

## AGENTS OF MERCY LESSON: LEARNING TO FORGIVE

GRADES 7-9

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### **Goal:**

Students will learn about the mercy of God and His invitation to us to uphold the dignity of every person, even those who have committed crimes. Students will examine the difference between punitive prison time and restorative justice, and be challenged to view those in prison through the lens of the dignity of the human person. Bad decisions cannot destroy the reality of the love of God. Solutions to crime and punishment must take into account the dignity of every person.

### **Lesson:**

The prison system in America is characterized by its emphasis on punishment and retribution. The Church, on the other hand, rightly recognizes that mere punishment is not justice. In particular, long unfair sentences, solitary confinement, and the death penalty can be used in vengeful ways rather than to help the offender to correct the wrong done. Restorative justice emphasizes repentance and repairing the harm done. It allows for victims and families to forgive the offender, and allows the offender to seek that forgiveness.

### **Watch:**

- [Catholics and the Death Penalty](#). (start at 1:30)
- View [the infographic](#) on the prison population in the US
- [Listen to this powerful story](#) of a man who experienced the light of Christ in prison.
- [Pope Francis speaks](#) to world leaders working to end the death penalty.

### **Discussion:**

- Pope Francis outlines the moral argument against the current use of the death penalty. He mentions the following points. Which of these can your students name after watching the video? Discuss what each one means personally (punishment is rehabilitation); culturally (justice not vengeance); and eternally (God's plan for mercy).
  - Death penalty is unnecessary as a means of defense, no matter how serious the crime.
  - An offense to the inviolability of life
  - Contradicts God's plan for merciful justice
  - Does not render justice to victims but instead fosters vengeance
  - "Thou shalt not kill" applies both to the innocent and the guilty.
  - Must also work for the improvement of prison conditions that respect the dignity of the criminal.
  - The basic purpose of all punishment is the rehabilitation of the offender.
  - Punishment for its own sake, without room for hope, is a form of torture.
- What do you notice about the infographic? What stands out to you?

**Activity:**

- Read [letter from Pope Francis](#) to youth incarcerated for involuntary manslaughter in LA (full letter available at 0:19 in the video).
- Have students journal for 5 minutes using these questions:
  - How does the letter from Pope Francis help Carlos? What does the Pope tell him that gives him hope?
  - What would you want to write to someone in juvenile prison?
  - What does true mercy to those who are in prison look like?

**Prayer:**

Merciful Father, we ask your blessing on all we do to build a culture of life.

Hear our prayers for those impacted by the death penalty.

We pray for all people, that their lives and dignity as children of a loving God may be respected and protected in all stages and circumstances.

We pray for victims of violence and their families, that they may experience our love and support and find comfort in your compassion and in the promise of eternal life.

We pray for those on death row, that their lives may be spared, that the innocent may be freed and that the guilty may come to acknowledge their faults and seek reconciliation.

We pray for the families of those who are facing execution, that they may be comforted by your love and compassion.

We pray for civic leaders, that they may commit themselves to respecting every human life and ending the use of the death penalty in our land. Compassionate Father, give us wisdom and hearts filled with your love.

Guide us as we work to end the use of the death penalty and to build a society that truly chooses life in all situations.

We ask this Father through your Son Jesus Christ who lives and reigns with the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever.

Amen.

*Lesson adapted from the plans on the Archdiocese of Los Angeles Office of Life, Justice and Peace website*