

A Theological Reflection on Forgiveness

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The existence of forgiveness is one of the central tenets of our Christian faith at the core of our relationship with God and with all other human persons. It is a dynamic reality a divine imperative at the heart of the mystery of our loving God proceeding from the profound depth of Trinitarian relations. It is the Trinity that we invoke with the sign of the cross as we gather together to celebrate the Eucharist. And it is in the light of our Triune God we recognise our own sinfulness and the need we have to be forgiven. Forgiveness by definition is both the act of forgiving and the state of being forgiven. So crucial do we consider the experience of forgiveness that each of our Eucharistic liturgies begins with a penitential rite – a form of the *confiteor* – and ends with the thrice-fold repetition Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy.

On our part, we do not always find it easy to experience in an affective way this forgiveness. At the same time, when we honestly look at ourselves we know the reality of sin both within us and around us. By God's grace the work of forgiveness is not dependent upon our more ephemeral feelings. It is a work of the Trinity made known in its fullness in and through the Incarnation and accomplished in the life passion death and resurrection of Christ and ever operative in our day through the work of the Holy Spirit. This divine initiative finds expression in the invitation to reconciliation extended to all human persons. In and through such reconciled persons the word of forgiveness maintains a divine trajectory imbuing human relations with renewed life and vigour.

At the heart of the experience of forgiveness is a reclaiming of the dignity of human life in the beauty of our creation and in the reality of our sinfulness. This is the work of grace for forgiveness is a graced reality. At the same time, however, the grace of forgiveness does not give innocence, it gives absolution to sinners. The Church's peace is a grace-filled healed history. It is not a total harmony whose constructed and wounded character does not show. Today as at other times in its history, the Church stands in need of that freedom of God drawing it towards conversion. This means that each member of the Church – those of us here present also – need to respond to that call to conversion which is always the work of the Holy Spirit calling us both to receive forgiveness from our God and to proffer it to one another.

What I have to say this evening falls roughly into three sections. If we are to come to a deeper understanding of forgiveness we must glimpse something of the nature of the one who forgives. So first we shall explore something of what scripture and theology teach us about our God who always inclines to mercy and forgiveness. Then we focus on Christ who brought us forgiveness and the Cross as the place of forgiveness. Lastly in the light of what we see as the loving compassion of our God made known to us in and through Christ we are able to look at the reality of sin and how as forgiven sinners we can enter into that forgiveness of others which extends God's work of redemption in and through our own sphere of life and activity.

The divine nature

"The Lord, the Lord a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. ... forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin." [Ex. 34 6-7 New RSV] The book of Exodus recalls that when the Lord passed by Moses this is the description of God that Moses heard. The Lord is compassionate and merciful. He knows very well our defects and our errors. God's very nature is to show forgiveness. Sacred Scripture frequently portrays

the Lord as a God of mercy. He is abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. The overwhelming characteristic that God wants his people to recognise in God is this attribute of mercy – a mercy that leads to abundant forgiveness.

The Old Testament is redolent with a long and rich history of the concept of mercy and forgiveness. Israel, the people of the covenant with God drew from their history a special experience of the mercy and the loving forgiveness of God. This experience was both individual and interior and also communal and social. The chosen people often broke the covenant with God. In the history of Israel it was the prophets who awakened the people to this awareness and who stirred them to appeal to God for mercy and forgiveness. It is noteworthy that in preaching the prophets always linked God's forgiveness with the incisive image of God's love. The Lord loved Israel with a special predilection and for this reason pardons their sins and even their infidelities and betrayals. So in the preaching of the prophets forgiveness signifies a special power of love, which prevails over the sin and infidelity of the chosen people.

