

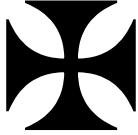


The Basilica of Saint Longinus the Centurion
Mother Church of the Holy Catholic Church of the Gospels
THE OFFICE OF THE LEGATUS EPISCOPUS MAXIMUS

Litterae Encyclicae Legatinae **Non Occides**

On the Death Penalty, the Mercy of Christ, and the Inviolable Dignity of Human Life

Issued from the Basilica of Saint Longinus the Centurion
Anno Domini 2026



In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Greetings and peace to you in the name of Christ, our Risen Lord.

- 1) Since the beginning of time, violence and war have plagued every nation and all peoples. Murder isn't seen in scripture before Cain murders Abel. It is Cain who does something that, if you will allow the inference, many likely never thought was even possible. Due to jealousy, Cain kills Abel by his own hand, and then attempts to hide what he has done. Yet, God comes to Cain and says that he can hear the blood of Abel crying out from the ground. This is also the passage where Cain impiously says to the Lord that he is not his brother's keeper. Yet, God knows what Cain has done, but instead of killing him, he marks him; ensuring that Cain will never be killed but live a long life being avoided by everyone.
- 2) Further in Genesis, however, God says to Noah and his household that "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall their blood be shed." God links this command with his own image. That, because mankind is created in the image and likeness of God, murderers kill the God-like image by shedding the blood of the bearer. Christians today reach for this early command, believing it answers the question; but they don't see that it raises new ones. Does a person cease to be made in the image and likeness of God when they commit murder against their fellow man, or do we treat them the way God treated Cain?
- 3) When we move to Exodus, we see the familiar command, whose Latin translation is the title of this encyclical, "Thou Shalt Not Kill." Many Christians have long anguished over the commandments and of their value to Christianity. In my teaching, I make it clear that the Commandments are the ultimate commands of God himself, binding on all peoples and nations. However, holding with Christ, I do not read them rigidly; legalism and textualism defeat the purpose of those commands. For the same Lord who said that hatred is murder in the eyes of God, also said that lust is adultery; akin to one having lain with the object of their lust, even if in the heart only. What Christ essentially says of the commandments is that you don't have to physically commit the act, your heart can commit the act even if your body doesn't.
- 4) The command of not killing is simple, especially with Christ's interpretive lens in place. The command prohibits the taking of life whether physically, emotionally, or psychologically. Put simply, whether it kills their body, soul, or mind, it is all a form of murder to God; thus, prohibited under the command.

- 5) When we move into Leviticus and Deuteronomy, we see that death is commanded for a variety of offenses. However, when we look at these laws in the fullness of Jesus, we see that God permits some actions; but they are not sanctioned nor approved by him, as he clearly prefers the original order of things. For instance, marriage is meant to be forever in the eyes of God; yet, due to hardness of heart, he allows divorce. The Covenant with Moses is fulfilled by Christ, as Christ repeatedly makes clear. The fulfillment, while total, varies in some senses. Christ fulfills the decalogue by expanding it and revealing its purpose; yet still commanding it be followed as his teachings convey. As for the Laws of Moses, contained in Leviticus, Jesus' death is the sacrifice that frees us from that particular bondage. Christians, as a result, are not under the purity, sacrificial, and penal laws of Moses; but under the New Covenant, where the Decalogue is received through Christ, interpreted by Christ, and carried into the heart by Christ. But let's talk about how Christ fulfills it, and what a covenant really is at its heart.
- 6) A covenant, at its heart, is a religious contract. Like a contract, a covenant is a list of agreements, promises, and consequences for breach. Under the covenant, Israelites were supposed to be faithful to God and obey what he was setting out for them. In exchange, God promised them that he would protect them, defend them, and see their enemies defeated. After Moses dies, the time of the "Judges" begins. Israel breaks the covenant constantly, are taken prisoner by civilizations, and then they cry out for God to help; and God does, raising up a leader or a "judge" from among them to save them. When the Judge dies, the Israelites again break the covenant, and the cycle repeats; Gideon and Samson are the famous amongst these.
- 7) Due to our inability to fulfill our side of the covenant with God, God takes human form to fulfill what we could not. When God makes a covenant, it must be answered. It cannot simply be ignored, erased, or treated as though breach has no meaning. Yet humanity owed what humanity could not pay. God, as God alone, could not perform the human side of the covenant because that duty belonged to mankind. So, God does what only God can do. He joins Himself to mankind. In Jesus Christ, the Maker of the covenant takes on the debt of the covenant without ceasing to be its Maker. He enters the debtor's house, takes the debtor's nature, assumes the debtor's burden, and satisfies the covenant from the debtor's side.
- 8) God does not abandon mankind to breach and judgment; nor does He pretend the covenant never mattered. He fulfills it in the flesh. God loved us so totally that He became one of us, so that in Him the old covenant could be fulfilled and the New

