

## Holy Week 2020 – A Time for Just Mercy

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You may have heard of the new movie *Just Mercy*. I was particularly interested in it because I work at St. Mary's University School of Law and am a long serving member of the MSJC Anti-Death Penalty/Restorative Justice Issue Team. In addition, I had the opportunity to meet Bryan Stevenson, the author of the book by the same name, when he spoke at a Law Day event in San Antonio.

The movie/book is a powerful and thought-provoking true story that follows young lawyer Bryan Stevenson and his history-making battle for justice. After graduating from Harvard, Bryan had his pick of lucrative jobs. Instead, he heads to Alabama to defend those wrongly condemned or who were not afforded proper representation.

One of his first cases is Walter McMillian, who in 1987 was sentenced to die for the notorious murder of an 18-year-old girl, despite a preponderance of evidence proving his innocence. While the movie portrays a gritty reality of prison life, the Florida bishops have indicated that this movie also puts a human face on the crisis facing America's prison population and the reform that is needed. The Diocese of Pensacola -Tallahassee credits Stevenson for inspiring them to open the Joseph House, a ministry for ex-offenders seeking to help reintegrate them into society.

As I reflected on the title, *Just Mercy*, and background of the movie, I thought it provided a theme for our Anti-Death Penalty Restorative Justice Issue Team's annual Holy Week letter. The image that stayed with me is that of Jesus on the Cross with Mary, John, and the soldiers all witnessing Jesus' suffering and impending death. In the midst of this agony of the cross, we see Jesus extending just mercy to the "good thief," as he is commonly called. Later assigned the name Dismas, he enters into a dialogue with Jesus admitting his sin, accepting his suffering, but opening his heart to the transformative power of Christ by only asking to be remembered.

In turn, he acknowledges that Jesus has done nothing wrong. "And indeed, we have been condemned justly, for the sentence we received corresponds to our crimes, but this man has done nothing criminal." (Luke 23:40-41) In this powerful scene at the cross, Dismas becomes a recipient of God's love and just mercy and invites us to do the same.

I invite individuals or communities of faith or those involved in criminal justice education to read the book or view the movie, *Just Mercy*. In addition, if you would like more information and a program of reflection on restorative justice and its connection with our Marianist spirituality, our Anti-Death Penalty/Restorative Justice Issue Team has developed a [resource and discussion guide](#) in cooperation with NACMS. For further reflection and information on Restorative Justice Spirituality and programs, please read the upcoming spring 2020 "ALIVE" magazine.

The end of the *Just Mercy* movie reveals these credits: “For every nine people who have been executed in the U.S., one person on death row has been exonerated and released, a shocking rate of error.” Stevenson and his colleagues at [Equal Justice Initiative](#) have won relief or release for [more than 140](#) death row prisoners. For me it ties in with the last words of Jesus, “Father forgive them for they know not what they do.” (Luke 23:34)

As we enter these days of Holy Week, (even if our services might not be held in churches impacted by health safety concerns) we might take an opportunity to pray and venerate a cross and reflect on the “just mercy” extended to us. May we also, in turn, reflect on how we might be messengers of restoration and healing.