

THE IMPERATIVE NEED TO FORGIVE

Anthony Mifsud

IN HOLY WEEK WE NOT ONLY CALL TO MIND what happened—the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth—but we take part in the celebration of the central mystery of our faith—the mystery which makes sense of our daily lives. There can only be true understanding of the paschal mystery, the death and resurrection of Jesus, when this impinges directly upon our way of living, our lifestyle. Celebrating Easter means that we rejoice in the ‘passing over’ from Jesus of Nazareth to the Christ of faith—that Jesus who was assassinated and whose life seemed to have ended in failure, but whom the Father raised to life and proclaimed as his own Son. As Peter declared in his first public discourse: ‘Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified’ (Acts 2:36).

At Easter the celebration is not an empty ritual at which we assist as mere spectators. Our own lives have to be a Passover, a transition, a movement. To remember the paschal mystery is unsettling. Christ upsets the normal values accepted by society, which focus on power and wealth as the central criteria and motives for living. He provides a new ‘covenant’ or alliance with God. He brings hope of a life that will be full, of a love that will be true, of a truth that will be complete; the life he brings is founded on the triumph of Christ over the infernal forces in human existence. As we celebrate Holy Week we celebrate our own lives: the paschal mystery recalls the past to our memory, confesses the present in the presence of God, and looks to the future of resurrection.

But all this is possible only if we believe in forgiveness. It is through forgiveness and pardon that we can look calmly and honestly at the past, live peacefully in the present and look hopefully to the future. The experience of the paschal mystery takes on a deeply personal character when lived as an exercise in forgiveness, in its twin dimensions: pardon

of self and pardon of others. Its true meaning—the choice of death in order to live—then becomes clear: it is the passage through death to new birth in life.

Why Should We Forgive?

The French preacher Henri Lacordaire wrote: ‘If you want to enjoy a moment of happiness, seek vengeance; if you want everlasting happiness, open your heart to forgiveness’. And there is an oriental proverb: ‘If you seek vengeance, you need to dig two graves: one for the other and one for yourself’.

From the psychological point of view vengeance, in so far as it eliminates pardon, embitters our lives. The search for vengeance perpetuates in ourselves and in others the harm suffered; it keeps the wound constantly open and becomes an obsession, the focal point of our whole thought and outlook. The dominating feeling is one of resentment, and by giving way to this we condemn ourselves to death in this life; it is impossible to have an independent life because we are constantly living in relation to other people. A desire for vengeance imprisons us in the nightmare of the past. Time congeals around this unique moment which alone seems relevant to the present and which cuts off freedom for the future.

The need to learn self-forgiveness is as important as forgiving others. It is by knowing ourselves and accepting ourselves that we are able to recognise our own fragility and weakness. Only by being ready to accept ourselves as we are can we be open to the possibility of surpassing the present self. Only what is accepted can be overcome. An invalid sets out on the path towards a cure only by accepting that the illness exists. Someone who is proud, who lives a lie, is unaware of this defect, and hence unable to accept self-forgiveness. In the lives of the proud there is no space for self-confessed errors, and this shows the perpetual untruth that they need to survive with their pride intact.

Others may be incapable of self-forgiveness because of a stubborn perfectionism which inflicts deep harm on their self-esteem. They may confuse committing a bad action with actually being bad. Consequently they live with disabling feelings of guilt which destroy the peace of their souls and fill their lives with needless anxiety. Unconsciously such perfectionists refuse to accept their limitations as part of the human condition. At heart they are inspired by a fundamental spiritual longing

for transcendence, something that can only find satisfaction in God. But they have created their own model of perfection and imposed it upon themselves. Their point of reference is always themselves; they are closed to the Other, having established their own criteria of perfection. Such perfectionists constantly strive to meet the requirements of a harsh super-ego, which punishes them with guilt and loss of self-esteem when they fail to obey its demands. Some of them, moreover, lack a firm sense of identity and are forever seeking the attention and admiration of others to bolster their self-esteem. Most of those dominated by the super-ego are afflicted by guilt because of failure, but those with a weak sense of personal identity experience paralyzing shame. The former feel crushed because of the evil they have done, the latter condemn themselves because they feel themselves to be evil.

When a person identifies spirituality with being perfect, the result is a state of perpetual anguish. Such an identification weakens the very foundation of the spiritual life because it hinders the acceptance of ourselves as we are. Real self-acceptance is crucial to faith. The flight from God starts with the flight from ourselves; rejection of the self can easily lead to rejection of God. If we are constantly dissatisfied with ourselves and with our actions, we find it difficult to value life as a gift from God and to respond with deep gratitude. Unconsciously, the perfectionist is refusing unconditionally to accept God's hold on our lives. Such a person cannot experience the dynamism of gratitude because of a conviction that everything comes about through personal effort and merit. The perfectionist will very easily fall into the sin of the Pharisee and think that God has to be earned. Such a person believes that salvation must be obtained through good works rather than received as an undeserved gift. The preoccupation with the self is progressive, as personal value is seen more and more as the fruit of our own efforts, leaving no room for the Other.

