

PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

By Bishop Joseph L. Hogan

Forgiveness: The Love That Sets Free

From 1936 to 1939 Spain reeled under the barbarity of civil war. Nationalists and extremists engaged in atrocities that shocked the civilized world. Churches were desecrated and burned.



Ten bishops, over a thousand priests, and many hundreds more of religious and laity were cut down in cold blood, for no crime or political activity.

At one point a young priest was dragged before a firing squad, hands manacled behind him. He asked that his hands be untied he wished to bless his executioners. His hands were untied, and in a gesture of refined cruelty they were sadistically hacked off.

In season and out, fire-and-brimstone Christians keep reminding us that vengeance belongs to the Lord. Our self-righteousness often obscures the more evident truth that forgiveness belongs to the Lord.

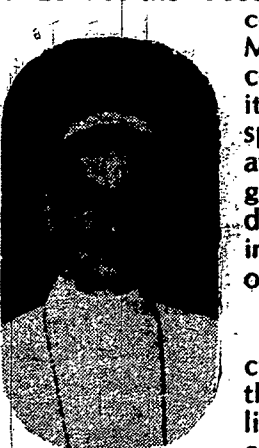
Sound psychology reminds us that sin is a basic distortion of human personality. Sound theology equally reminds us that God has no pleasure in the death of a sinner. Indeed, divine forgiveness is the pulse-beat of salvation history in all of its phases: covenant, cult and contrition.

By the first God initiated a love by which He chose for himself a people. God's covenant love not only set Israel free, it created a people that would be called by his name and forever be marked by signs of his predilection.

The Old Testament has too often been characterized as a dispensation highlighting God's justice and anger. This caricature ignores God's repeated self-manifestations. Among others, "I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings."

Holy Father's Message for Lent 1977

Here we are in Lent! Listen to us for a moment! Lent is a period for receiving God's favor. The liturgy speaks of Lent as the "acceptable time" for us to prepare to celebrate worthily the Paschal Mystery.



Nearly 10 years ago, our encyclical Populorum Progressio, on the development of peoples, was like a "cry of anguish, in the name of the Lord," addressed to the Christian communities and to all people of good will.

bonds of wickedness...to share your bread with the hungry, to bring the homeless poor into your house?" (Isaiah 58:6-7) Dozens of other texts could be added

God did not withhold the mystery of forgiving love until the Christian era. His assurances of love are frequent and fervent throughout the pages of the Old Testament. One of my favorite texts speaks of the mercy of God reaching down to the thousandth generation—a concrete way of stating that history is too short to measure the length and the human heart is too small to grasp the breadth of God's forgiving love.

At the onset of the New Testament, John the Baptist emerges as the powerful voice calling all to experience forgiveness. As a revivator of the prophetic tradition, he preaches a stirring campaign of repentance. Even more, he proclaimed a baptism of repentance leading to the remission of sins, taking care to point beyond himself to the one who would come with the baptism of the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:4,8).

The highpoint in the salvation history of forgiveness is, of course, Jesus. While the richness of his life and teaching offer many approaches to understanding him, he is probably best understood as the embodiment of the mercy of God. The Gospels surely leave no doubt that the Savior is the personification of the Father's forgiving love.

When Peter, in an obvious gesture of reaching beyond the bounds of reasonableness, offers to forgive his offending brother up to seven times, Jesus shocked the irrepressible apostle. "Not seven, I tell you, but seventy-times seven." (Matthew 18:22) Even those translators who have "seventy-seven times" in this passage clearly underscore Jesus' intent.

When the woman caught in adultery is brought to Jesus by his adversaries to entrap him, he offers them, too, a never-to-be-forgotten lesson. Jesus ingeniously cuts through the web of intrigue, and challenges, according to the requirements of the law, that those who have accused her (and are themselves without sin) should be the first to move towards stoning her.

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Of course, we find it hard to share our possessions in order to contribute to the disappearance of the inequalities of a world that has grown unjust. Yet statements of principles are not enough. That is why it is necessary and salutary for us to remember that we are stewards of God's gifts, and that "during Lent, penance should not be only internal and individual but also external and social" (Second Vatican Council, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy).

