

# When Compassion Becomes Misguided

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**Tragic news from France informs us that a Rwandan man, Emmanuel Abayisenga, murdered Fr. Olivier Maire, 61, the French provincial superior of the Montfort Missionaries (the Company of Mary). Abayisenga is also the main suspect in an arson attack on the cathedral in Nantes, in northwestern France, in July 2020. The suspect had been under the protection of the local Christian community. Evidently, the murder suspect and others had met with Pope Francis in 2016 and had subsequently been taken in by the priest's community. Fr. Olivier Maire was**

described as “a victim of his [own] generosity, a martyr of charity.”

The redoubtable William F. Buckley, Jr., was persuaded that Edgar H. Smith, Jr. (1934-2017), had been unfairly tried for a brutal murder. Buckley led a virtual crusade on behalf of Smith, who was facing the death penalty, leading finally to Smith’s being freed. A few years later, Smith murdered another woman and was subsequently captured in Las Vegas. Buckley expressed regret for having supported Smith. One newspaper account said that Buckley had been “duped.”

The story of Frank Pakenham (1905-2001), the seventh earl of Longford, and the monstrous Moors murderess Myra Hindley (1942-2002) is similarly instructive. Lord Longford tried for many years to help Hindley. She was a manipulative criminal who made a mockery of the generosity and mercy of a very good, if very naïve, man. The movie *Longford* tells the story (but I recommend it only with serious reservations; it is not a family film).

Now imagine a soldier who, while under enemy fire, jumps up, waving and yelling, “Can’t get me, can’t get me!” What bravery! What courage! What fortitude! No: what stupidity!

**A thing is right or virtuous because it is in balance**, which is to say that it is properly ordered to what it ought to be. A thing is mistaken or corrupt or even evil because of its inadequacy or its excess. The soldier who refuses legitimate duty because of personal fear is cowardly; the soldier who needlessly exposes himself to enemy fire is foolhardy. The virtue of courage, then, lies between inadequacy and excess.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told the crowds—and us: “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy”

(Matthew 5:7), and St. Paul counseled us to “be kind to one another [and] tenderhearted” (Ephesians 4:32). “Charity,” Pope Emeritus Benedict told us, “is at the heart of the Church’s social doctrine” (*Caritas in Veritate*, #2).

Then why would Mother Angelica, the founder of EWTN, call such compassion the reigning sin of our times? She didn’t. In fact, it was *misguided* compassion or false mercy—a perversion of charity, of magnanimity—about which she warned us. **Misguided compassion is “mistaken mercy”; it is condolence without direction, without limit, without justice. It is “out of order” and improperly balanced.** Walker Percy and Flannery O’Connor also warned us against the dangers of false mercy and misdirected tenderness. See [here](#).

The great old movie *The Bells of Saint Mary’s* tells the story of a conflict at a school between a priest who wants to pass everyone and a nun (the school principal) who insists upon certain academic standards. Passing everyone (or giving high grades without real student achievement) is not charity; it is false mercy—and a violation of the standards of justice, fairness, and integrity.

**Much more serious in this regard is, in the name of forgiveness,** restoring to his office anyone who has been guilty of molesting children; such forgiveness may be genuine kindness, but sending someone with such a history back to children is not only imprudent, it is a type of morally insane cooperation with evil, and it is felonious.

Recall that St. John Paul II forgave Mehmet Ali Ağca, the man who had shot him in St. Peter’s Square in 1981, but Ağca remained in jail. Similarly, David was forgiven, but he suffered the penalty for his sin (2 Samuel 12:13-23).

It is right to feel pity for the dying who are suffering; it is evil to kill them in the name of mercy. It is right to feel badly for the girl who is pregnant and lacks an encouraging husband and family; it is evil to abort her child in the name of compassion. It is right to help the stranger and the sojourner; it is wrong, in assisting them, to ignore or to violate legitimate civil law (cf. CCC #2241; Romans 13:1-7). It is a fundamental Christian duty for us to help the poor; it is mistaken, as Pope Leo XIII taught us, “to distribute to others that which is required for [our] own needs and those of [our] household” (*Rerum Novarum* [1891], #22).

**To have inadequate mercy is to be pitiless and cruel; to have excessive, or mistaken, mercy is to be unjust and credulous.** We are called both to mercy and to justice, knowing that only God can perfectly reconcile the two. The parent who fairly disciplines his child (as in Proverbs 13:24) is trying to be merciful and loving by being just. The cardinal virtue of prudence (CCC #1806) refers to our having the developed reason “to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it.” Prudence is developed by wise education and by the examined life.

***We teach prudence by calling those with authority to second-order thinking.*** That means that they are called not just to see the probable results of what they do, but to see the probable results of the results, the probable **consequences of the consequences.** It may seem merciful, for instance, to give a student a high, but unearned, grade; but what are the long-term effects of that “charity”? What are the probable secondary results—the impact of that decision on the student’s character and its effect upon others and even on society (the “ripple” or “butterfly” effect) of what

may well be misguided compassion? What good are we doing and what evil are we avoiding, now and later, by making this kind of wise judgment?

In their compelling defense of capital punishment (*By Man Shall His Blood Be Shed*), Edward Feser and Joseph Bessette prophesied four years ago that **“Since classical natural law reasoning and Catholic Tradition firmly support the legitimacy of capital punishment, there is bound to be a strong correlation between hostility to capital punishment and hostility to classical natural law reasoning and Catholic orthodoxy....** [Enthusiasm for the abolition of capital punishment] thus inadvertently provides powerful ‘aid and comfort’ to ideas and movements that any Catholic must regard as morally and socially destructive” (p. 207). There will be a deleterious “butterfly effect” from disregarding the biblical, classical, and Traditional warrant for capital punishment.

**In the world, there is at work a “mystery of iniquity”** (2 Thessalonians 2:7)—a profound evil—which only God can fully and finally eliminate. **We are victims of (misplaced) charity, or “duped,” or exceedingly naïve if, like Pangloss or Pelagius, we expect all people and all things to turn out well in this fallen world.** Such an expectation ignores, minimizes, or rejects the powerful and pervasive evil in the world (Galatians 5:19-21; James 4:1-5; 1 John 2:15-17; CCC #386, 407, 418).

There are tragic, but burning, lessons for us in the cases of Emmanuel Abayisenga, Edgar H. Smith, and Myra Hindley, anticipated, it seems, by Sirach:

*Never trust an enemy; his wickedness is as destructive as rust. Watch out, and be on guard against him, even if he*

*acts ever so humble.... Realize the truth of my words, [or] be stung with regret when you remember them. Nobody feels sorry for snake charmers or wild animal tamers who get bitten, and nobody will feel sorry for you if you run around with sinners and get involved in their wrongdoing” (12:10-14).*