Covenant could be opened; final in Christ, merciful in character, and rooted in love of God and love of neighbor. In Christ, the debt is paid in full, needing no further completion from us.

- 9) In contract language, still, the covenant has been satisfied. Christ establishes the New Covenant; a covenant of bread and wine, of following His commands and teachings, and of loving others as Christ loved us. This New Covenant carries forth the words of the Decalogue, but fulfills and closes the Levitical observances and statutes as binding obligations. Where a covenant is similar to a contract is that once it is fulfilled and satisfied, obligations toward it cease; unless those obligations are written into a new one. In Christ, He carries forth the Decalogue, albeit in a reinterpreted form. However, He does not carry forth the Laws of Moses as continuing obligations upon Christians. Imagine, if you will, that you are a party to a contract; a debtor under contract.
- 10) Let us say that you have bought a car, signed a contract for payment, but were unable to make even minimal payments after a time. In the seller's kindness, he gives you the full balance owed on the car. You hand over the money, the balance is paid, and the contract is satisfied. If the contract is satisfied, are you going to continue making the payments required under that contract? This is what we, as Christians, do when we hold others, and indeed ourselves, to the fulfilled provisions of Leviticus; and in doing so, we treat the sacrifice which fulfilled the covenant as though it were inadequate.
- 11) We then move to the Gospels, where Christ carries forth the decalogue. However, we see him reject death as suitable punishment; even though the Laws of Moses command it. Instead, he sharpens God's mandate in Hosea; that God desires mercy, not sacrifice. The Laws of Moses demanded the death of an adulteress, yet Jesus rejects this outright when he says to those gathered "He who is without [any] sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." However, this is not the only place we see Jesus condemn killing. When the sons of Zebedee, James and John, are with Jesus, the Samaritans treat them terribly. When James and John mention calling down fire from heaven, Jesus tells them that he has not come to destroy; rather, he has come to save.
- 12) We see Jesus also expand the Decalogue's prohibition on murder, extending it to showing hatred and contempt for others. Jesus even reinterprets "an eye for an eye" commanding that evil is not to be resisted. That we are to go two miles, give our tunic, even offer up the other cheek. The rationale behind it is that violence solves nothing, rather it creates more problems. Instead, the best tool is nonviolence. If we do not give in to anger or hatred, giving no reason for provocation, it stirs something within the soul. In the 1960s,

Martin Luther King Jr. showed the world what this looked like. As a result of his nonviolence, millions of Americans came together. News crews documented in real-time the violence used against those who had not provoked it. As a result, Americans saw it in their homes and spurred legislation that has lasted decades; at least, until recently with the Supreme Court's taking an axe to the Voting Right Act.

