

Camus, Catholicism and the Death Penalty

By **Thomas Merton**

Introduced and Transcribed by **Mark C. Meade**

I wrote an article for the Spring 2011 issue of *The Merton Seasonal*¹ concerning Thomas Merton's reading notes on Albert Camus's essay, "Réflexions sur la Guillotine" ("Reflections on the Guillotine"²). Merton did not publish an essay or part of a book incorporating these notes, and I thought it likely that these scattered notes were his only reflection on this essay by Camus. Sometimes I am pleased to be wrong. In creating a finding aid for the one of the newly published audio recordings of Merton's lectures released by Now You Know Media, I discovered a section of a conference Merton recorded in July of 1967 for the Sisters of Loretto in which he mentions Camus and his essay on the death penalty.³ In the conference, Merton expands upon the themes reflected in the notes. He echoes concerns shared with Camus about the death penalty in general and, scandalous to both Merton and Camus, the involvement by the Catholic Church in historically sanctioning the death penalty and using it as a tool of religious submission. In the following transcript of the relevant portion of his conference, Merton's attention is drawn to the connection between the Catholic justification of the death penalty and justification for war, as stated by a Swiss Catholic politician. He attributes these teachings on war and capital punishment to poor catechesis from early Catholic education to seminary training, even distorting the logic used by those in the Church hierarchy. On a broader level, he sees this as the Church's dark history of siding with systems of corrupt political power and siding against individual rights and dignity. He posits two undesirable extremes: submission to an often unjust power structure, frequently supported by the Church, that dehumanizes the individual, and support from left-wing Catholics of Communism, a political system with its own history of large-scale atrocities committed against groups defined as enemies of the state. In the 1960s, the Second Vatican Council began to change the Catholic outlook on war while some American clerics openly continued their support of the Vietnam War. Likewise, Catholic opposition to the death penalty, largely championed by bishops and popes in the last few decades, is not yet universally accepted by American lay Catholics. At a time when Church leaders feel increasingly threatened by challenges to its authority, largely undermined by its own scandals, Merton's words are a reminder that, on a host of issues, the faithful may be willing to stand with the Church as long as the Church is perceived as standing with its people and not for a political agenda.

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Another approach to this question from another viewpoint [is] the fact of the Church and of Catholics being defenders of established society and the status quo, and of doing this in the name of God. In Camus's very interesting little work on capital punishment, he is questioning the right of society to deprive a man of life and to judge him definitively, to close his accounts, without compassion. He admits, of course, other punishments, but he feels that the death penalty is not justified. Talking

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about the death penalty in the past, [he states] that in a sacred society there is special slant on the death penalty, that for the man condemned to death, the death penalty was seen on two different levels – that being deprived of his physical life, he was not necessarily deprived of eternal life, and that he was not definitively judged. Then he has a very amusing, very shocking, quotation from a member of the Swiss parliament. In 1937, there was a discussion of the death penalty in Switzerland, and a Catholic member of this government was advocating the death penalty as a good thing from a Catholic point of view. So here is the man’s argument: that the death penalty, he says, is something very good for criminals because it makes them think a little, it gives them some salutary points of meditation. He says, the criminal recants and his preparation for death is made more easy. The Church has saved one of her members; she has accomplished her divine mission; that is why the Church has always accepted the death penalty not only as a legitimate means of social defense but *as a powerful means of salvation* [Camus’s emphasis]. Without wanting to make the death penalty a thing of the Church (*une chose d’Église*), the death penalty can claim for itself a quasi-divine efficacy like war⁴ [Merton laughs]. Well, that’s a beautiful quote! That shows the solemn mentality of the average Catholic committed entirely to the status quo, to society as it is, to a non-prophetic view of society. There you have a completely non-prophetic, Catholic support of society, a refusal to choose for the individual against society, and a justification on religious grounds. The death penalty and war are means of salvation because they help man, put man face-to-face with death, and they make him decide. They force him to repent, irrespective of the fact that a lot of them do not repent. And so the death penalty and war are means of salvation, and you find this good man is almost at the point of hesitatingly regarding them as “sacramentals,” but he draws back in time. He doesn’t go quite that far.

Now, that [is a] significant quotation with which we find our Catholic logic is tempted. We run along those rails, and we are tempted to say [that] maybe there is something to what he is saying there; but that is an admission to the grave calamity that has happened in Catholic thought – that we should be so prone to feel that this is reasonable. That the Church should support social order in this particular way, established order – many Catholics would fully agree with this. They would not perhaps go so far as to say the death penalty is a means of salvation, but they would say that this is a practical, reasonable way of looking at things. This kind of thinking, let us face it, underlies so much of the teaching, so much of the indoctrination, so much of the preparation for life that we give in our Catholic schools. This is the sort of thinking that is taken for granted, is inculcated and accepted in Catholic education to a great extent. That is a very shocking thing because it means that we are committed to this sort of inhuman, self-righteous support of society at any cost. This comes out, for example, in Cardinal Spellman’s defense of the Vietnam War. Cardinal Spellman can defend the Vietnam War and can even say “my country right or wrong” because he thinks in these terms – he has grown up thinking in these terms, has always thought in these terms; [it] is natural for him to think in these terms. For real renewal to take place in the Church, in religious life and in education, this kind of thinking has to be changed.

