

“Today, in fact, as a consequence of the possibilities which the state has for effectively preventing crime, by rendering one who has committed an offense incapable of doing harm without definitively taking away from him the possibility of redeeming himself the cases in which the execution of the offender is an absolute necessity are very rare, if not practically non-existent” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* §2267).

In plain English, this means that if a society has the capability to protect itself by incarcerating an offender where they cannot ever harm another person, then we do not have the right to take the life. Once life ends, the possibility of salvation ends.

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Pope John Paul II Society of Evangelists

14818 Rancho Road

Hesperia, California, USA

Telephone: 760-220-6818

FAX: 760-948-7620

E-mail: pjpiisoe@earthlink.net

www.pjpiisoe.org

Pamphlet 125

Thou Shalt Not Kill

Victor R. Claveau, MJ

Murder is prohibited in the Decalogue (Ex. 20:15; Dt 5:18). God established the commandment, “thou shalt not kill,” in order to protect all human life, the greatest of His creations. This must be understood as not only concerning the life of the body, but also of the life of grace, which is the spiritual life of the soul.

Our daily newspapers are splattered with the blood of those unjustly put to death through revenge, desire to remove a rival, for money, or out of fear. That murder is sinful is clear from Sacred Scripture. “Any one who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him” (1 Jn 3:15). “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for God made man in his own image” (Gen. 9:6).

Homicide, or Murder, including suicide consists in taking one’s own life, or the life of another without lawful authority. “The fifth commandment forbids direct and intentional killing as gravely sinful. The murderer and those who cooperate voluntarily in murder commit a sin that cries out to heaven for vengeance. Infanticide, fratricide, parricide, and the murder of a spouse are especially grave crimes by reason of the natural bonds, which they break. Concern for eugenics or public health cannot justify any murder, even if commanded by

public authority” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* §2268).

No person, no matter how powerful he or she may be, has the right to take another human life without legitimate authority. The murderer takes to himself the right of God over human life. He robs man of his most precious possession – life. He often sends a soul into eternity without any preparation. He disrupts society, causes bitter grief, and sets the stage for other murders. Mercy killing, lynching, and abortion are also classified as murder. Those who are legitimately authorized to take another’s life are the executioners of legal sentences, soldiers who fight in a just war, and persons who have no other means of protecting their own life against an unjust aggressor.

In the case of defending our own lives we are not allowed to go beyond the limits of a just defense. We cannot do more harm to an aggressor than is necessary to protect ourselves from evil; nor is it allowed to strike him before or after the time of his attack. He must have first attacked or shown his intention of doing so before we have a right to wound him; for instance, if he were loading his pistol or drawing his knife, we should then be justified in defending ourselves. In every case where we should be justified in killing an unjust assailant in self-defense it would also be right to do so in defense of another.

Suicide is simply another form of murder. Deliberate killing of oneself is never justified. To do so is to usurp the rights of God, who is the author and judge of

our existence. God, in a sense, loans us the use of our life, and He is the only one who has the right to take it. For this reason the law says, “Thou shalt not kill.” The person who commits suicide violates this law by committing the most repugnant of murders, and unless there are mitigating circumstances, such as mental illness, or coercion, merits eternal damnation. It is not suicide to expose one’s life to danger from necessity or for the public good. The soldier who covers a grenade with his body in order to save the life of his comrades would not be guilty of suicide. It was not suicide when St. Maximilian Kolbe, the dutiful priest, offered his life in exchange for the life of another in a Nazi concentration camp. If a shipwrecked person gives his life vest to another and drowns as a result he cannot be held guilty of suicide.

The fifth commandment also forbids, besides homicide, all that is related to it, or that tends in any way to destroy the integrity of human life; and this includes, hatred, anger and revenge, evil wishes and desires of revenge, quarrels, angry blows or threats, all ill-treatment of one’s neighbor and hardness of heart towards the poor. It also includes all that is hurtful to ourselves, intemperance, excesses that shorten life, and rash exposure of our lives without necessity.

What does the Catholic Church really teach about the death penalty? There seems to be much confusion among Catholics and non-Catholics alike on this subject.

The Church holds that, “The efforts of the state to curb the spread of behavior

harmful to people’s rights and to the basic rules of civil society correspond to the requirement of safeguarding the common good. Legitimate public authority has the right and the duty to inflict punishment proportionate to the gravity of the offense. Punishment has the primary aim of redressing the disorder introduced by the offense. When it is willingly accepted by the guilty party, it assumes the value of expiation. Punishment then, in addition to defending public order and protecting people’s safety, has a medicinal purpose: as far as possible, it must contribute to the correction of the guilty party” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* §2266).

“Assuming that the guilty party’s identity and responsibility have been fully determined, the traditional teaching of the Church does not exclude recourse to the death penalty, if this is the only possible way of effectively defending human lives against the unjust aggressor. If, however, non-lethal means are sufficient to defend and protect people’s safety from the aggressor, authority will limit itself to such means, as these are more in keeping with the concrete conditions of the common good and more in conformity with the dignity of the human person.