Real self-acceptance is crucial to faith

Perfection, if defined as the absence of all error, is humanly impossible; otherwise there would be no need for salvation. The gospel injunction, 'Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Matthew 5:48), comes in the context of God's indiscriminate and all-embracing love, a love that makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and which allows the rain to fall on the just and on the unjust. Christian perfection is an invitation to share in the love that never ceases to reach out to others, no matter what they may do; it is an

invitation to learn how to forgive just as God forgives, and to love just as God loves. The heart of Christian sanctity is not inward-looking but is always growing in the capacity to love others. Otherwise there is a danger that the Christian will become absorbed in personal progress, with no reference to the Other or to others. The search for perfection can lead us to give more attention to the person offering service (the self) than to those in need of it (others).

One of the greatest challenges in the spiritual life is to learn how to accept our own weaknesses and to take ourselves less seriously. Life often teaches us through failures. We can learn humility by recognising our need to be helped by others, and in this way we learn to have greater understanding of others' limitations. The more deeply we accept ourselves, the more we come to rely on God and to trust in His grace. It is trust in that unconditional love of the Father which eliminates the struggle for self-perfection, and replaces it with a growing conviction that the grace of God suffices and provides the basis for building our lives. God offers pardon: why not accept it for our own lives?

The Gospels recount the episode of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1–11). The scribes and the Pharisees affirm that the law of Moses commands that she be stoned, and in the name of God they ask for the death penalty. But Jesus, in the name of the Father, replies, 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at



Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery, by *Peter Aertsen*

her'. The scribes and the Pharisees go away, and Jesus says to the woman, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' And when she replies, 'No one', Jesus says, 'Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.' This is the good news brought by Jesus. The very bad news would be to learn that we are condemned as sinners. But Jesus brings the good news that he offers us pardon for our past lives. When we accept pardon, it becomes possible to rebuild our lives and to make plans for the future not feeling condemned for something that happened in the past.

Self-forgiveness does not mean that we are ignorant or oblivious of the evil we have done, but that we recognise we have done wrong, repent the harm done, and make a new start. Self-forgiveness requires the courage to tell the truth about our own lives, and the humility to follow our path, trusting in the strength of God. As St Paul says, 'whenever I am weak, then I am strong' (2 Corinthians 12:10), because it is in human weakness that God's strength comes to perfection. In acknowledging one's own weakness one pays tribute to the need for God and His grace. The celebrated French Catholic poet Paul Claudel wrote:

Lord, if you need virgins and heroes to follow your flag, there are
Dominic and Francis, and there, Lord, are Laurence and Cecilia
But if you happen to need somebody who is lazy and stupid, an idiot
and a proud man, an ungrateful coward and lecher, a man whose
heart was closed and his face hard as flint ... when everybody else
fails you, you can always call on me.¹

The sanctity of the saints lay not so much in the good that they did, as in their belief that God was capable of doing great things by their means despite their failings. They had confidence in the power of God to overcome their own limitations. So it was that Paul could proclaim: 'God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong' (1 Corinthians 1:27). He says in another passage: 'But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us' (2 Corinthians 4:7). Only when we learn self-forgiveness can we become capable of forgiving someone else, because then we can

¹ Paul Claudel, 'Le jour des cadeaux', in *Corona benignitatis anni Dei* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957 [1915]), 437.

share the other person's own experience. Conversely, if we have not learned self-forgiveness we are not capable of forgiving someone else.

God the Father declared: 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased' (Matthew 3:17). Faith teaches us that we are called to be children of God the Father; and to be a Christian is to model one's own life on that of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus teaches us to forgive, and he showed himself to be forgiving. In the 'Our Father' he invited us to forgive (see Luke 11:1–2) and, on the cross, one of his final gestures was to grant forgiveness: 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing' (Luke 23:34). His life gave testimony to his teaching.

What is Meant by Forgiveness?

Etymologically the word 'forgive' has its root in the notion of 'giving', and the term implies complete giving, the gift *par excellence*, because to forgive is the highest expression of love. Only someone who loves is able to forgive, and only someone who has felt what it is to be loved is able to open his or her heart to the possibility of forgiving. To forgive is the highest form of love, because we love in spite of the harm we have suffered. To forgive is not to ignore the offence but, recognising it, to decide to continue loving.

Forgiveness can hardly be an obligation, since it is not possible to oblige anyone to forgive; rather it is a personal decision. It is freely chosen and—as with all choices in life—no one can make the decision for us. Paul teaches,

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. (Colossians 3:12–13)

For anyone who wishes to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, forgiveness becomes a choice and a way of life. It is the decision to live as we would expect to live, given that our God is a God who makes a gift of God's pardon. The picture is that of the merciful father in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32), who welcomes the younger son and corrects the harshness of the elder.

