

LEARNING TO FORGIVE

GRADES 7-9- Lesson II

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 consider the dignity of every person. The Church's stance on capital punishment is not letting criminals escape what they deserve, rather, it is valuing their life as made in the image of God and leaving just punishment up to Him.

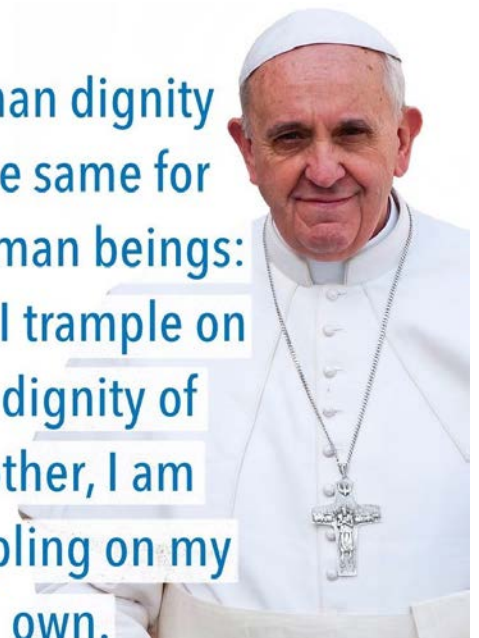
Lesson:

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 victims and families to forgive the offender and allows the offender to seek that forgiveness.

Watch:

[Confession is a Place of Victory](#)

Human dignity
is the same for
all human beings:
when I trample on
the dignity of
another, I am
trampling on my
own.



Discussion:

- Confession offers us an opportunity to return to right relationship with God.
- How do you feel about confession? Scared? Great? How did this video change your perception of confession?
- In the Our Father we pray “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” How do you think this relates to God’s mercy in confession?
- God offers us endless mercy but He also asks us to extend that same mercy to others who have wronged us. If God offers us this mercy for wronging Him who we should love above all else then who are we to reject mercy to someone else?
- Giving mercy as Christians does not just apply to those who have wronged us personally but also systematic mercy and recognition of the dignity of criminals. Criminals have fallen away from God but God still wants them to come back to Him like the Prodigal’s Son. We are called to visit those in prison and minister to them. Have you ever done prison ministry? Do you know anyone who has?
- Prisons are a place where the dignity of the criminal is often not recognized. The Catholic Church takes a strong stance on the treatment of prisoners when it comes to punishments like long sentences, solitary confinement, and the death penalty. Why do you think criminals’ dignity is often disregarded? Why do you think the church speaks out against practices like these?

Watch: [Catholic Stance on Capital Punishment](#) *Note: Fr. Spitzer is blind

Read: [Catechism 2267](#)

Discuss:

- Why did the Church approve capital punishment in certain circumstances for centuries but change its stance in recent years? A: Previously, there was no adequate way to keep criminals off the street or pay for them to spend life in prison. For the common good capital punishment was tolerated. Now, we have viable ways to keep criminals in prisons for life sentences, so capital punishment is no longer necessary for the common good. The Church’s teachings have matured with the circumstances of our day.

- What scripture does Fr. Spitzer quote where Jesus says punishment for retribution is not how Christians are called to act? A: [Matthew 5:38](#) during the Sermon On the Mount Jesus teaches his followers to move beyond “an eye for an eye.” Capital punishment is a final act of retaliation so Christians should not support or partake in it.
- What stuck out to you from the explanation given by the Catechism? Do you understand the argument? What are your thoughts/feelings on the topic?
- As Catholics we are called to respect all life no matter what our culture is telling us. Life is disrespected in a variety of ways that seem acceptable, but we know each person is made in the image of God and that dignity cannot be taken away no matter a person’s age, circumstance, crimes committed, etc. Satan wants to rob God’s children of their dignity any chance he gets and the same ploy is at play in capital punishment.
- Why do you think the devil encourages capital punishment? A: Capital punishment takes the life of someone who, if allowed to live, could have a conversion of heart and find their way back to God.

Watch: [Restorative Justice](#)

Discuss:

- What are your thoughts/feelings about restorative justice? Were you surprised at the success its shown?
- How does this justice system respect the dignity of the victim and perpetrator more than the current system?

Activity/Prayer:

Have students think of someone they need to forgive. Give them a few minutes to write a letter to that person expressing their feelings and how they have been hurt by them. This letter can be given to the person or simply for the healing of the student. Afterward, give students a rosary and begin prayer, “*in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit*” ... “*Lord we come to You today with intentions for all those on death row and for all the people in our lives which we are extending our forgiveness to today. Thank you for Your never-ending mercy for all of us and we pray especially to be wrapped in that mercy at the hour of our deaths.*” ... Lead/teach students to pray the [Divine Mercy Chaplet](#)