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Mercy vs. Justice - Blood of the Lamb

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MERCY VS. JUSTICE – BLOOD OF THE LAMB

AN ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF THE ATONEMENT

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HONORS PROJECT

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Introduction

I'm a layman of the Catholic Church. I was raised a "lukewarm" Catholic, going to Mass not every, but most Sundays. As I grew older and more interested in what is "true," I began a journey of reason and philosophy in search of that truth. Through this, I found a new and stronger belief in Christ and in His Church. Since that time, learning and sharing more about the theology and history of the Church has become a passion of mine. My sister was also raised a "lukewarm" Catholic. Around the same time that I had my first spiritual awakening in high school, she had just entered college. There, she was swayed away from the Catholic Church by her new group of friends and towards a more individual interpretation-based school of thought, living by *sola fide* and *sola scriptura* philosophies. These philosophies contend that "sola fide," or faith alone, is necessary to be saved and "sola scriptura," or scripture alone, contains the truth of the faith. The Catholic Church teaches that both faith and works are necessary, and that truth also comes from Sacred Tradition, interpreted by means of the Magisterium of the Church. My sister came to reject what the Church teaches and accept those philosophies. Growing since then, she and I never spoke much about our religious differences to avoid too much conflict, until she found herself being led back to the Catholic Church at the end of 2017.

In mid-2017, my sister and I found ourselves discussing our current interests. We came upon theology, and it was here that she asked me the question that is the basis for the analysis in this paper. She looked at me and asked, "Why was it necessary for Jesus to die?" One might be ready for this question with a typical answer – we were fallen in sin, doomed to be separated from God. God, however, in His infinite love, wanted to save us. Yet in his perfect justice, he would not simply excuse our sins. By offering His only Son, Jesus Christ, to die in atonement for our sins, He was able to save us in both ultimate mercy and justice. Her question, however, was

not finished. “I don’t see how the death of Jesus would solve anything. The ‘God is just’ argument doesn’t make sense to me because Jesus was innocent and we’re not, so that doesn’t look like justice to me. But it’s a scary question to ask because then the whole basic premise of Christianity seems to unravel.”

This conversation brought to my attention just one example of the many tough questions that critically thinking Christians seek answers to regarding the Passion of our Lord. That conversation, and my lack of an immediate answer, inspired me to push forth and learn more, continuing to challenge my faith. In the pages to come, the reader will find the results of that journey, as I respond to my sister’s questions: Why was it necessary for Jesus to die, and how did His death, that of an innocent man of infinite dignity, excuse the rest of us who are guilty of sin against God? How did this satisfy both mercy and justice?

The Questions

- Why was it necessary for Christ to suffer and die on the cross for our sins to be forgiven?
- Did Christ dying on the cross satisfy both God’s mercy and his justice? If so, how?
- Do mercy and justice contradict? Must there be compromise between the two rather than complete fulfillment of both?
- Was it unjust for Jesus to die? If we were guilty and he was innocent, how did His death excuse us?
- How are these questions relevant to college-age Catholics and Christians?
 - Are these kinds of questions one which you’ve thought about or struggled with before, and if so how?
 - Is understanding, or striving towards understanding, complex items of the faith like this important to you and your faith life?
 - Do you feel that your own, mine, or other explanations you may have heard or come across have helped you in your faith or otherwise been useful or affected you in any way?

Methodologies Used

The theological questions here are deep and complex, needing much thought and prayer, as well as researching the publications and writings of others and discussion with experts. Additionally, to find answers to the practical questions of what this all means to college-age Christians, surveying of my peers one-on-one was necessary.

To fulfill the theological goals of this analysis, I researched the topic by finding all I can that the Church specifically and dogmatically teaches about how we are to understand the Atonement, and then proceeded to research and understand various theories and models of how the Atonement worked to save us. After getting a grasp of existing information and thought about the Atonement from written sources, I sought out experts in the field who are experienced in their scholarly study of the subject about the questions I have and what they had to say about the Atonement. In the midst of this, I also interviewed my peers on their thoughts of the Atonement by means of asking them specific questions related to it. The peer interview portion not only serves to give me more views and ideas, but also sets up the portion of this project examining the practical questions of what this means to college-age Christians.

To answer the practical questions of how Atonement is relevant to or affects college-age Christians, I first raised the essential questions of the Atonement to 17 of my fellow college-age Christians and recorded their responses. These theological peer interviews consisted of the first four questions listed above. These include:

1. “Why was it necessary for Christ to suffer and die on the cross in order for our sins to be forgiven?”
2. “Did Christ dying on the cross satisfy both God’s mercy and his justice? If so, how?”