- 13) Finally, we move to the Passion of Our Lord. Jesus rebukes Peter for taking up the sword in his defense. He doesn't speak in his defense when he is questioned by the Sanhedrin, Herod, nor Pilate. On the cross, as he is dying, he forgives his executioners. It is inconceivable in the Christian mind that Jesus would have advocated the penalty he suffered, wishing us to mete it out on others. His death was so that we may live, spiritually and physically; no longer tied to sacrifice and death at the hands of the law.
- 14) We turn then to the Early Church Fathers. They lived closer to the time of Jesus and the apostles than we do today. They give us the best evidence for how Christian communities lived, and what they believed. Athenagoras, a Greek Christian living around the time of early to mid-second century, in his writing *A Plea for Christian*, says of the death penalty that Christians cannot endure witnessing a person be put to death; saying that to do so is morally akin to killing.
- 15) Lacantius, an Early Christian author and later advisor to Emperor Constantine, shared the same sentiments as Athenagoras; saying it wasn't lawful to kill or even be present when it was being done. He would go further and say that no just man can pass a sentence of death, that killing, whether by word or sentence, is prohibited and not condonable; saying that "Killing a human being who God willed inviolable is always wrong."
- 16) Origen, the early Christian theologian living around the turn of third century, says that Christians shouldn't participate in stoning, burning, or other deaths commanded by Moses; he makes it clear that Christians do not carry those punishments forward in Christ.
- 17) Tatian, living around the same time as Athenagoras, writes in his *Address to the Greeks* that Christians should not support gladiatorial sports; that the rich buying the death of another isn't condonable. Tertullian, the Early Church writer, says that those who wear the purple (emperors, judges, magistrates, and all others who have legal authority) if they follow Christ, must not pass a sentence that takes the life of another.
- 18) It is not until after Constantine that we see a real shift away from condemning death, to the eventual usage of it by the Church itself; sentencing heretics to be burned at the stake. While not every Ante-Nicene Father wrote about the death penalty, those that did speak

about death as a punishment did not write favorably about it. It appears to be a sizable consensus of Early Church writers that Christians are not supposed to call for the death of someone, pass a judgement of death over someone, enact the sentence of it, nor witness the taking of a life; finding it incompatible with the Christian life and our witness of Christ.

- 19) As Christians, we are supposed to believe in justice that restores an offender to their place in society. The Early Church did not support murderers, or those who committed public evil, they just didn't believe in death as a punishment. The Didache, the early manual of teachings and Church formation, commands correction and exclusion until repentance; but it never commands death. This is what the apostles taught, according to the Didache, and it is sound teaching.
- 20) The Church never turns its back on victims or their families. While we are supposed to restore the offender, we must never forget victims. As Christians, we believe in justice for offenders; Christ commands justice. However, he commands that justice must not be divorced from mercy. In the beatitudes, Jesus says "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy." We must not forget that this command is not just about how we interact with each other, but also about how God interacts with us. It doesn't matter whether someone deserves to be shown mercy, it matters whether you want mercy shown for yourself when you stand before God. So, we must show mercy to the offender.
- 21) The Church must also help take care of the victims and their families. In many cases, they get forgotten; jostled between decisions and forced to live the worst day of their lives over and over in courtrooms, in front of cameras, and news stories. Who upholds them? Even years after a tragedy, they still need care. Many victim's families say that, after a tragedy, they are allowed to grieve for a time before others don't want to hear about it anymore; grief is treated by their outside circle as having a shelf life. The Church cannot abandon them. Just as Christ stretched his arms upon the cross, the Church stretches its arms to embrace both offender and victim; it isn't an enviable place to sit, but Christ asks it of his Church.
- 22) The Church cannot condone capital punishment, or else it makes itself complicit and rejects Christ in the process. Christians cannot advocate for capital punishment, witness it, or partake in its administration, lest they become just as complicit. If a Christian supports the death penalty, they cannot stand behind the faith for it. If they mount that hill, they mount it alone; owning that fact, and accepting that they are no different than the murderers they condemn. This teaching may be harsh, but it is in accordance with

Christian teaching and Early Church doctrine; again, they lived closer to Christ and the Apostolic age than we do today. The Church and the faithful must look to the old road and the good way, following it in their lives and witness. For centuries the Church allowed death to be carried out, staying silent as people were deprived their very life. The Church forgot the old road. It forgot the good way. Even in recent years, the Roman Catholic Church allowed for the death penalty in rare cases; Pope Francis made the last change to the catechism in 2018, closing the door on capital punishment entirely.

