

# Forgiveness & Justice

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September 12, 2026

*A response to the vandalism of the statue of the Blessed Mother*

You probably know by now, on September 8, this past Tuesday, which was the birthday of our Blessed Mother, late at night our historic statue, painted gold, was vandalized. It was knocked over, it was cracked, some of the parts broke off, and in Church terminology we call that a desecration.

Desecration is when someone with malicious intent tries to damage or destroy a sacred object or something religious that we hold dear. Let me just say, to bring you kind of up to date without throwing a wrench into the wheels of justice, that Bishop Senior knows about this.

The insurance carrier has been contacted. We have some people, professionals, coming in on Tuesday to take a look at the statue and see if it can, in fact, be repaired or at least be replaced.

As some of you know, it was the statue between the spires, in the middle of them. That's where this statue was in the old church that dates back to the 1870s.

And finally, just so you know, the police are on it, and the detectives also, and are going to do a very good job, so we'll leave it at that. So if everything is pretty much well in hand, what is there left for us to do?

Well, some people I've heard, you know, have told me, "Father, I'm very upset about this. I'm devastated." Others have said that they're very angry.

Others have said they feel violated. All normal, very expected feelings in light of that kind of evil.

And we're dealing with two kinds of evil here, really. We're dealing with being offended by this desecration, which offends God and our Blessed Mother and anyone who holds our Blessed Mother near and dear to their hearts.

And we're dealing with a crime, a felony. So we're kind of offended in two ways.

How are we going to deal with that? Funny that we should have this Gospel today, which is about forgiveness.

Because I think it is divinely inspired, because it gives us a way. It gives us a really important spiritual way to deal with these kinds of situations in life.

And so Jesus says, "Forgive." And interestingly enough, Jesus compares forgiveness to writing off a debt. So how do we apply that to our present situation?

Well, first of all, we can write off a debt that we often feel we owe to ourselves: to get even, to retaliate, to seek revenge against the perpetrator of this offensive crime. But then we realize that Jesus said, "We're not going to do that."

We're not going to do an eye for an eye. What we're going to do is, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." So that's what we're going to do.

We're going to pray for the perpetrator that he will have a kind of conversion and, in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "Stop doing evil and learn to do good."

Okay, what's another debt we might write off? How about the debt of an apology? We are owed an apology. Well, we're also going to write off that debt.

We're going to write it off because we can't force anyone to feel sorry.

What's another debt we're going to write off? Restitution. Oh my goodness, how can we write that off? We need that to pay for the statue, to have it repaired or replaced.

Restitution, in a spiritual sense, is actually what we call satisfaction. It's like the penance we do after confession to try to show God that we're really sorry and we want to make this situation right again. We can't force anyone to do that. We can't.

Another debt that we can write off is the demand that we often place on forgiveness. We feel we owe that to ourselves.

We feel it's just: "I'm not going to forgive this perpetrator until he apologizes, until he pays full restitution, and until he changes his evil ways and has a conversion. Then I'll forgive him." Well, you see how we're adding on to forgiveness and Jesus is subtracting from it?

When we hold on to these kinds of conditions when it comes to forgiveness, we often end up frustrated and angry and bitter and feeling more victimized, because we're holding on to things we can't control.

We cannot control an apology or restitution or how someone is going to respond to this situation. Jesus is saying, in effect, "You've got to learn to let some things go." We need to learn to write off the things that we cannot control.

That actually constitutes forgiveness, and it's good for us. We often think we're doing forgiveness for the other person, but so often, especially when a person shows absolutely no repentance, forgiveness is unilateral.

It's something we do for ourselves. Because if we hold on to all these conditions of forgiveness that are never met, we end up unforgiving. We end up angry. That often produces a stress response in us, which releases the cortisol, and we're not supposed to live in that kind of stressed-out state all the time. It's not good for our hearts. It's not good for our minds.

Science has figured that out. We need to get on board. It's not good to live in a state of unforgiveness.

Okay, so if we write off all of these debts, then aren't we—aren't we giving away the farm?

I mean, where is the justice for us? Well, justice for us comes with the other side of the forgiveness coin, which is justice.

And St. Thomas Aquinas tells us that justice is to give to the person what they are owed. And so, with the criminal justice system on board and working for us, what are we owed? We are owed restitution, satisfaction, to make it whole.

What is the perpetrator owed? Well, probably according to the Pennsylvania Crimes Code, he's owed incarceration, probably fines, and restitution to us.

So in this way, we see that forgiveness and justice are not mutually exclusive, which most people think they are. The fact that we are forgiving of this individual, as we are, doesn't mean that we give up all justice.

Justice is also a virtue. It's actually one of the cardinal virtues.

Our entire, you know, Western civilization is strongly based on a system of justice. So we need to make use of it and respect it as we can.

So, two sides of the same coin: forgiveness, which actually helps us with our healing of the situation, and justice, which holds the perpetrator accountable. And in this way, we hope and pray that the situation, you know, finds a peaceful and equitable and just resolution.

So if you're angry or hurt or feel violated by what has happened, that's natural. But Jesus says, "Go ahead and try to forgive this," letting go of the things that we cannot control and trusting that the wheels of justice will, in the end, give us our due.

Those very memorable words in our first reading from Sirach. Sirach tells us that, "Wrath and anger are hateful things, and the sinner hugs them tight." May we not hug and hang on to anger, wrath, frustration, bitterness, and victimhood in light of this situation.

But may we be a people known for practicing forgiveness as we await the fulfillment of justice.