3. “Do mercy and justice contradict? Must there be compromise between the two, rather than complete fulfillment of both?”
4. “Was it unjust for Jesus to die? If we were guilty and he was innocent, how did His death excuse us?”

Later, after giving them my best explanation of the Atonement, I asked them further questions about how the subject affected them and their faith personally, again recording their responses. These practical questions consisted of the three questions listed last:

1. “Are these kinds of questions one which you’ve thought about or struggled with before, and if so how?”
2. “Is understanding, or striving towards understanding, complex items of the faith like this important to you and your faith life?”
3. “Do you feel that your own, mine, or other explanations you may have heard or come across have helped you in your faith or otherwise been useful or affected you in any way?”

From the results of these interviews, I sought to be able to gauge if this kind of research was helpful to my peers, and how important understanding the more complex and detailed concepts of our faith can be to the individual.

Hypothesis

When I began my studies for this analysis, I anticipated a stimulation of conversation surrounding the Pascal Mystery, in particular the Passion. In addition to this, I anticipated that a satisfactory answer to my sister's question, along with all the theological questions posed, would be successfully crafted and conveyed in a way that a general mature audience can understand. I also suspected that about half of college age Catholics interviewed will have struggled with these or similar questions, and that a majority of them would find that knowing the answers to these questions is useful. In addition to this, I thought that I might see a general trend among all those interviewed in how they understood the Atonement and what it meant to them personally. I anticipated to see most Christians look for a way to reconcile both mercy and justice in both the cross and in general, or if they could not, that they would question how the doctrine of the Atonement could work, assuming that God needed to fully fulfill both.

Atonement Theories Discussed

All of these questions pertain to or are closely related to the Atonement, for which there are many theories. The Church does not particularly espouse the belief of any one of the theories. Christus Victor, the Moral Influence theory, Ransom Theory, and Penal Substitution were the first theories I learned about.

Christus Victor

In the Christus Victor model of the Atonement, according to multiple sources, Jesus very literally defeated sin and death itself. Mankind was bound by sin and death from original sin. Christ came and took on that sin and death fully.

With the weight of the world's sin on His back, he suffered death by it. But being God, he rose up from death, directly defeating the forces of sin and death in order to free us from it. This one of the first, if not the very first, theory of the Atonement from the beginning of the Church and the most commonly held by Catholics from early Church history until around the 12th century (Morrison, 2017; Orick, 2015; Stoltzfus, 2012).

Christus Victor was a beautiful theory, but to me seemed far too vague. It stated that Jesus literally defeated sin and death itself by dying and rising for us, and that freed us all. This didn't seem to give the detailed mechanics of exactly how his happened, and while I liked what it said and even agreed with it, I was far from satisfied in understanding "how" from it, or how it was justified that Christ did that in our place. The Cross is at the very core of Christianity – we know that it is how we are saved. It can't have been as simple as a demonstration. Nor does it address the issue of our infinite injustice against God that keeps us from us. Even with this demonstration, we as people have not become sinless, so it somehow still needs to save us from that sin in a way that is more direct than showing us something that should hopefully help us become less sinful. I didn't get much out of the theory when I first learned about it. However, I would come back to this theory later in my thought process.

Ransom Theory

Ransom Theory, according to Morrison, was one of the first theories of the Church made popular in the 3rd century and states that Jesus, in His suffering and death, paid our "ransom." In some versions of the theory, the ransom is paid to God the Father, but more commonly, the ransom is being paid to the devil, who

supposedly had the property right to mankind after Adam and Eve sold humanity to him at the fall (Morrison, 2017).

This was very dissatisfying to me. In the traditional understanding of it, God pays a ransom to the devil by means of suffering on the cross in order to win back ownership of the human race (Morrison, 2017). In some versions, it's even a trick on the devil, making him believe that Christ will be his in exchange for the human race to be God the Father's once again (Morrison, 2017). Simply put, God owes the devil nothing – rather, the human race, His creation, is owed to Him. Nor does God need to play a trick on the devil. We are rightfully the property of God rather than the devil, and if the problem were simply that we were in the devil's clutches, God could simply take us back without needing to ask, negotiate with, or play tricks on the devil.

Moral Influence Theory

The Moral Influence Theory of the Atonement, according to multiple sources, states that Christ came to be an example for us and to show God's love to the world, influencing us to do better in both our acts and our faith in God. In this theory, Christ's death is not necessarily as directly and mechanically necessary for our salvation as in other theories (Morrison, 2017; Peters, 2006). The Moral Influence Theory was also one of the first theories of the Church and was made more popular in the 4th century (Morrison, 2017).

