

Forgiveness is a Choice

We find ourselves in the season of Easter, a time when we continue to keep before our mind's eye the great event of Our Lord's paschal mystery: His passion, death and resurrection. God not only wishes us to contemplate this mystery of His Son's suffering, death and resurrection, but he also invites us to participate in it — in fact, it is only by participating in it that we can really come to some understanding of it. With this article I would like to consider one lesson that we can learn from Our Lord on the cross, a lesson that I think constitutes one of the most radical and challenging teachings of Christianity, a teaching that many have a hard time accepting and putting into practice, and a truth of our faith that many non-Christians look upon as utterly incomprehensible and foolish: I refer to Christ's example and His teaching with regard to *forgiveness*.

The first words which Our Lord spoke as He was being crucified were: "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do." Our Lord was here giving us a heroic witness to what He preached to His disciples during His life. When Christ lived among them He spoke to His disciples on various occasions about this matter of forgiveness. When He taught them to pray, He told them to ask their Father in Heaven: "*forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.*" The New Catechism begins its commentary on this passage of the Our Father by simply saying: "*This petition is astonishing*" —

and it is astonishing — the fact that God makes His forgiveness dependent on our own willingness to forgive those who have injured us.

But still, even knowing and understanding Our Lord's teaching, we humans find it very difficult to forgive those who have wronged us, those who have insulted and injured us and caused us pain.

It is not uncommon for those who have suffered some injustice to think they have a right to their anger and resentment and that they are entitled in justice to withhold forgiveness; they even see such an attitude as compatible with a religious spirit. You will hear Christians make many excuses to justify their continued hostility and ill-will toward someone who has offended them. They will say things like: I am only required to forgive if the person repents of what he has done (as if we are only bound to love some people, and not all,

including our enemies). Or sometimes you will hear Christians say: if I forgive that would, in effect, mean that I condone what the person did and that would be false and encourage more of the same treatment.

Since some of these attitudes that one finds among Christians are often based on a false notion of what forgiveness is, I think it would be helpful if we stopped and considered the nature of Christian forgiveness, what it is and what it isn't. To begin with, we could note some of the things that forgiveness is not. Forgiveness is not the same as condoning or excusing: when we forgive someone we do not say that what the person did to us was right, we do not overlook evil and pretend it didn't



Soldier mocking Christ — Carl Bloch (1880)

happen. Forgiveness does not mean denying the seriousness and the consequences of the wrongdoing. In fact, there is no true forgiveness unless we admit that what was done was wrong and should not be repeated. In his encyclical on the Mercy of God, John Paul II wrote: "In no passage of the Gospel message does forgiveness, or mercy as its source, mean *indulgence* towards evil, towards scandals, towards injury or insult." Forgiving does not mean that we must open ourselves to further abuse. Forgiveness is also not the same as forgetting. We can forgive, but we should not expect to forget, though it is often the case that forgiveness will change the way we remember the past. Forgiveness is not the same as simply calming down. It is possible for us to calm down after we have been offended and to put the incident aside, but at the same time withhold forgiveness. So the mere absence of anger is not the same as forgiveness.

We must also beware of a kind of pseudo-forgiveness: some people will use the words "I forgive you" when they have not actually forgiven at all as a way to try to hurt the person who has offended them, or to try to control them or demonstrate their moral superiority. In these cases, "I forgive you" means in effect: "You are a terrible person who should feel guilty and I will never let you forget it." Such an attitude obviously has nothing to do with true Christian forgiveness. Finally, forgiveness is not the same thing as reconciliation. Reconciliation takes two people, but we can and should forgive, even if the party that offended us does not seek reconciliation. Forgiveness opens the way to reconciliation, it is indispensable to reconciliation, but it's not the same thing as reconciliation.

So what *is* forgiveness? Forgiveness is above all *a choice*, it is not a feeling, *it is a choice*, an act of our *wills*. When we forgive, we choose to set aside our desire for revenge, we set aside our resentment and above all *we wish that all things be well* with the person who has offended us, we wish that everything associated with the person may be *truly*

good. Forgiveness is an act of love, of compassion, of benevolence towards a person who has injured us. Perhaps you will say: but that person who injured me has no right to such treatment; to which I respond: *precisely*. That is precisely the point. "While we were yet sinners Christ died for us." Nor do we "deserve" the forgiveness of God; the people who crucified Christ did not "deserve" His pardon, and it was not only the soldiers who crucified Christ, each one of us had our part to play. Christian forgiveness is a completely free and gratuitous participation in God's own love. In the words of St. John Chrysostom: "...nothing so likens you to God, as to forgive him who has injured you."

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We live in a world where no one escapes suffering injustices. Some suffer larger ones, some smaller, but we all suffer. And so it should come as no surprise that many people and perhaps we ourselves struggle with deep anger and resentment, bitterness and hatred towards those who have injured us or who have injured those whom we love. It is not wrong to feel anger when someone offends us; to feel anger, in a moderate way, is in fact, good and natural. The problem comes when we nurse the anger and keep it alive. It is possible to keep anger alive for a very long time. The real problem comes when we have an unforgiving attitude which is like a cancer that can spread and spoil and embitter the whole of our lives. To fail to forgive is to keep alive in our hearts the desire for revenge, to wish that evil befall the one who has hurt us. It is a terrible condition for the human heart to be in. It's an especially fearful thing to see someone who is approaching death and who refuses to let go of old grudges and resentments. It is as if they are living in a prison from which they cannot escape, a prison of their own making. It is from this prison that Christ would like to set us free, He would like to show us that even in our world, love is stronger than sin.

If when considering the prospect of forgiving someone, you feel that it is beyond your power

— in a certain sense that is a good sign and an understandable feeling, because Christian forgiveness *is something beyond our own power*. We can't do it on our own; it is only possible with the help of God's grace. If we are having a hard time forgiving someone, we should not cease to ask God for the grace we need. He asks us to fight the good fight and to persevere in our determination. He will eventually hear our prayer. We should start small. Make some small effort to think well of the person, pray for him, bless him in your heart. That is the beginning. Those who have worked with people who have suffered greatly at the hands of others, trying to help them to forgive, have noted that a critical point in the process is reached when the person *simply accepts the pain*. Just as Our Lord freely accepted the pain.

In the midst of all the emotional turmoil, sometimes it is hard to know whether we have in fact forgiven someone. How do we know if we have forgiven? One clear sign is: *Do you wish the*

person well, do you *sincerely want things* to go well with him or her in their lives.

If after much struggle and prayer we have come to forgive someone who has hurt us deeply, perhaps it will seem to us that we have accomplished a great work for God; but if we could see things clearly, the truth of the matter is, God has done something great for us. He has set our hearts free. He has given us a way to escape from this dark dungeon of hatred and resentment; from this evil that has darkened our souls and poisoned our lives and kept us from experiencing the light and warmth of God's merciful love. We should not be surprised if we discover what many other people have discovered who have chosen the path of forgiveness: that *as we reach out to the ones who have hurt us, we will be the ones who are healed*. ✕

Acknowledgements

Many of the above ideas were derived from:
Robert Enright, *Forgiveness is a Choice: A Step-by-Step Process for Resolving Anger and Restoring Hope* (APA Life Tools, 2001)