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The Best Way of Showing Our Gratitude

Peter asks how and how much to forgive. Jesus turns the question around and teaches him to let himself be forgiven... like the prodigal son, who was able to become faithful again through trust.

01/30/2024

Peter is about to prompt Jesus to share a surprising parable. As usual, without mincing words, he boldly

asks how many times he must forgive his brother. To make it easier for the Lord, he even offers to do it seven times, a number that in the Bible signifies fullness and abundance. Andrew observes the scene, amused and curious. He knows his brother but he is not quite accustomed to his spontaneity. He will end up appreciating Peter's audacity, however, because it gives rise to a parable that is at once tender and tragic but – because of that – also profoundly hopeful. Jesus reveals that divine abundance exceeds even Peter's most daringly optimistic ideas.

Crushed by debts

The scene is narrated only by Saint Matthew and has all the freshness of someone who knows coins and their value very well. A king decides to settle accounts with his servants. Filled with dread, a servant who

owes him ten thousand talents appears before him. Understandably overwhelmed by his debt, he can only muster the courage to ask for an extension. However, his lord's kindness surprises him: *Out of pity for him, the lord of that servant released him and forgave him the debt (Mt 18:27)*. He forgives everything at once. The servant could never have dreamt of such a thing. Bewildered, he leaves the place without fully grasping the king's magnanimity.

But his bewilderment is transferred, amplified, to those of us who pay attention to Jesus' account. If the master's reaction was surprising, even more so is the servant's attitude towards a companion he coincidentally encounters after being with the king: *Seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe' (Mt 18:28)*. He does not seem to recognize in his companion's pleas the ones he himself uttered moments

ago. He remains inflexible and demands what is due to him; he cannot forgive, even though his companion's debt is trivial compared to the debt he has just had forgiven.

What is the reason for this insensitivity that prevents him from acting like his king? Perhaps he hasn't truly let himself be forgiven. His debt still weighs on him. He fails to be a faithful servant to his lord because he hasn't discovered the love and joy of the one who has forgiven him. He cannot forget the fortune he owed; such a great gift doesn't fit in his heart. Perhaps he fears that such goodness will haunt him in the future. Ten thousand talents are sixty million denarii. A laborer would have to work one hundred and sixty thousand years to accumulate that amount...

Filling heaven with joy

To delve into the ocean of divine freedom, to understand a little why we can consider God so happy when we let Him forgive us, we need light from the Holy Spirit. Only then can we understand how it is possible that there is *more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance (Lk 15:7)*. St. Thomas explains that “it is more in keeping with God’s infinite goodness to use mercy and forgiveness than punishment. In fact, forgiveness befits God’s nature, whereas punishment is due to our sins.”^[1] The harm we do to ourselves offends God; we can even say it hurts Him. Jesus suffers and takes on all the blame we deserve. He cleanses us with his own blood (cf. *Rev 7:14*) and clothes us with his person (cf. *Gal 3:27*).

As Saint Josemaría considered, the Lord “speaks to us about our lack of

generosity, our sins, our mistakes; but he does so in order to free us from them, to promise us his friendship and his love. Awareness that God is our Father brings joy to our conversion: it tells us that we are returning to our Father's house.”^[2] — Conversion could be described as letting God act toward us as the Father He is. Thus “the best way of showing our gratitude to God is to be passionately in love with the fact that we are his children.”^[3] —

On one occasion, Pope Francis referenced a legend about Saint Jerome. It is said that after spending many years translating the Bible into Latin, he was celebrating Christmas Eve in the cave of Bethlehem when the Child Jesus appeared to him, asking for a birthday gift. Saint Jerome began listing possible gifts, but the Child was not satisfied with any. Saint Jerome then asked what He desired, to which Jesus replied,

“give me your sins.” That is, in a way, the best gift we can give Him, the only thing that is exclusively ours. And if we give Him our sins, they stop weighing on us; they stop poisoning our lives. *Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool* (Is 1:18).