- 23) Today, there are many Christians who still hold the death penalty to be a defensible punishment. While many denominations have taken a stand, plenty of Christians stand defiant against the Church's teachings; and the justice Christ commanded us to show. However, even more problematic is the number of people who may have appealed their sentences, claimed innocence, and still were wrongfully executed. One example is Carlton Gary, who was executed in 2018. Before his execution, some of the DNA evidence was tested post-conviction and was found to exclude Gary. Due to improper handling, the remaining DNA evidence had been contaminated and thus untestable. The death penalty is a final solution, and doesn't always result in the right person being executed.
- 24) Anytime an innocent person could be killed, or has been, the punishment is tainted beyond retrieval; necessitating its abandonment. In some cases, procedural bars are placed on claims of innocence; those bars, had they been successfully invoked, would have killed Richard Glossip. We cannot say the penalty is meted out with honesty, transparency, or integrity. When taken in totality, we must teach and instruct that "Non Occides" or "Thou shalt not kill" does not have any exceptions; and thus killing, no matter its form, is against Christian teachings, sound doctrine, and good conscience and morals.
- 25) Therefore, as Legate of the Holy Catholic Church of the Gospels, and under the authority of this office, I give the following teaching to the faithful:
- 26) That Capital Punishment, no matter its form, as a judicial punishment is incompatible with Jesus' commands, Christian morals, teachings, and Church doctrine.
- 27) That the faithful of this denomination are instructed to not pass such a sentence whether as a Judge, or juror. And, they are not to partake in its administration or be witnesses for the State or any newspaper at an execution. They are permitted to be spiritual advisors, or death house clergy. The Church will not abandon the condemned at the hour of their death.

- 28) That Victims families are to be cared for by the faithful, accompanied by the Church's ministers, and religious orders of the Church. The teaching of this church is not meant to deny victims the right to justice, rather to give them the justice God allows and allowing God to work in the life of the condemned. Where blood has been shed, the Church must not deny it or lessen the tragedy experienced. Just that the solution to tragedy is not another body, and not another grieving family; one grieving family is tragedy enough without adding to the suffering.
- 29) That Condemned prisoners are to be accompanied by the Church's ministers, religious orders, and the faithful of this denomination. However, while the Church teaches mercy, this is not to be taken as a free excuse to commit evil without consequence. While we will not tolerate capital punishment, we do believe in justice and incarceration for those who commit grave evil. We do command repentance for evil deeds, and reparations where repair can take place.
- 30) Lastly, that all persons who commit unspeakable acts of evil are not cut off from heaven, nor immediately damned for eternity. Jesus, on the cross, makes it clear that even the guilty can enter paradise. Therefore, we reject hatred and vitriol directed towards criminals as if they already destined for Hell; it isn't just unchristian, but also can put one's own soul in jeopardy. If criminals are truly sorry, repent, and amend their life, even at the end of their life, they are under the mercy of Christ; as Christ will judge us all.
- 31) We commend this teaching to God, the faithful, the clergy, and all those of good conscience. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In testimony whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and affixed the Seal of the Basilica of Saint Longinus this the 8th day of May, in the Year of Our Lord Two Thousand and Twenty-Six.

✠ *Brandonis Leg. Max.*

His Holiness, the Legate

Chief Legate-Bishop of the Holy Catholic Church of the Gospels
Bishop Ecclesiae of the Basilica of Saint Longinus the Centurion
Apostolus per Vocationem Dei