The people of the Old Testament experienced the misery of sin from the beginning of their constitution as a people. While Moses was first receiving the Ten Commandments the people set up a golden calf to worship. The Lord, himself overcame this breaking of the Covenant from its initial inception by the reality of God's own loving kindness. This is the central revelation for the people at that time. This understanding is what enables them at later times both individually and collectively to beseech God's forgiveness in their time of need. The reality of God's love becomes manifest in the Lord's forgiveness of those who are his own people. He is their Father, for Israel is the firstborn son; the Lord is also the bridegroom of the one the prophets call 'beloved'. God is known as the God of love, tenderness, mercy, forgiveness and fidelity; for God's love is more powerful than betrayal and God's grace stronger than sin. Indeed, it becomes clear within the Old Testament that God's forgiveness is more profound than justice alone; for justice is seen to serve love. God's loving mercy and

forgiveness differs from justice, but is not in opposition to it. Indeed the profound basis of the relationship between justice and forgiveness in God lies in God's relationship with human beings and the whole of created reality.

In the very mystery of creation is the revelation of our God who is characterised by loving forgiveness. It is God who is the source of our creation who sustains our every breath and who brings to fulfilment the life we have been given. And connected with this understanding of creation is the mystery of the election of the chosen people of God – not because they were a great and mighty nation but because they were the very least of the nations. And in and through this chosen people which journeys through the time of the Old and New Testaments we come to see that the mystery of God's choosing refers to every human person and indeed to the whole human family to whom God desires to show loving forgiveness.

St Thomas Aquinas wrote that divine omnipotence shows itself especially resplendent in the exercise of divine mercy.¹ God's mercy is abundant and infinite. "To say that someone is full of mercy is like saying their heart is full of woe, they experience the miseries of another with the same force and sadness as if they were their own. They make the best effort to remedy the problem because it has become their problem. This is the effect of mercy. Of course, God does not become saddened by thus making his own the miseries of his creatures. Yet God does work to remedy those problems, those defects, because to act in this way does correspond to the divine nature."²

Pope John Paul II has taught us: Christ confers on the whole of the Old Testament tradition about God's mercy a definitive meaning. Not only does He speak of it and explain it by the use of comparisons and parables, but above all, He himself makes it incarnate and personifies

¹ C.f. St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1, q.21, a.4; 2-2, q.30, a.4.

² Idem, ip cit. 1, q.21, a. 3.

it. He himself, in a certain sense is mercy.³ It is this God who is rich in mercy whom Christ has revealed to us as Father. In and through his life-style and actions Christ revealed that love and forgiveness were present in the world. "This love makes itself particularly noticed in contact with suffering, injustice and poverty – in contact with the whole historical 'human condition', which in so many ways manifests limitation frailty and sinfulness."⁴ It is in this context that Christ reveals God as 'rich in mercy' as the Father who forgives. This is not just the subject of Christ's teaching; it is a reality that is made present to human persons in His very person. Christ makes the Father present as love and forgiveness – the Father of love and mercy when he affirms his union with the Father. Indeed, loving forgiveness is a touchstone of His mission.

On the basis of this way of making known the presence of the God who is Father full of love and forgiveness, Jesus makes forgiveness one of the principal themes of his teaching.⁵ It is also important to note that in revealing the loving forgiveness of God, Jesus at the same time laid before people the need that they also should be guided in their lives by love and forgiveness. "Blessed are merciful for they shall receive mercy."⁶ Indeed, by becoming for people a model of loving forgiveness for others, Christ proclaims by his actions even more than by his words that call to mercy which is one of the essential elements of any proclamation of the gospel.

In the teaching of Jesus, this image inherited from the Old Testament concerning the long term fidelity of God to His people becomes both more simple and more profound. A clear example of this is in the parable of the Prodigal Son which expresses the essence of the mercy and loving forgiveness of God, in the loving drama of the father's love and the prodigality and sinfulness of the younger son. "The parable indirectly touches upon every breach of the

³ John Paul II, Encyclical, *Dives in Misericordia*, 30 November 1980, 2.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ No where is this more evident than in Luke's gospel.

⁶ Matthew 5:7.

covenant of love, every loss of grace, every sin.”⁷ The analogy turns on the human interior condition. The inheritance of the son was more than material goods but was more importantly his dignity as a son in his father’s house. It is only after he has squandered the former that he becomes aware of the intrinsic worth of the latter – the lost dignity and squandered sonship.

It is at this stage that he decides to go home aware now of his loss of his right as son he decides to ask to be received as a hired servant – a great humiliation. The terms mercy and justice are not used within this parable. Nevertheless the relationship between justice and love is manifested as mercy. The father’s love is transformed into mercy and forgiveness when it is necessary to go beyond the precise norm of justice. It is worth exploring this in a little detail.