But can we say more about the effective meaning of forgiveness, and about what it entails in the minutiae of daily life? It will be well to begin by

clearing away both false ideas of what forgiveness means, and the false motives that can be advanced to justify acts of pardon that are not genuine.

Thus to forgive is not to forget, as if nothing had happened. The result of this can be simply a repression of feelings which remain bottled up, only to erupt in the future. Moreover, what is repressed can continue to act within us even if we do not perceive it: it can grow in intensity and unconsciously influence our outlook on life and our attitude to others. There are episodes in life that cannot simply be forgotten, and to think otherwise is a form of self-deception. Nor does forgiveness mean that we renounce our rights in order to avoid problems. This can seriously undermine our self-esteem and reinforce relations which are based on untruth. In addition, no help is given to the other person to recognise his or her fault. Equally, to forgive is not to take the blame upon ourselves so as to free the other from guilt. Such a reaction runs contrary to the truth. The person who has been at fault should recognise the fault. If not, we establish an upside-down world of values, where relations are no longer based on truth, and self-deception becomes the gateway to illusion. Finally, to forgive is not to re-establish the situation as it was before the offence; wounds do heal, but the scars remain. It is impossible to go back in time and to erase incidents that have occurred. Rather, a new situation has to be faced. Reconciliation opens up a new state of affairs, which does not eliminate the past. Pardon goes along with the pain while pointing the way to new health.

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Quite apart from false ideas concerning what it is to forgive, false motives can also frequently exist. These arise when there is no real offence: true forgiveness can only occur when there has been an unjustified offence. If a responsible person quite rightly points out that we have been at fault—in not fulfilling our duties, for example, or being careless about our work, or not keeping our word—then there is no question of forgiving the other for speaking out: our reaction should be to correct our error.

Also, quite often, the gravity of an offence is calculated not in objective terms but in relation to what one person expected of another. It is possible to have wildly exaggerated views of what is due to us, and in such cases the fault does not lie with the other, but with ourselves. For example, a person may assume that someone else is aware of a particular tension, when in fact the other is completely unconscious of it. We must be realistic.

Similarly, it is important not to make mountains out of molehills. We have to learn the relative importance of things in life: a forgotten greeting does not necessarily signify the end of a friendship, and an occasional angry word is not to be interpreted as an unpardonable offence. The complexity of the human psyche also needs to be borne in mind. Sometimes a stray word may evoke memories of the past or reopen old wounds in ways that are unknown to the person speaking. The most inoffensive remark can cause havoc; of course this should remind us of the importance of prudence when speaking, but it does not really call for forgiveness. Old wounds and past frustrations may also be a hindrance when forgiveness is necessary; the scars are still there and we must learn not to become obsessed by them. It is still possible to follow our path, and indeed to learn from the past for the future.

The Process of Forgiveness

It takes a lifetime to learn how to forgive both others and ourselves: pardon is not a simple act of the will, but a process that lasts throughout life. We even have to learn how to forgive ourselves for not forgiving! This great gift has to be humbly begged from God, who knows how to forgive because God alone knows how to love.

Brother Roger of Taizé asks himself, in an open letter dated 20 December 2002, what the source of hope can be in a world torn apart by strife. He gives the clear answer: 'It can be only in God, who alone can love and who searches for us tirelessly; hope is reborn when we trust, with complete humility, in God'. And he explains why:

It is partly by his forgiving that God shows clearly his loving face, and for our part, when we forgive, our life gradually changes. As we discover in forgiveness a weightless happiness, any severity within us towards others fades away, and it is essential for it to be replaced by an infinite kindness.²

When there has been a grave offence, various stages are needed in the process of forgiveness:

1. We recognise the wound and the pain involved. There are defence mechanisms that prevent us from facing up to the harm

² 'Dios sólo sabe amar', *Zenit* (20 December 2002).

inflicted on us: we may try to deny the fact ('Nothing has happened') or the emotion ('I'm not upset'). Recognition of the pain caused by the offence implies recognition of our own weakness and vulnerability. Sometimes quite a small thing can cause deep pain, and part of the pain is realising that we are not self-sufficient and in complete control, but affected, more than we would wish, by the doings of others. Clearly, care is needed here to preserve proportion and to avoid falling into the trap of false motives.

2. We forego vengeance and guard against any aggressive reaction. The process of vengeance, with its focus on the past, wastes energy through constantly reopening the wound and breeding feelings of guilt, bitterness, hostility and rage.