We ask you to go out to meet poor Lazarus, in his hunger and misery. Make yourself his neighbor, so that he can recognize in your eyes the eyes of Christ welcoming him, and in your hands the hands of the Lord sharing his gifts. And respond generously to the appeals that will be made to you in your own local Churches, so that you can relieve those who are most disinherited, and share in the progress of the peoples who are most deprived.

We remind you of the words of the Lord Jesus on helping the weak, words happily preserved for us by the Apostle Paul: "It is more blessed to give than to receive." We exhort you all to purify your hearts in order to welcome the coming Easter celebrations and to proclaim the joyous Good News of salvation.

Whenever religious people share their common values, one of their assumptions is that the worship of God in a more or less formal setting is a supreme experience. And while Jesus never challenges the view directly, he does point out that even here some priorities are to be observed. "If you are bringing your offering to the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, go and be reconciled with your brother first, and then come back and present your offering." (Matthew 5:23-24) Whatever other meanings one can draw from this ringing challenge, Jesus is clearly saying that love for God expressed through worship presupposes that one's heart is right with one's fellow human beings.

I would propose to those who see the double commandment of love of God and love of neighbor as either two commandments or love of God necessarily precedes love of neighbor, that they carefully reflect on the passage before us. Jesus does not appear to support the position so often taken by those who separate, distinguish or unequally rate the dual command of love. I have often thought that the best way to understand Jesus' position is to see him calling us to "the un-restricted love of others." And the list of "others" begins with the Other (with a capital "O"). To state the same insight a bit more daringly, is it too much to consider God as "neighbor," since neighbor means one who is close to, concerned with and shares the same fundamental experiences of life? Or are we not ready to pursue vigorously some of the finest implications of incarnation?

When Jesus reached beyond teaching about love, his example was no less striking than his words. The dimensions of Jesus' willingness to forgive are not fully understood until one sees his final hours with Judas as a concerted campaign to win back the heart of the disaffected apostle. At the Last Supper Jesus, following a near Eastern custom, offers the host's choice morsel, not to any of the other followers, but to Judas. This gesture is a remarkable sign of Jesus' love for the betrayer. When Jesus knelt at Judas' feet to wash them, should we not assume that the apostle recalled that he had been the most vocal critic of the woman, who some days earlier, had offered this generous service to Jesus? Now the Savior was, in the capacity of a menial, offering this service to the disciple. And, finally, should we not try to fathom why and how Jesus allowed Judas in the garden to offer that extraordinary sign of affection? As one reads the events of those final hours, it becomes clearer than ever that the first word on the cross was already welling up as an inner experience of forgiving love even before it crossed the lips of Jesus as a prayer on Calvary.

And, of course, I will forego the opportunity of reviewing the great lesson of forgiving love which Jesus wove into the Lord's prayer, where one of our petitions to the Father is to be worthy celebrants of forgiveness, both actively and passively.

By way of closing, here are some thoughts we might ponder during this holy season of forgiveness:

The new commandment of Jesus is clear enough, "Love one another, as I have loved you." (John 13:34, 15:12) Jesus never offered this imperative to us as an option. He set it before us as a touchstone of our discipleship. Forgiveness is an essential quality of the Christian experience.

Peter who denied the Savior three times was given opportunity by Jesus to repent and experience forgiveness by the threefold question: "Simon Peter, do you love me?" Repentance and forgiveness go together, they point to moments of weakness in our lives, they highlight moments of our enriching and being enriched. Let us celebrate them — indeed, sacramentalize them well.

If we find great difficulty, perhaps even experience deep embarrassment, in forgiving others, we need to recall that we do not do this alone. This is the work of grace supporting our will, and we should pray for the presence and power of the Spirit to assist us.

A forgiving love breaks the cycle of violence and aggression and hatred. Turning the other cheek is never easy, but then the call to follow Jesus was never meant to be without its moments of difficulty, doubt, even heroism.

How well are we measuring up? May this Lent deepen your relationship to Christ.

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More parish gourmet dinner on Saturday, 7 p.m. in honor of St. Patrick's Day. The event will be held at 2617 East... dancing will be... Randazzo
\$4.75. For contact Cathie 86-8998; Joan 86-1270.
TO SPEAK
McCabe will Charismatic a lecture to be... Sunday, March 13.
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