The prodigal son having wasted the property he received from his father, deserves – after his return – to earn his living by working in his father’s house as a hired servant and possibly, little by little, to build up a certain provision of material goods, though perhaps never as much as the amount he had squandered. This would be demanded by the order of justice, especially as the son had not only squandered the part of the inheritance belonging to him but had also hurt and offended his father by his whole conduct. Since this conduct had in his own eyes deprived him of his dignity as a son, it could not be a matter of indifference to his father. It was bound to make him suffer. It was also bound to implicate him in some way. And yet, after all, it was his own son who was involved, and such a relationship could never be altered or destroyed by any sort of behaviour. The prodigal son is aware of this and it is precisely this awareness that shows him clearly the dignity which he has lost and which makes him honestly evaluate the position that he could still expect in his father’s house.

The figure of the Father reveals to us God as Father. There are threads of our Old Testament understanding here. The father of the prodigal son is faithful to his fatherhood, faithful to the

⁷ John Paul II, *Dives et Misericordia*, 5

love and forgiveness that he has always lavished on the son. Most clearly is this expressed by the joy of the father that causes him to throw a party. The father's fidelity to himself and his deep compassion for his son reveal that a fundamental good has been saved – the good of his son's humanity. Although the son has squandered his inheritance, still his humanity has been saved. Indeed, it has been in a way found again. "the father's fidelity to himself is totally concentrated upon the humanity of the lost son, upon his dignity. This explains above all his joyous emotion at the moment of his son's return.

Forgiveness as Christ presented it in this parable has the interior form of the love that the New Testament calls agape. This love is able to reach down to every form of human misery and sin. When this happens the person who is the object of God's mercy does not feel humiliated, but rather found again and restored to value. We need to understand this parable from within not outside. So often our prejudices about forgiveness are mostly from looking from outside. When we do this we see in forgiveness above all a relationship of inequality between the one offering and the one receiving it. And we then deduce that forgiveness belittles the receiver and offends the dignity of the human person. The prodigal son shows that the reality is different. The relationship of forgiveness is based on the common experience of that good which is the human person and the dignity proper to being human. This common experience makes the prodigal son begin to see himself and his actions in their full truth [this vision in truth is a genuine form of humility].

The parable of the prodigal son expresses in a simple but profound way the reality of conversion. Conversion is the most concrete expression of the working of love and of the presence of mercy and forgiveness in the world. The true and proper meaning of forgiveness does not consist only in looking however compassionately at evil. Forgiveness is manifested in its true and proper aspect when it restores to value, promotes and draws good from all the forms of evil existing in the world and in human persons. Understood in this way forgiveness

constitutes the fundamental content of Christ's message and the power of his mission. It also leads inextricably to the reality of the cross.

II -The Cross the ultimate commitment of mercy and forgiveness

The journey of Lent which we are undertaking over these days draws us to focus our attention on the Cross. This is not just the source of consideration for Good Friday. Each year it is the wisdom of our Christian tradition that we need 40 days to prepare to glimpse something of the extraordinary grace of the paschal mystery which is the mystery of God's loving forgiveness made known in the Passion death and resurrection of Christ. It is in these events that the divine nature is most fully revealed in the abundance of God's gratuitous gift of self-emptying love that fulfills Christ's redemptive work. Indeed, in the reality of the Cross, God remains throughout the whole drama of history, the God of compassion, of merciful and glorious love even in the face of human resistance, and blind violence.⁸ God is irrevocably committed to us – on our side– always!

In Christ the love of the Triune God is made known a love that reaches into the depths of death for the salvation of human beings. As with the Incarnation, the entire Trinity is involved in the events of the Passion and the unfolding of the Paschal Mystery. In the events of Holy Week, the heart of God lies open before us and the light of God's love shines before our eyes.

