

Forgive As You Have Been Forgiven

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How hard we find it to forgive, don't we? Teresa of Avila, who had a good number of mystical bones in her body but was also severely practical, as indeed Jesus was, is said to have asked the Lord one day: 'Lord, how can I thank you for all the blessings you have given me?' And the Lord replied: 'By showing your love and forgiveness to those who are as undeserving of it as you are of mine.' That certainly brought her out of her ecstasy and down to earth!

Yes, forgiveness, which is at the heart of love, is always a practical challenge. And how hard we find it. When we look at the many conflicts in the world, nearly all rest on memories of past hurts, injustices, hardships that go back for many generations: the conflict between Jews and Palestinians; Croatia and Serbia; Bosnia... Kosovo... East Timor. Those situations didn't happen overnight. So why can't we let bygones be bygones? Why cannot we put the past behind and make a new start?

That isn't easy, because suffering is painful and real; suffering causes deep wounds that need to be acknowledged. Injustice cannot just be wiped out by a thoughtless and casual 'I forgive you', and certainly not 'You/they ought to forgive' when we ourselves haven't been touched by the anguish.

Here are two little scenarios to ponder on. The first is set in a convent. It's exaggerated, of course, and each must make their own application, but maybe it's nearer the truth than we like to think.

'Hello, sister, you look really down today.'

'I've every reason to be down. Reverend Mother offended me and I just can't forgive her.'

'O, what happened?'

'Well, when Sister Kateri Tekathwitha was given the habit, Mother gave her a beautiful lace-edged holy picture with a blue silk Our Lady embroidered on it; and when I received the habit I expected to get the same, but all Mother gave me was a picture of the Prodigal son – and the corner was bent too.'

'I'm sorry your special day was spoiled by that disappointment. Time will help you get over that, don't worry. By the way, when did you receive the habit? Last week?'

'No, forty years ago today.'

Forty years! Forty years of saying the Lord's prayer daily, going to Communion, receiving sacramental forgiveness in Reconciliation, working and praying in God's service; all the blessings of life and health and friendship, yet a life poisoned by resentment over something that happened forty years ago when I didn't get my lace-edged holy picture! What went wrong?

Now for the second vignette.

Father Jean-Marie Lustiger, now Cardinal Archbishop of Paris, but then a university chaplain, was addressing the young people of Germany on the radio when he was unable to get to a meeting in Berlin. Lustiger, Jewish by birth, had lost his whole family in the holocaust, and he was addressing the Christians of a nation that had murdered and tortured his dear ones to death.

During his talk he paused, then said: 'There is something that is very sensitive to touch on. None of us wants to mention it. But I just want to say 'I forgive you'. No platitudes there, as when the high-ups in the church come out and say how sorry they are for some injustice perpetrated in the past, and the words just out pat and meaningless. No, here is a man who has suffered terrible wrong. Yet even today one hears in some quarters the taunt that the Archbishop of Paris is a Jew, as if that disqualified him from holding his post – made him less Christian – when he belongs to the very race that gave us Jesus himself.

How often do we hold against another the colour of their skin, their racial origins, their difference from ourselves in some way. And why? Have I deserved forgiveness, love, acceptance, while others haven't? And what I have received as gift, can I not give freely in return?

Recall again the words of St. Teresa: 'Lord, how can I thank you for all the blessings you have given me?' 'By showing your love and forgiveness to those who are as undeserving of it as you are of mine.' To forgive is to understand something of the heart of God, a heart which is all gift, all self-giving, all for-giving.

Oscar Wilde once said that 'Love is a sacrament we should only receive on our knees with the words "Lord, I am not worthy"'. Oscar Wilde wasn't speaking of some rarified spiritual love, something reserved for mystics and saints. No, he was speaking of human love, love between husband and wife, friend and friend, love within a family. All that makes life sweet and beautiful and fills us with joyful surprise. Do we deserve that? No, it is pure gift.

God forgives because God loves. God opens for us the possibility of a new future. We can do that for one another when we forgive. But we can't do that just of and by ourselves. It is something to ask for, to pray for. The gift not to held captive by the past but to free ourselves and others for something new, something that brings us close to one another and therefore closer to God's own heart. We cannot help our bitter memories. What we can do is choose what we do with them.

During the last century in France there was a case in which an old woman was murdered and her money stolen. Everyone knew that she would only open her door to the parish priest after dark, and when they found his blood-stained cassock in the garden of the presbytery, the Abbé Pierre was convicted and sentenced to penal servitude for life on Devil's Island. There, disgraced and humiliated, he had to spend his days working in the swamps with the other convicts who reviled him as a so-called man of God turned murderer – the defrocké, the 'unfrocked one'.

Meanwhile the Abbé Pierre gradually gained their respect. He could not say Mass, but he would stay up late at night to pray, try to make life a bit more humane for

his fellow convicts by tending their sores, fashioning small gifts for their families, ministering to them when they lay dying far from home.

After many years spent like this he was called out one night to a newly arrived convict who had been stricken by malaria. As he bent over the dying man he heard a voice cry out 'Is it you Abbé Pierre?' and the dying man told this story... 'It was I who murdered that widow. I dressed in the priest's cassock and she let me into her house. But Abbé Pierre saw me stealing away and called me to him. He heard my confession and I promised to tell the authorities what I had done, but I didn't. I let this man be condemned while I continued my criminal activities. Abbé Pierre, I want these people to know you are innocent. Can you forgive me?'

The priest didn't trivialize that repentance. He didn't say 'It's nothing; forget it', for he had been terribly wronged. What he did say went something like this:

'Thanks to what happened I have become a different man. I was a self-satisfied person with all I wanted to hand. Here I have experienced hardship and sorrow, but I have also experienced heaven in this hell that is Devil's Island. For that I can feel only gratitude. May God bless you in return and give you his peace.'

And indeed, although freedom was offered and his innocence established, Abbé Pierre chose to remain where he was and end his days among the men he had grown to love and who had grown to love him in return.

What happens to us isn't so important as what we do with what happens to us. The same event can be curse or blessing. It can be a way closer to God or closer to self-pity and bitterness.

'Lord, how can I thank you for all the blessings you have given me?'

'By showing your love and forgiveness to those who are as undeserving of it as you are of mine.'

'Lord, I am not deserving, I am not worthy, and I find it so hard to give and receive forgiveness, when I have been forgiven so much. Lord, I am not worthy – but only say the word and I shall be healed.'