This theory was also dissatisfying to me. Not only did it not give a case for how it was just for Christ to die for our sake or address how it was exactly that He truly excused us, but it did not even suggest that His death directly saved us at all. It only claimed that the entire Passion was, essentially, a show – that it was a demonstration of God's love and that Christ was on Earth

to save us by simply teaching and showing us how to live. Essentially, the theory states that Christ's death on the cross was the mode by which God would show us how much He loves us. I certainly agree that Christ showed us how to live, that the Passion showed us how much God loves us, and that it was truly the ultimate demonstration of God's power, love, and mercy. Even something as great as this, however, was not all it was. This theory is far from addressing any of my questions I needed answers to.

Penal Substitution

In the Atonement theory of Penal Substitution, according to multiple sources, the human race is facing judgement from God to impose His wrath upon us for our sins. It stems from the Reformation in the 1500's (Morrison, 2017). To face wrath proportional to our sin against a being of infinite dignity, God, and ourselves being finite beings with limited dignity, our punishment would have to be infinite in duration (hell) to satisfy God's wrath. Jesus became "legally guilty," as Dr. William Craig describes it, for our sins by means of vicarious liability (Craig, 2017). By doing so, He was able to take on the punishment of God's wrath in place of us. Because Jesus is God and is of infinite dignity, He would not have to take on a punishment of infinite duration. His infinite dignity would make his punishment of infinite magnitude to match the infinite offense against God and satisfy His wrath (Morrison, 2017; Orick, 2015; Peters, 2006; Stoltzfus, 2012).

When I first read about it, I was really beginning to like Penal Substitution. However, there was a fundamental problem with a portion of the theory. The prevalent way of thinking about this theory is that God was angry with mankind and God the Son had to step in and take on that wrath in our place, saving us from God the Father. This cannot be true, as the Godhead is

one and the Persons of the Trinity do not oppose each other or dish out wrath upon one another. God did not save us from Himself. I liked the theory of Penal Substitution, but not in the way of giving God the Father a place to set His wrath and satisfy His anger, but rather replacing that idea with the idea that justice must be served because injustice cannot exist in complete communion with God (I would later find that this describes the Satisfaction Theory). Thinking of it this way, Penal Substitution could appeal to me.

Where I saw Penal Substitution to be a reasonable explanation was in that our offense against God, an infinite being of infinite dignity, was an infinite offense, so justice could never be satisfied by the suffering of mankind because we are not infinite beings unless it were made infinite in duration (hell). No souls can enter into the fullness of His presence while in that unjust state, so they must be cleansed by bloodshed (*The New American Bible, revised edition*, Hebrews 9:22; Orick, 2015) or suffering. Jesus, being God, would satisfy that justice within a finite amount of time because He is an infinite being with infinite dignity, just like God the Father. This is where Penal Substitution theory made sense to me.

I still had a big problem with it though - while it all adds up with its given premises, a vital premise relies on the assumption that making Jesus legally guilty through “vicarious liability” is ethical. Dr. William Craig, a popular Christian apologist, and other sources explain that Christ is “legally guilty” before God the Father through what he calls “imputation,” or what would legally be referred to as vicarious liability, so that we may be pardoned, but He is not personally guilty (Craig, 2017). This could be understood similarly to how people can be hereditarily guilty of original sin, but are not personally guilty of it. Christ, as we know, was free of original sin. Through imputation, however, the theory argues He could still be “legally guilty.” Dr. Craig defends this in that vicarious liability or “imputation” is a commonly accepted legal

practice in the western world (Craig, 2017). This the only reasoning I've seen to support this, and it doesn't justify it for a couple of reasons.

The first reason is that something being commonly accepted in the western world, or any human society, is not grounds to say that it's righteously justified. Analogies between man's and God's law are made in the Bible on multiple occasions, but this doesn't mean that we can make any assertions about what's ultimately (according to God) right and wrong justified simply by what any number of humans think is right or wrong. The second is that, even if it were given that imputation were justified by it being commonly accepted human practice in the western world, it certainly would not extend to capital punishment, let alone extensive torture followed by a slow and brutal execution as that's not accepted in western legal systems.

Secondly, vicarious liability is commonly accepted where the superior has the “right and duty” to control the subordinate (Vicarious, n.d.). He has the right, but certainly, God is in no way obligated to control us, and therefore cannot be faulted for not doing so, and in fact, speaking from Catholic doctrine, God gives us free will exactly because it is the right thing to do. So while it is His right, God would have been committing an action that was contradictory to Himself and therefore immoral to forcibly prevent us from sinning to begin with. How then can He be held responsible for the sin which we freely committed and that he was right not to stop?