3. We share the hurt with someone: in so far as it is important to acknowledge it to ourselves and not deny it, a great help can come from sharing our pain with another person. A listener is needed—someone who can simply listen, without moralising or giving advice, without passing judgment or trying to diminish the pain with superficial comments. This sharing relieves the loneliness of being hurt and provides some objectivity. Sometimes the person who caused the offence may be wholly unaware of the harm done, and it may be possible to talk to that person and let him or her know what has happened.

4. We come to a deeper understanding of the offender's point of view. This is not a question of wanting to justify the offender, but of trying to understand why the offence was given, the possible motive behind it. Thus we may try to take into account a person's family background or psychological state; frequently the more we know of a person's past, the easier it becomes to start the process of forgiveness. There are those who deliberately offend, sometimes thinking they have a good motive; others offend unconsciously. This stage helps us to set an offence in context and at its right level: the offender can be recognised as not purely evil.

5. We take care to avoid forcing ourselves to forgive: we can become so obsessed with forgiving an offence that we lose sight of the wider picture, making a healthy, balanced approach to the problem very difficult. It is blown up into a major tragedy in which we are ham actors. The drama takes over!

6. We remain open to grace. While we are feeling the difficulty and the pain of a situation, we should place ourselves in God's presence and ask God the Father for help in overcoming our impotence. To err is human; to forgive is divine. The prayer to be offered—with great humility and sincerity—is that of the 'unbelieving believer',

the father of the possessed epileptic boy: 'I believe; help my unbelief!' (Mark 9:24). In the end, we have to believe in the words of Jesus when he says: 'Do not fear, only believe' (Mark 5:36).

7. We allow our relationship with the person who has offended to be transformed. Reconciliation does not imply a denial of what has happened, and it requires the assurance that there will not be a repetition of the offences unjustly caused. The former situation is known and recognised as having changed; the old relationship has to be transformed. Thus reconciliation involves a real change, with recognisable effects, which may involve a new and deeper intimacy, or greater distancing, temporary or enduring. There may be occasions where a relationship has to be ended, and pardon does not exclude the possibility of separation.

When we open our hearts to forgive we cease being a spoilt child and adopt instead the fundamental role in life of a *parent*. Henri Nouwen recounts how a friend explained to him the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32) as depicted by Rembrandt:

... she said, 'Whether you are the younger son or the elder son, you have to realise that you are called to become the father'.... 'You have been looking for friends all your life; you have been craving for affection as long as I've known you; you have been interested in thousands of things; you have been begging for attention, appreciation, and affirmation left and right. The time has come to claim your true vocation—to be a father who can welcome his children home without asking them any questions and without wanting anything from them in return' Looking at the bearded old man with his full red cloak, I felt deep resistance to thinking about myself in that way. I felt quite ready to identify myself with the spendthrift younger son or the resentful elder son, but the idea of being like the old man who had nothing to lose because he had lost all, and only to give, overwhelmed me with fear.³

Nouwen goes on to reflect:

It was easy to identify with the two sons. Their outer and inner waywardness is so understandable and so profoundly human that identification happens almost spontaneously But what of the father? Why pay so much attention to the sons when it is the father

³ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Meditation on Fathers, Brothers, and Sons* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1992), 19–20.



The Return of the Prodigal Son, by Rembrandt

who is in the centre and when it is the father with whom I am to identify? ...

If God is compassionate, then certainly those who love God should be compassionate as well. The God whom Jesus announces and in whose name he acts is the God of compassion, the God who offers himself as example and model for all human behaviour

Rembrandt's father is a father who is emptied out by suffering. Through the many 'deaths' he suffered, he became completely free to receive and to give. His outstretched hands ... are hands that only bless, giving all and expecting nothing.⁴

⁴ Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, 114–115, 117, 127–128.

The Sacrament of Forgiveness

Pardon is so important in our lives that God has given us the gift of the sacrament of reconciliation. What is confessed in this sacrament is not so much our sins as our faith in God: we believe firmly that, despite the presence of sin in our lives, God continues to love us. Therefore, at the heart of confession is to be found not our own sins, but the mercy of God. God is greater than my sins, and his mercy knows no limits. For God alone, God who is love (1 John 4:8), knows how to love. As St John writes in his First Letter:

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:8–9)

Belief in the mercy of God allows us to recognise our sin and humbly to set out along the path of conversion. Central to the process of confession is the act of faith in the forgiving nature of God. We are encouraged to amend our lives and to behave in accordance with the faith that we profess. The obsession with our own sins can only imprison us in the past, whereas confidence in the mercy of God opens paths to the future through repentance and the resolve to make concrete changes in how we live. Confession is truly a celebration, a festival of forgiveness. This is only possible when attention is not focused primarily on the sin, but on the new situation brought about by pardon, and on the sincere desire not to continue causing harm but to make our lives a service to others. We must entrust the past to the mercy of God and, while remaining conscious of our own weakness, launch out into a future in which we can rely with full conviction on the presence of the power of God.

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