⁸ Somewhere in the very core of our being there lies the all-embracing, all-explaining truth. But we resist its revelation with all our energy, We ... *exist*: what a marvellous thing! And yet, how idiotic, how inexplicably senseless. We *suffer*: how logical, of course, the inevitable consequence of our precarious paradoxical existence. But how revolting! How unaccountable! Ah, perhaps we suffer because we are guilty. ... The guilt is there, inescapably there. Banished to that no-man's land between God and creation, it comes to rest alarmingly on the shoulders of that No-man, of that No-body, of that Outcast to whom no one will give credence, *Tolle, Tolle, crucifige!* Away, away with him, and *cross him out!*⁸

The paschal mystery stands at the center of Christian faith. "In the event of reconciliation on the Cross the true character of God – God's 'in-himself-ness' – is seen."⁹ It is within these events that we need to be able to see through the passion of the Son a glimpsed revelation of the kenotic event at the heart of the Trinity.

The co-inherence of salvation history

There is a coherent whole to salvation history from the act of creation through the Incarnation; the events of Christ's earthly life; and the passion, death, resurrection and ascension of the Lord; to the future eschaton – the fullness at the end of time. In this theological perspective we are invited to see all Christian theology as revealing Christ both as the revelation of the Father and as the criterion for understanding what it means to be truly human.

Moreover, in the reality of Christ's suffering and death we are also invited to glimpse something of the self-giving propensity that lies at the heart of God. Thus within the events of the Passion we look to trace the involvement of the Triune God ever compassionately engaged in the divinely desired process of the forgiveness of all human beings. Because the world into which Jesus becomes incarnate is a sinful world, in need of redemption, Jesus' form has to take on suffering and death in order to save us. He has to take on the modalities of fallen existence so as to transvalue them by redemptive suffering.

The crucifixion stands, above all else, as the divine judgment upon sin – the *telos* of the incarnation. The one who brings judgment also brings salvation in a unique and singular way. This is achieved with his "elevation on the Cross"¹⁰ The whole of the scriptural witness

⁹ Adrian Nichols OP, *Divine Fruitfulness: A Guide Through Balthasar's Theology Beyond the Trilogy*, Washington DC, Catholic University of America Press, 2007, 166.

¹⁰ Ibid. 119.

reveals that the covenant of God requires the judgment of injustice.¹¹ Christ becomes both judgment and justification [the subject and object of judgment]¹². “And so unrighteousness is shattered against the infinite justified righteousness of God, and the tormented final humiliation of Jesus becomes his definitive exaltation.”¹³ Christ identifies himself with humanity in the suffering of sin not the committing of sin. So the exterior physical suffering signifies also the interior effects as he takes upon himself the sin of the world. In him there is “the gathering up into himself of the world’s sin, which offends the goodness of the Father, in order to burn it utterly in the fire of his suffering.”¹⁴

The events of the crucifixion – the tearing of the curtain, the darkening, the quaking of the earth, the opening of the graves – all witness to the eschatological and apocalyptic dimension of this event. The action of the piercing of the side of Jesus by a lance focuses our attention upon the water, body and blood of the sacraments and thus on the life of the church as a life under and from the cross.¹⁵ The church exists in the opening and pouring forth of the elements as a community that lives from the covenant of the cross. The Christian comes to the cross not as a solitary sufferer but as one who shares in the cross unequivocally because Christ has both granted and sustains that space.¹⁶

¹¹ Ibid. 121.

¹² “For God guarantees henceforth both sides of his covenant, the divine and the human, and as the God-man actualizes his entire righteousness.” Ibid.

¹³ Ibid. 124.

¹⁴ “The Father is henceforth to perceive this sin as being only fuel for the Son’s love: “Behold the Lamb of God [the scapegoat] who takes away the sin of the world [into the desert, into a place which is out of sight and unreachable].” Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Threefold Garland The World’s Salvation in Mary’s Prayer*, op cit, 71.

¹⁵ “What shows for the inner inclusiveness [of the Cross] is the open heart out of which is communicated what is ultimate in Jesus’ substance: blood and water, the sacraments of the Church..... The opening of the heart is the gift of what is most interior and personal for public use: the open, emptied out space is accessible to all.” Ibid 130, 131.

¹⁶ Ibid. 135.