The bottom line here is that one way or another, Penal Substitution theory is asserting that Christ is accountable, responsible, even faulted, for our sins. On the contrary, He was not guilty, legally or otherwise. So, unless there is an explanation of how Christ can take on suffering for us justifiably, the entire model does not work. However, reading the Catechism, I became confident that I had found a way to modify the theory to logically justify Christ suffering in our place to justify us.

Paragraphs 602 through 603 of the Catechism, entitled, "For our sake God made him to be sin," (Catechism, 1997) read:

"Consequently, St. Peter can formulate the apostolic faith in the divine plan of salvation in this way: 'You were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers. . . with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. He was destined before the foundation of the world but was made manifest at the end of the times for your sake.' Man's sins, following on original sin, are punishable by death. By sending his own Son in the form of a slave, in the form of a fallen humanity, on account of sin, God 'made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.' Jesus did not experience reprobation as if he himself had sinned. But in the redeeming love that always united him to the Father, he assumed us in the state of our waywardness of sin, to the point that he could say in our name from the cross: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' Having thus established him in solidarity with us sinners, God 'did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all', so that we might be "reconciled to God by the death of his Son" (Catechism, 1997).

And in paragraph 615, entitled "Jesus substitutes his obedience for our disobedience" (Catechism, 1997) the Catechism reads,

"'For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous.' By his obedience unto death, Jesus accomplished the substitution of the suffering Servant, who 'makes himself an offering for sin', when 'he bore the sin of many', and who 'shall make many to

be accounted righteous’, for ‘he shall bear their iniquities’. Jesus atoned for our faults and made satisfaction for our sins to the Father” (Catechism, 1997).

These passages from the Catechism sound very much like a substitutionary theory. However, it describes more of a unification between Christ and mankind than simply a replacement. God became man, not just in that He had a body and a human nature, but in that He was truly one of the human race, together with all of us. Love is what unites God the Son to God the Father. Using that same love, as it states, Christ united to us and with our sin. Paul wrote in Romans 6:5-6, "For if we have grown into union with him through a death like his, we shall also be united with him in the resurrection. We know that our old self was crucified with him, so that our sinful body might be done away with, that we might no longer be in slavery to sin," and in Galatians 2:19, "I have been crucified with Christ.”

When we accept Christ, and respond to His grace, we are accepting unity with Him on the cross, so that our stain of sin may be absolved in the justice at the cross. Was it just that Christ suffered this way? No, not in the sense that He might have deserved it or was in any way responsible to take it on. But it fulfilled justice because He was able to unite to, be one with, us and with our sins. He came to be “sin who did not know sin” (2 Corinthians 5:21). This is where it must be understood that justice is not vengeance. Sin itself is evil and must be cleansed or destroyed by suffering or bloodshed proportional. We ourselves could not destroy our sin of infinite offense without an infinite timeline, but Jesus could if He united with us and our sin.

At this point, I had modified the Penal Substitution theory beyond recognition and could no longer refer to it as even a tweaked version of it. In my research of theories, I learned more about Anselm’s Satisfaction Theory.

Satisfaction Theory

Satisfaction Theory, from Anselm of Canterbury, is in some ways similar to, but pre-dates by a few centuries, the Penal Substitution theory, becoming popular in the 12th century (Morrison, 2017). In this theory, according to multiple sources, we have the similar mechanic at work that we beings of limited dignity, or “honor,” had committed sin of infinite magnitude by offending God, who is of infinite dignity and therefore we could not make up for this offense ourselves within a finite duration. However, instead of God’s wrath needing to be satisfied, this theory about making perfect justice, or respecting the appropriate honors and dignities, in this case those being of God. This is different than a punishment or penalty as in the Penal Substitution theory. There was an inherent imbalance and disorder because of our sins that had to be atoned for in order for us to have unity with God again. Because we could not do so ourselves in our limited dignity, Jesus who was of infinite dignity had to in order for us to be saved and could do so by being both God and man (Benner, 2007; Morrison, 2017; Peters, 2006).

Satisfaction theory actually predates Penal Substitution by a few centuries and, as I preferred to think about it, it focuses on needing to eliminate injustice rather than to subject either Jesus or ourselves to God the Father’s punishment.

Satisfaction Theory, however, did not make a clear case of how it was justified that Jesus would take our place to suffer in fulfillment of that justice, other than that he was both God and a man, a man to represent humanity. With this, even as a man, He was still not guilty, but rather the one perfect and innocent man, so the problem remains. This is where I would take what I’d

read in the Catechism and apply it, meaning that Jesus did not simply replace the human race, but became one with the human race and our sin.

