Burke or Sarah, or Archbishop Vigano. This time, it was not traditionalist or conservative-leaning clergy or laity of our time but all of his predecessors for centuries.

In a meeting with the International Commission against the Death Penalty, on December 17, Francis cast aside his prepared speech and instead decided to ad lib a few off-the-cuff remarks. Every saint of the Church must tremble in their grave every time the current pope decides to ad lib comments as one never knows what bizarre things will follow ("Who am I to Judge?", "Mary was angry with God at the crucifixion", etc.). According to a report at LifeSiteNews, the Pope's impromptu remarks this time included a tongue lashing of the popes "in centuries past" who permitted the use of capital punishment, even in lands controlled by the Vatican (the Papal States).

Not only does the "Pope of mercy" have harsh words of condemnation for Catholics today who refuse to follow him into error and novelty, but he even berates every single one of his predecessors "in centuries past" for allowing this "inhuman form of punishment . . . ignoring the primacy of mercy over justice." He blames these supposedly wayward popes in condoning the death penalty on "an insufficiently developed understanding of human dignity." Even John Paul II, who was certainly squeamish about capital punishment, did not agree with Francis and is therefore also a target in Francis' latest attack.

But if Francis is condemning his predecessors for being ignorant of the new doctrine of Bergoglio and allowing the death penalty, then Francis is blasphemously chastising God Himself in his condemnation of those who "in centuries past" tolerated the death penalty. Many times, the Bible recounts that God inflicted the death penalty on offenders (e.g. 1 Sam. [Kings] 6:19: "But He slew of the men of Bethsames, because they had seen the ark of the Lord: and He slew of the people seventy men, and fifty thousand of the common people. And the people lamented, because the Lord had smitten the people with a great slaughter." God Himself, as well as every other pope before Bergoglio, had, according to Francis, "an insufficiently developed understanding of human dignity" since they admitted the death penalty (at least in theory).

Think about the hubris of this claim for just a moment: *every pope before Francis* (e.g. St. Peter, St. Gregory the Great, St. Pius V, St. Pius X) had "an insufficiently developed understanding of human dignity," until Francis came along to enlighten them all.

Contrary to this false gospel, God has revealed that the death penalty is both admissible and compatible with the human dignity He created (a dignity He understands infinitely more

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than Francis) for certain offenses (e.g. Gen. 9:6, 38:24; Ex. 21:17; and 1 Sam. [Kings] 15:3, in which God says to King Saul through the Prophet Samuel: "Now therefore go, and smite Amalec, and utterly destroy all that he hath: spare him not, nor covet anything that is his: but slay both man and woman, child and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass."). Too bad Francis wasn't there to deliver some off-the-cuff corrections to King Saul, encouraging him to disregard the command of God in the name of human dignity. Perhaps after he "corrects" the Catechism to remove capital punishment, Francis will have to "correct" the Bible to update these and other verses.

In addition to the absurdity of his latest attack, there are two serious errors in his rash comments. These errors demonstrate that the Jesuit Pope does not understand basic principles of philosophy, jurisprudence, or history.

Beyond slandering his predecessors (and God Himself, by extension) as having "an insufficiently developed understanding of human dignity" (truly outrageous), he also erroneously claims that the reason for allowing the death penalty for so many centuries was an "inability to protect society." This *is not now*, nor has it *ever* been, the purpose of capital punishment. The primary reason for the death penalty is to satisfy the requirements of justice, specifically, *retributive justice*. Retributive justice, which is a species of commutative justice, requires that one who commits an injustice and thereby takes something unequally from another person or society as a whole owes a debt to return the balance to the exchange. For the most severe of crimes, the equity in exchange for the harm caused requires the forfeiture of life. Satisfying the debt of retributive justice was held to be the primary end "in past centuries" of the death penalty, not some imagined inability to protect society. (Given that we live in a time with the highest rates of violent crime in centuries, it would seem our predecessors knew more than we about how to protect society.) The protection of society and possible reform of the perpetrator were only secondary ends of the death penalty, not the primary ones.

Beyond the bad history Bergoglio learned in his Jesuit schools, he also exhibits a gross lack of philosophical understanding. Mercy is not over justice, in the sense of trumping justice. Catholic philosophy and theology understand that mercy and justice are both indispensable and must be held in balance with each other. As St. Thomas succinctly explained: "Mercy without justice is the mother of dissolution; [and] justice without mercy is cruelty."[1] Mercy is a great virtue (although not superior to charity, as St. Thomas explains), but it must be held in balance with justice. The ancient philosophers debated whether mercy is over or under justice (again, too bad Bergoglio wasn't around in ancient Greece to set them straight), but the Christian synthesis demonstrated that the entire question was flawed. We need both justice tempered by mercy and mercy regulated by

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justice.

In his *Summa*, St. Thomas distinguishes between two types of mercy, one false and the other true (take a guess as to which one describes Francis' understanding). In response to the question of whether mercy is a virtue, St. Thomas says:

> Mercy signifies grief for another's distress. Now this grief may denote, in one way, a movement of the sensitive appetite, in which case mercy is not a virtue but a passion; whereas, in another way, it may denote a movement of the intellective appetite, in as much as one person's evil is displeasing to another. This movement may be ruled in accordance with reason, and in accordance with this movement regulated by reason, the movement of the lower appetite may be regulated. Hence Augustine says (De Civ. Dei ix, 5) that "this movement of the mind" (viz. mercy) "obeys the reason, when mercy is vouchsafed in such a way that justice is safeguarded, whether we give to the needy or forgive the repentant." And since it is essential to human virtue that the movements of the soul should be regulated by reason, as was shown above (I-II:59:4 and I-II:59:5), it follows that mercy is a virtue.[2]

Mercy which is not regulated by reason (i.e. does not safeguard justice) is *not* the virtue of mercy but merely an unregulated, sentimental passion that undermines justice. St. Thomas' clear distinction speaks directly to Pope Francis, who shows that he understands mercy merely as some sentimental feeling of the lower passions that rejects being regulated by reason in accord with justice. By flagrantly rejecting and insulting his predecessors in these informal remarks, he shows that he has merely a sentimental, visceral reaction against a serious punishment which, when used justly, has not only been commanded by God but is in accord with reason. Even John Paul II, who seemed to share such an emotional understanding of mercy, allowed a scintilla of reason to prevent him from irrationally declaring the death penalty "inadmissible" in all cases.

Rather than speaking off the cuff on subjects that demonstrate his lack of proper Catholic education in history and philosophy, perhaps Pope Francis should read the divinely inspired Psalms that testify to the Christian synthesis of justice and mercy, rather than holding mercy as an emotional trump card over justice. If he did so, he would find that, "Mercy and truth have met each other: justice and peace have kissed" (Ps. 84:11).

Notes

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[1] *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, Cap. V, l. 2.

[2] II-II, q. 30, art. 3.

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