The scriptural corpus clearly indicates that the Cross can only be understood in the light of the Trinity and through faith.¹⁷ Indeed the scandal only becomes 'tolerable' as consideration is given to this specific economy. The movement of God in Christ toward humanity is one in which the Son obeys the Father going to the cross and the desolation of abandonment for the purpose of the reconciliation of humanity which is completed by the witness of the Holy Spirit "who dwells in us"¹⁸

The Cross thus becomes the entry point through which humanity encounters a new truth and a new goodness: "I am the way, and the truth and the life" [John 14:6] Christ on the Cross is the 'way' to the Father, the eternal source of 'life' and goodness as the 'truth' of self-emptying love.¹⁹ By contrast the crucifixion stands as a universal metaphor for injustice, torture and death. These are among the chief moral and physical evils of the human condition that repel us. It is therefore not surprising that St. Paul encountered the cross as the chief obstacle to evangelization. A 'scandal' to the Greeks and an 'absurdity' to reason [I Cor. 1:23], it seems devoid of intelligibility.

In the drama of the Cross where God's heart is broken open, where God is revealed most splendidly, God also hides in the horror of death, of the Cross. Christ the Word-made-flesh is the 'form' of the Father, his very divinity hidden in his humanity was revealed in the glory of the *mysterium paschale*. In this paradox of revealedness as hiddenness the truth about God – 'God is light and in him there is no darkness at all' [I John 1: 5]; 'God is love' [I John 4: 8] –

¹⁷ "God [the Father] gave up his Son out of love for the world and all the Son's suffering up to and including his being forsaken by God, is to be attributed to this same love. All soteriology must therefore start from this point." Hans Urs von Balthasar, *TheoDrama IV*, op cit. 319.

¹⁸ "The Cross of Christ becomes transparent; as the medium of reconciliation between the Father and ourselves – we who have become his children through the Spirit who dwells in us. Ibid 137.

¹⁹ On the Cross the eternal divine drama of Love mutually emptied between the Love and the Beloved is exposed for all to 'see'. The Father abandons the Son in his death, creating a chasm between them bridged by the one who stretches from Heaven to the depth of Sheol – the Spirit.

becomes the privileged centre of any words about God. God has made God-self known, and God now desires a human response.

The cross is a revelation of who we are called to become. The selfgiving of the Son becomes also the disciples' existential condition. "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me." [Gal. 2.20] In this verse Paul's emphasis is threefold: first on becoming disciples through the act of faith; secondly on the self-emptying of the disciple herself who becomes conformed to Christ's self-emptying on the Cross for the forgiveness of human persons; thirdly, on how the disciple's new Christian form is thus inherently imitative. The pattern of divine love is the cross – a pattern of life for us also who are drawn into the divine trajectory. This is not a destructive burden but rather a source of empowerment enabling a deeper refining of interior dispositions and a greater ability to forgive. It is in this way that we come to reflect the radiance of the Lord.

III - And for our part - Sin

The Lord asks of those who follow him, of you and me, a forgiving approach and unlimited pardon. The Lord asks of his friends a generous largeness of heart, he wants us to imitate him. "The omnipotence of God", says St Thomas Aquinas, "is shown in, above all, in the act of his forgiveness and the use of his mercy, for the way He has of showing his supreme power is to pardon freely"²⁰ And thus "nothing makes us so God-like as our willingness to forgive"²¹ This is where we also show our greatness of soul, our magnanimity. But to do so we need to realise how much we ourselves have been forgiven, what the reality of sin is within our own lives. Then in the wonder and joy of such a re-realisation of God's gratuitous loving

²⁰ St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q25, a3, ad3.

²¹ St John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of St Matthew*, 30, 5.

forgiveness of ourselves we are able to offer such forgiveness to others. It is this recognition that St Ignatius Loyola sought to assist in the Spiritual Exercises.

In the first week of the Exercises prayer focuses on the experience of forgiveness. The meditations of this week confront individuals with the fact that we need salvation – a Saviour. There is so often a temptation to say we don't need such reconciliation so we build up our own securities. Such a self-defence mechanism is an illusion we need to let go of to face the darkness of sin. If we are to do so we need a strong belief in the experiential understanding of the goodness of God. In this way we find God within the darkness within the world and within ourselves. It is within this darkness that we experience love more deeply in a truly poignant fashion.