At this point, I was beginning to feel a clearer understanding of the issue and that my – and my sister’s – questions were beginning to be answered. My answers of how it was justified that Christ would die for us and how it “excused” us were beginning to solidify. However, much more thought would be required to come to a more full and coherent answer. At the same time, Christus Victor was creeping back into my mind as well. I was beginning to also see sin more as being something in itself, something that takes on a life of its own so to speak, rather than just a word we use for wrong actions, inactions, etc. With sin itself being an item, and death and suffering inherently following from it, the idea that Christ could confront this item directly and defeat it by entering into it and then rising from it, literally defeating it, was making sense. To me, it would not serve as a complete explanation by itself, but would perhaps be an important part of my understanding as that understanding developed. My understanding of the Atonement was beginning to truly take shape.

Peer Interviews – Part 1

The purpose of the following questions is to collect the typical thoughts of my peers, or to see if there even was any particular way of thinking that was especially common among Christians of college age. These questions are purely theological and philosophical in nature. This not only helped me to gather thoughts and ideas about these questions for my own understanding of the Atonement, but also brought the subject matter to the forefront of my peers' minds so that later, after giving them my own thoughts in return, they can both understand my own thoughts better and they can give better answers to my Practical Peer Interview questions. The results I gathered are summarized as follows:

The necessity of Christ's suffering and death

(each interviewee can have given an answer aligning with multiple of the following)

“For us to be saved, Jesus had to suffer and die...

- 29.5% (5/17): ...to take the consequences of our sin in our place to save us.”
- 29.5% (5/17): ...as an expression of His love for us and/or example of love and acts to inspire us.”
- 23.5% (4/17): ...as a divine sacrifice to save us.”
- 17.5% (3/17): ...as both God and man, bridging the gap between God and mankind.”
- 12% (2/17) ...as a payment, trade, or settlement of debt.”
- 6% (1/17) “It was not necessary for Christ to suffer and die for us to be saved.”

The most popular ideas from college-age Christians surveyed were that Jesus's death was necessary for us to be saved so that He could take our place in facing the consequences of our sin and that it was an expression of His love and an example of that love for us to follow.

Interestingly, one individual said that it was not necessary for Christ to die to do this at all.

Mercy and Justice in the Passion

- 70.5% (12/17) said the Passion of Christ satisfied both mercy and justice.
- 18.5% (3/17) said the Passion of Christ satisfied only mercy.
- 12% (2/17) were unsure, or disliked the wording of the question.

The overwhelming majority of college-age Christians surveyed believed that the Passion satisfied both mercy and justice at the same time. This was often reasoned by the idea that justice was still given, but to Christ instead of us. Some, who took issue with that in that it wouldn't be just if Christ didn't deserve it, still believed that it somehow satisfied both, simply by trusting that it must because God is both fully just and fully merciful.

Mercy vs. Justice

- 64.5% (11/17) said that mercy and justice do not contradict.
- 17.5% (3/17) said that mercy and justice contradict.
- 12% (2/17) said that mercy and justice sometimes, but not necessarily, contradict.
- 6% (1/17) were unsure.

Most college-age Catholics surveyed were also of the opinion that mercy and justice do not contradict. Some cited God's divine nature and that He is both things.

Was it Just for Christ to die?

- 41% (7/17) said it was just for Jesus to die.
- 35.5% (6/17) said it was unjust for Jesus to die.
- 17.5% (3/17) were unsure or did not answer.
- 6% (1/17) said it was both just and unjust, each in different ways.

This issue was much more split than others. Almost as many people said it was unjust as those who said it was just. Many said it was unjust that Jesus died without seeming to have any reservations about it, or seeing the problem raised that then it could be argued that God would have given Himself up unjustly, or committed an unjust act. Of those who said it was just, some did so only because they saw this problem, while at the same time admitting that it seemed unjust.

An Expert Opinion

Being such a complex topic, getting input from a person who is highly qualified and accredited in the study of theology is essential. I had the opportunity to have an informal email correspondence with Dr. John Betz of Notre Dame University's Department of Theology. Dr. Betz is an associate professor in systematic theology and has authored numerous theological publications. Dr. Betz was gracious enough to answer some of my questions about the doctrine of the Atonement. In this conversation, he gave me valuable input on God's mercy and justice and how the Passion of Christ, an innocent man, excused the rest of us from what we deserved. The discussion, of course, was an informal off-the-cuff personal email discussion, not one of his publications, and does not necessarily represent any official claimed assertions of Dr. Betz – but rather some thoughtful insights which he had when asked about the subject. He was kind enough to allow me to reference that email conversation I had with him in this project.