What is Camus’s thought on this idea of the death penalty and on this shocking practice of using the death penalty as a means of forcing a man to return to religion? The chaplain [is] present with the condemned man, taking advantage of him, so to speak, in a moment of supreme hazard and weakness; reconciling him with God and reconciling him with society at the same time; making

him accept the death inflicted upon him by society in the name of God; and promising him eternal life for his submission to society. The ambiguity of this in Camus's eyes! This is an ambiguity that we do not consider. We do not worry about it, but he worries about it very much.

[Camus] says, in this canton of Switzerland where their heads are cut off, the sword with which the condemned were beheaded had an inscription on it which said, "Lord Jesus, you are the Judge." From a certain point of view Camus says that it is true. This means they are putting the judgment in the hands of God and not in the hands of man and so forth; but, ultimately, he says this sword is a further outrage to the person of Christ. Remember, Camus is not a Christian.

Then [Camus relates] the terrible word of a man condemned to death in Russia by the Tsars in 1905. The priest comes to him with the image of Christ and the man says, "Go away! Do not commit a sacrilege." This is a strange new view, but it is a view which shows that using the things of religion, the image of Christ, to justify a man's submission to the social order is, in a certain way, subordinating the things of God to that social order. It is a kind of idolatry, Camus would say. This is a very complicated question.

At the back of my mind all through this has been the figure of Joan of Arc, condemned roundly in the name of God as a heretic. They threw the whole book at her. This has been brought out more easily by the fact that she is a French national heroine. So in the name of nationalism, the political iniquity of this crime against justice has been brought out more easily, but the fact remains that in Joan of Arc's case what happened was a complete prostitution of justice to politics – an idolatrous, sacrilegious profanation of the name of God and the truth of God in destroying this human being. She was destroyed because of her prophetic witness against an iniquitous social situation, against an unjust social situation, and against a corrupt clergy and a corrupt Church.

So this is just another glimpse, another aspect, of the great problem today: that although we may shout about church and state, and not mixing up the church with politics, the Church is so deeply implicated in an established society in which there is so much injustice, so much lying and so much hypocrisy. The Church is so profoundly involved in this, justifies it in the name of God, and keeps telling people that their unquestioning submission to an unjust social situation, or at least an ambiguous social situation, is something pleasing to God. All that I can do myself at this particular point in talking about this is to raise a few of the questions. I don't know the answers.

I admit there is a very grave danger among certain radical Catholics today of simply swinging over and identifying with another social system, with the Communist system. There are so many left-wing Catholics in France that are simply lined up with Communism. The Communist system is just as iniquitous, just as hypocritical, just as pharisaical. The only advantage it has is that it is socialistic; and, therefore, it avoids some of the enormous economic injustices of our capitalistic society. It is, perhaps, slightly more honest economically, but that is all. There have been enormous political injustices and enormous stupidities. It is a reign of a stupid, arbitrary, bureaucratic machine. A Catholic cannot simply identify with that. That is the great danger. My view is that we have to be groping and seeking, not for some easy answer, but for a truly prophetic position which does not line up with any one of these powers, any one of these power blocs; and which does honestly, really and truly stand up for the interests of man, made in the image and likeness of God; and stand for life, stand for survival, stand for truth in human and social life and stand for real justice.

How can we do this? I don't have an answer ready. I do not claim that I will have an answer

soon, but this is something we should be thinking about. This is part of our task, and it does not mean getting involved in politics. It does mean facing certain social truths on a prophetic and Christian level, and helping to clarify these truths for a nation which is in serious hazard because of the great injustices and abuses, which are, in fact, quite operative in our life today.

1. Mark C. Meade, "Rebels in a Death-Wish Culture: Opposition to the Death Penalty in the Writings of Thomas Merton and Albert Camus," *The Merton Seasonal* 36.1 (Spring 2011) 3-9.
2. Albert Camus, "Reflections on the Guillotine," *The Plague; The Fall; Exile and the Kingdom; and Selected Essays*, trans. Stuart Gilbert and Justin O'Brien (New York: Modern Library, 1963) 609-56.
3. Thomas Merton, "Camus: The Status Quo," *Prayer and Trial in Christian Life* [sound recording] (Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2013).
4. This quotation, which differs from the translation that I have cited (see 647), is probably Merton's own rendering of the French, because here and in his notebooks he quotes the original French. Camus notes that this statement was made in 1937 by M. Grand, a member of the Swiss National Council from Fribourg.