As the love of God is a mystery so is 'sin'. Indeed, as we are drawn into a deeper appreciation of the reality of divine love we become ever more aware of the reality of sin. For at the heart of divine love is that characteristic of divine mercy. God delights to forgive. We always need to try to understand sin because any glimmer of insight is a grace. Knowledge of Sin and forgiveness is a grace of God and cannot be manufactured. Being grace it can be asked for. In order to appreciate sin we need a solid basis of trust in the Lord. The grace of the first week of the Spiritual Exercises is to know God who is love and who gives Himself to me. Here we are entering into an alternative understanding not judging according to our own human categories but with a desire for the truth. To know God we must know sin to know the God who especially has mercy on us. Jesus - the name given by the angel - is the one who saves us from our sin. We need to know the difference between sorrow – the gift of the Holy Spirit - which draws us to put in love where there was little or none and remorse which is more akin to vanity – I have not lived up to my own standards - and is debilitating. We pray to know God's love and to know forgiveness which C. S. Lewis termed 'the inexcusable met by love'.

The reality of sin is more than a personal reality. As human persons we are part of a history of sin evident throughout the cosmos at all levels societal, structural, inter-personal, intra-personal along with a personal reality. It is important that we come to some understanding of this in order to appreciate the immensity of God's gracious forgiveness and the redemption wrought for us through the Cross of Christ. The movement of this week of the Spiritual Exercises is toward a cry of wonder at the gracious loving forgiveness of God for the individual and for the whole of created reality. It is in the light of this insight and experience that the one making the Exercises comes to realise the clear imperative to forgive others. The petition of the Lord's prayer to be forgiven as we forgive others is re-appropriated in a more profound way.

There is no lesson that we so need to learn as our common human fragility. God's forgiveness means the compassionate recognition of the weakness and instability of human persons; how often we cannot help it, how truly there is in us a 'root and ground of sin', an implicit rebellion against the Holy, a tendency away from love and peace, And this requires of us the constant compassionate recognition of our fellow-creatures' instability and weakness; of the fact that they too cannot help it. If the Christian penitent dares to ask that his many departures from the Christian norm, his impatience, gloom, self-occupation, unloving prejudices, unwary tongue, feverish desires, with all the damage they have caused to Christ's Body, are indeed to be set aside, because - in spite of all - we long for God and Eternal Life; then we too must set aside and forgive all that impatience, bitter and foolish speech, sudden yielding to base impulse in others that have caused us to endure. Hardness is the one response that is impossible. Harshness to others in those who ask and need the mercy of God sets up a conflict at the very heart of our personality and pushes aside grace. And that which is true of the individual is also true of us communally - we are called to conform to the law of charity.

This principle applied in its fullness makes a demand on our generosity which only a purified and altruistic love can hope to meet. For every one that appeals for God's forgiveness is required to move to God's side and share God's compassionate understanding, the unmeasured pity, with which God looks on human frailty and sin. So radical and difficult is the Christian call to forgiveness especially where there has been real and deep injury to forgive that only those living in the Spirit, in union with the Cross can walk this way.

Every liturgy begins with a penitential rite, an expression of our acknowledgement of the need we have to be forgiven to be reconciled with our God and with one another. It is an acknowledgement of our sin and our awareness that "there is no sin, not even the most intimate and secret one, the strictly individual one, that exclusively concerns the person committing it. With greater or less violence with greater or less harm, every sin has repercussions on the entire ecclesial body and the whole human family."²² It is, however, also our awareness of the divine nature of our God who we know to be full of mercy and compassion. It is our recognition of God's loving commitment to us irrevocably made known in the paschal mystery. And it is a proclamation of our willingness to witness to that forgiveness in our own lives through our dealings with others. It is also to recognise that in our conversion repentance and confession grace effects life for ourselves as individuals and builds up the body of the Church also. In this way the forgiveness of God becomes the dynamic operative within ourselves, our Churches and beyond - for the life of the world.

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²² John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, *Reconciliatio et paenitentia*, 2, December 1984, 16.