In regard to God's mercy and justice, Dr. Betz made the important point that mercy and justice are not simply things belonging to God, nor is God to be described as simply having both of these attributes. Instead, as he explained, God is Mercy, and God is Justice. "In other words," Dr. Betz said, "while we can have these attributes insofar as we are Christian, God IS these things. This is how St. Augustine came to appropriate the Platonic doctrine of the 'forms.' There is no Idea of the Good beyond God. Rather, God IS Goodness itself, Truth itself, Beauty itself, Being itself (the so-called transcendentals)" (J. Betz, personal communication, March 29, 2018). I think that this note is essential to my project. Mercy and Justice cannot be inherently contradictory because God is the ultimate of both. It's their seemingly contradictory nature, at least in how we understand them, which causes what can be troubling questions for some of us. Knowing this alone, however, should be sufficient to know that mercy and justice cannot be truly

contradictory. Dr. Betz later added that “it is in the Cross that Justice and Mercy meet: it really is a crossing of sorts: the place where God experiences for us what we deserve” (J. Betz, personal communication, March 19, 2018).

Dr. Betz, as he continued into how the Atonement might have worked and how Christ’s death saved us, did want to clarify that he did not mean to say that a satisfaction model was exclusively true. He did give a great explanation of this type of understanding of the Atonement, in that Christ suffered what we should have, and gave credit to how seriously a satisfaction model treats sin and the consequence thereof as well. At the same time, however, he gives warning of the trap that one can easily fall into while studying such theories. “This is where one has to be careful with ‘theories’ of the Atonement, which tend to turn the testimony of scripture into a neat-and-tidy system... the kind of theories that make God out to be cruel and sadistic and wanting to punish. It's probably better -- and truer to the gospel -- to say that sin is its own punishment, and that there could be none greater: separation from God” (J. Betz, personal communication, March 19, 2018). I agree with Dr. Betz, and a satisfaction model that I’d see truth in would not be addressing a sadistic punishment from God, such as a Penal Substitution model (which can qualify as a satisfaction model), but rather address this inherent suffering and death (separation) that comes from sin. This goes nicely with his explanation of how Christ took on both kinds of death, physical, and separation from God. He explained that Christ, along with the physical death, also experienced separation from God, as evidenced, he pointed out, by the cry of dereliction (Matthew 27:46). He said this is the same form of suffering that we as humans experience from separation from God and that now, through the Christ on the Cross, we can be reconciled with Him: “...recognizing what he has done in his mercy to overcome the condition we justly deserved” (J. Betz, personal communication, March 29, 2018).

In addition, Dr. Betz gave me the following bit of wisdom. “You seem to be aware of some of the traditional models of the Atonement -- from the patristic teaching of Christ trampling down death by death (Christus victor model) to the satisfaction theory of Anselm. Whereas the former is more common in the Christian East (the Orthodox church), the latter is more common in the West. But neither model is exclusively true; and both Roman Catholics and Orthodox recognize that the Atonement is a multi-faceted mystery for which our ‘models’ are inadequate” (J. Betz, personal communication, March 29, 2018). This was a great point. It’s important to understand multiple models and theories and try to find truth in any of them that may contain it.

Along with addressing these topics, Dr. Betz also drew a comparison between the Atonement and the old Jewish traditions of the Old Covenant in the use of animal sacrifices. In a way, he explained, these animals were types of "(J. Betz, personal communication, March 29, 2018) Viewing Christ’s Passion and resurrection through this lens is interesting, as it was the fulfillment of the Old Covenant. In this old tradition, on the “Feast of Yom Kippur,” the high priest would perform a ceremony which sacrificed various animals for the sins of the community (Parsons, n.d.). According to Parsons, one of these animals was a bull which the high priest would sacrifice to “purge” the temple from the dirt of the sins of the priests and those of their families or “households.” Another was a goat that would be a sacrificial offering for the sins of the people. Finally, another goat would have the sins of all the people confessed upon it, and then was “driven away into the wilderness, carrying on it ‘all their iniquities unto a land no inhabited’ (Leviticus 16:22)” (Parsons, n.d.). Just as Dr. Betz was pointing out, these old traditions are easily paralleled to the sacrifice that Christ took on for us in taking on our sins and facing the consequences of them.

My informal correspondence with Dr. Betz was a great help to me in forming my own understanding of the Atonement, as well as simply giving me interesting lenses to see it through, such as that of the old Jewish traditions. With his help, alongside my extensive thought and research, my own understanding began to take shape coherently.

