

## Jubilee of Mercy – Justice and Mercy

In *Misericordiae Vultus* – the Bull of Indiction in which Pope Francis formally proclaimed the Jubilee Year of Mercy – he addressed the relationship between *justice* and *mercy*, which many think of as opposing ideals. Justice, for them, demands the full payment of any penalties related to wrongdoing. They see such things as amnesty, pardon, mercy, or forgiveness as signs of weakness or lack of commitment. They take the Biblical injunction “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth ...” (Lv 24:20) as a **demand** for revenge, rather than its intended **limit** on acts of retaliation. And they skip Jesus’ response to this very text – “But I say to you, offer no resistance to one who is evil.” (Mt 6:39). Their thinking is reflected in support for stiff punishments, limitation of judicial discretion in sentencing, deportation of all illegal immigrants, and the death penalty. For them, one can have justice or mercy, but not both.

But Pope Francis wrote: “(Justice and mercy) are not two contradictory realities, but two dimensions of a single reality that unfolds progressively until it culminates in the fullness of love. Justice is a fundamental concept for civil society, which is meant to be governed by the rule of law. Justice is also understood as that which is rightly due to each individual. In the (Old Testament), ... justice is understood as the full observance of the Law and the behavior of every good Israelite in conformity with God’s commandments. Such a vision, however, has not infrequently led to legalism by distorting the original meaning of justice and obscuring its profound value. To overcome this legalistic perspective, we need to recall that in Sacred Scripture, justice is conceived essentially as the faithful abandonment of oneself to God’s will.

“For his part, Jesus speaks several times of the importance of faith over and above the observance of the law. ... Faced with a vision of justice as the mere observance of the law that judges people simply by dividing them into two groups – the just and sinners – Jesus is bent on revealing the great gift of mercy that searches out sinners and offers them pardon and salvation. ... The appeal to a faithful observance of the law must not prevent attention from being given to matters that touch upon the dignity of the person.

“... Jesus affirms that ... the rule of life for his disciples must place mercy at the center, as Jesus himself demonstrated by sharing meals with sinners ... (which) makes us realize the depth of his mercy.” (MV, #20)

Rather than placing mercy at the center, we often put it on the sidelines, demanding a full measure of justice before considering – if we even do that – mercy. We marvel at how the relatives of the Charleston, SC, victims can talk about forgiveness before the shooter is “brought to justice.” We give priority to “fairness,” putting what is fair for us over what may be best for all.

As Pope Francis further noted, the Scriptures show how God could fairly and justly inflict punishment, yet refrained from doing so: “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. (After noting the just punishment that the unfaithful Israelites deserved, the prophet Hosea revealed God’s true face): ‘My heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger, I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come to destroy’ (Hos 11:9). Saint Augustine, almost as if he were commenting on these words of the prophet, says: ‘It is easier for God to hold back anger than mercy.’ And so it is. God’s anger lasts but a moment, his mercy forever.

“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. Yet this does not mean that justice should be devalued or rendered superfluous. On the contrary: anyone who makes a mistake must pay the price. However, this is just the beginning of conversion, not its end, because one begins to feel the tenderness and mercy of God. God does not deny justice. He rather envelopes it and surpasses it with an even greater event in which we experience love as the foundation of true justice. ... God’s justice is his mercy given to everyone as a grace that flows from the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Thus the Cross of Christ is God’s judgment on all of us and on the whole world, because through it he offers us the certitude of love and new life.” (MV, #21)

In this Jubilee Year of Mercy, we would do well to reflect on the tension we may feel between justice and mercy, especially in regard to some of the social and political issues of our day.

- Do we insist on justice above all, or do we put mercy at the center?
- For our own sins, would we rather experience God’s justice or His mercy?
- Are we happy that God acts as He does with us, and not as we might do?
- Do we give thanks for God’s mercy to us by extending that mercy to others?

*(Jesus) said, ... “Go and learn the meaning of the words, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ I did not come to call the righteous but sinners.” (Mt 9:13)*