Personal Theological Arrival

The doctrine of the Atonement is about Christ's suffering and dying on the cross for us, but not just simply the "what," or even the "why," but the "how" of salvation that came from that cross. There are many existing theories or models of how the Atonement worked. These included most prominently the Christus Victor model, the Penal Substitution Theory, the Satisfaction Theory, the Ransom Theory, and the Moral Influence Theory. After reading through and studying these different theories and related literature, examining the debate and commentaries among Christians between the different theories, interviewing Dr. John Betz of Notre Dame's theology department, speaking with Dr. Kevin Vallier of BGSU's philosophy department and Deacon Dr. Daniel Brahier of St. Thomas More University Parish and BGSU, reading the thoughts of my peers, and being sure to stay within the confines of Catholic doctrine which addresses the subject, I've come to an explanation which I personally find satisfactory *enough*, as follows:

Firstly, we must recognize the state that we were in as mankind. We were in sin of infinite magnitude because we had offended God, who is of infinite dignity. We, being of limited dignity, could never fulfill justice in the sense of bringing balance because of the infinite nature of our sin. We would have to undergo suffering that is of infinite duration (hell) instead of that

which affects a being of infinite dignity in order to make it of equal magnitude. God could not simply erase our sins, but would have to somehow justify us because such injustice could not coexist with God, and because He would be disrespecting Himself and His own infinite dignity to simply ignore the offences against Him. To disrespect Himself would be contradictory to Himself. Additionally, the very foundation of Christianity includes that Christ saved us on the Cross, so it must have been integral in a way that would indicate that God simply dismissing our sins with no other action taken was not the best option, or not one at all. Because of our sin and the infinite nature of the inherent consequence, we were unable to escape our fallen nature through which we were bound in sin, which inherently causes spiritual death and suffering.

Then Jesus came. Christ came, became man, suffered, and died on the cross to set us free. So how did this work? Christ was of infinite dignity, and because of this, His suffering would not need to be infinite in duration to balance the infinite magnitude of mankind's sin against God and fulfill justice in the sense of balance. This mechanic of respective dignities was first explained to me by Dr. Kevin Vallier of BGSU's philosophy department and is originated from the Satisfaction Theory. Along with this, by taking on the weight of sin and death fully, dying, and then in God's ultimate power rising from the dead and overcoming the ultimate culmination of both these things, He defeated sin and death and their very core, breaking their bond on mankind. This comes from the Christus Victor model. However, simply substituting Christ for ourselves still does not seem to have any justification to it to say that it would actually take away our responsibility in a metaphysical sense.

Christ's action was able to excuse mankind not in that He simply replaced us, or was substitutionary for us, but in that He became one with us and our sin. Jesus was not just man, but in this sense, He was mankind in its sinfulness. Jesus did become sin, although he was not sinful,

having been guilty of none himself (2 Cor 5:21, CCC 601-603). This means that God Jesus took all of us with Him, in Him, along with our sin itself, to that cross (Jn 14:20, Jn 15:4). We were in fact not simply excused or replaced, but made at one with God who was one with us, one with mankind in its sinfulness, who was a man Himself, so that in this sense Mankind would indeed suffer, die, and rise again. Only mankind was responsible for its sin, not Jesus Himself, but in this way, it did hang on that cross through Jesus. Only Christ Himself would have to undergo the experience of this. We were saved from that experience, while mankind's sins were put through death on one man's back, at one with us (as long as we have faith in Him, and accept that unity which He offers each of us).

Christ doing all of this in fullness of both mercy and justice, however, is where it gets tricky. One should think that God, being ultimate of all things positive, including both mercy and justice, should be able to fulfill both entirely and without compromise, or else He'd be going against Himself. How was it just for Christ, being innocent, to suffer and die? God was able to do this justly – in a sense – by giving Himself up (remember, Jesus is God), and by God the Father having full consent from God the Son. However, in the balance sense of justice, it was not inherently just for Christ to take on our suffering that way (one should remember that even in this, it was not God committing the act, but in His permissive will, allowed humans to carry out the act itself). This sense of justice, however, does not need to be the only sense of justice. At its very core, true justice is “making things right,” or to justify. As Dr. John Betz of Notre Dame's theology department said to me in another personal email, “...with regard to justice perhaps one could look at it simply as a "rectification" or a "making things right" again, in which case, God's manner of justice, of making things right between Him and us, may exceed all of our expectations about what justice means -- in this case, it really does turn out that mercy is justice,

mercy is what makes things right. Was it just for Jesus to die in our stead -- from our way of looking at it, no. But from a divine standpoint, we could say that it was” (J. Betz, personal communication, April 5, 2018). This distinction between a justice of balance and a sense of justice in “making things right” makes sense. Think of hell, for example. There, there is no justice of “making things right” or “rectification,” because such souls are not justified. At the same time, however, they suffer the inherent consequence of sin and death themselves because they did not have faith in and accept Christ and his cross, accepting that unity to Him in His suffering which He offered, so they are doomed to the fate which was discussed earlier by explanation with the mechanic of respective dignities – because of their limited dignity, their suffering to fulfill the balance of justice will be infinite in duration. So, we have both of these understandings of justice, and while it is not necessarily inherently just in the sense of balance that Jesus should suffer, it fulfilled both kinds of justice by His unifying with us in our sin and fulfilling that justice of balance for us and it fulfilled the justice of “making things right” by reconciling us to God and defeating sin and death itself. This supports the idea that mercy can be a part of justice, or vice versa. It was not unjust of God to do this, because, again, Christ was Himself God, so God gave himself up and God the Father had the full consent of God the Son.

Peer Interviews – Part 2

Interviewees, after answering the original four theological questions, were given my own explanation in return. The explanation I gave them is identical to the one I give immediately above. After being given this explanation, they were asked about how these theological issues are relevant to themselves and their faith. The results I gathered are summarized as follows:

- 76.5% (13/17) had thought about or struggled with these or similar questions before
- 82.5% (14/17) found that understanding, or striving towards understanding, items of the faith like this was important to them and their faith life.
- 88% (15/17) felt that their own, mine, or other explanations had helped them in their faith or otherwise been useful.

These numbers were great to see because they meant that my work had not been only for a grade, or even for the honor of graduating with the Honors College, but also helped real people in my life in one way or another. It tells me that this kind of research and learning is helpful to the vast majority of people, and encourages me to continue similar work and discussion with my peers in the future. I'm glad that people care about what can be difficult topics of our faith.

One interesting thing to note in the data is that 15 of the 17 participants reported that their own, mine, or other explanations had helped them in their faith or otherwise been useful, yet only 14 said that understanding these things was important to them and their faith life. This is because one individual said that while it may become more important in the future, understanding these things now doesn't have a large impact on his feelings-based faith. However, when he is simply curious, explanations that help him understand are helpful.

Results and Conclusion

I was pleased with the results of this project for a few reasons. One of the reasons is that, as I had hoped and anticipated, there was a stimulation of conversation about the subject. Many of my peers who knew each other, particularly members of St. Thomas More University Parish, spent time talking about these subjects amongst themselves during and after they answered my theological set of questions. Each had his or her own ideas and opinions and it made for great conversation among them. I was not present for this conversation, but I was told about it by the people who were involved.

Another reason is that, while I'm sure my explanation is far from complete and will continue to change and evolve as I learn more and gain more in wisdom and knowledge on the faith, and faith itself, I have what is, to me, an answer to the question which inspired this project and an explanation of the workings of the Atonement which is satisfying enough for me at this time. This is an explanation which I was happy to present to my sister who inspired me to pursue this topic.

In their theological answers, I was not surprised to see that almost everyone interviewed agreed that Christ's Passion satisfied both mercy and justice. Following the same idea, most people also agreed that mercy and justice do not contradict. Surprisingly, however, there was much more of a split on whether or not it was unjust for Jesus to die. Many people stated very a-matter-of-factly that Jesus dying on the cross was unjust. And in a way, I'd agree in that Jesus suffered that which he did not deserve. However, I found a way that it was not unjust of God to do this, and that it did not actually contradict justice (largely by the Godhead being one, and by that Jesus gave full consent). People stated that it was unjust, and saw no problematic implication coming from that, the potential issue being that it would mean that God had acted unjustly and

that this would be against His nature. For about half of those interviewed, for one reason or another, did not see this problem, or did not think it was necessarily against His nature if for the purpose of mercy.

Most college-age Christians interviewed had pondered or struggled with these or similar questions before, which delighted me, given my original expectations that only about half would have. This is not to say that I'm happy about people "struggling" with their faith, but that I'm glad that people are thinking and asking questions, and challenging themselves to understand their faith more and more, even if it's difficult at times. Some people simply are not affected in their faith by this kind of theological thought however, and are able to have strong faiths without needing to dive deeper into the reason that goes along with it. Most, however, said that thinking or learning more about these topics, although perhaps difficult in some cases, did help them grow in their faith. It was encouraging to see that they reported that thinking about the topics and talking about them helped. In my own opinion, understanding reason, at least to a point, is very beneficial to one's faith life and it seems that in most cases, my peers find the same to be true for them. I also hope that having a deeper understanding of the Atonement, the different kinds of justice, and God's love and mercy, will fill people with awe at what Christ truly did for us.

I'm confident that this project would be helpful to anyone looking to find answers to the questions posed, and that I've helped people to think deeper about their faith and understand more about it. My greater hope is that in doing so, their very faith itself will be strengthened. I know that it's strengthened mine.

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