The fidelity of asking for forgiveness

In one of his pastoral letters, the Father puts the foundation of our fidelity in God's fidelity. “Faith in God’s faithfulness gives strength to our hope, even though our personal weakness sometimes leads us not to be entirely faithful, in small things or perhaps, on occasion, in great things. Then fidelity consists in following, with God’s grace, the path of the prodigal son (cf. *Lk 15:11-32*).”^[4] —

How is it possible that the path back is part of our fidelity? Perhaps because in asking for forgiveness, we accept that we are sinners and that we need to be saved. Ignoring the evil within us would mean locking ourselves in the prison of our weaknesses. But God has established a sacrament that blesses the path back and allows us to take it, to heal.

The simple — or, at times, not-so-simple — act of returning home already involves loving God in a very special way. We show Him that we firmly believe that He is good and faithful. We ask Him to give us back what we have broken because we recognize that it is not good to be far from Him. We even dare to ask for an even greater gift than what we lost. We let Him love us, even though we don't deserve it. And, if that is not enough, we know that we might stray from his side again. But we accept walking the path back to Him

whenever necessary, promptly and joyfully, infecting ourselves with the joy of the one waiting for us at home... or on the way, because God comes to meet us; He does not have the *patience* to wait. By letting Him forgive us, we accept living in debt and appreciate that He is our guarantor.

After returning, fidelity requires us to “remain in constant vigilance, because trusting our poor strength is not advisable.”^[5] Choosing Him means struggling, but accepting the struggle begets freedom. And “with God’s help, we can be faithful. We can advance along the path of identification with Christ, so that our ways of thinking, of loving, of seeing people and the world, become more and more his, through a permanent beginning and beginning again.”^[6] —

God first

In some Latin American countries, there is a saying that expresses how we submit our plans to God, like the classical *Deo volente*, or “God willing.” They say, for instance, “God first [*primero Dios*], I will visit my mother tomorrow.” Allowing ourselves to be forgiven is letting God go first, letting Him take precedence. It means accepting that He loves us more than we do and responding with all-encompassing, grateful love.

“The Christian vocation, in all its particular expressions, is God’s call to holiness. It is a call from God’s love to our love, in a relationship in which God’s faithfulness always steps in first: *The Lord is faithful* (2 Thess 3:3; cf. 1 Cor 1:9).”^[7] It is, therefore, easy to understand that “our fidelity is nothing more than a response to God’s fidelity. God who is faithful to his word, who is faithful to his promise.”^[8] Peter asks how and how

much to forgive. Jesus turns the question around and teaches him to let himself be forgiven: God first. If we want to love God, to be faithful to Him, to share his love, and to forgive those who offend us, we have to learn to let his fidelity to Himself and his eternal covenant work in us.

The prodigal son rediscovered that the only one who truly loved him was in the home he had abandoned. He trusted again in his father's faithfulness; he became faithful again in the way he could: by trusting. Indeed, in many languages the root of the word for trust is "fidelity."

The people who enjoyed the prodigal son's riches had abandoned him, but his father continued to be his father. He suspected that he no longer deserved to be called his father's son. In reality, he had never *deserved* it: gifts are not earned. What mattered

was allowing his father to continue being what he had always been: a proud father. And although he understood very little, the son dared to return. He dared to ask for forgiveness because he glimpsed his father's merciful heart, even though he couldn't fathom how much he was loved.

“What does it mean to build a house on the rock?” Pope Benedict XVI once asked. “Building on the rock means, first of all, to build on Christ and with Christ. [...] It means to build with Someone who, knowing us better than we know ourselves, says to us: *You are precious in my eyes and honoured, and I love you (Is 43:4)*. It means to build with Someone, who is always faithful, even when we are lacking in faith, because he cannot deny himself (cf. 2 *Tim* 2:13). It means to build with Someone who constantly looks down on the wounded heart of man and says: *I do*

not condemn you, go and do not sin again (cf. *Jn 8:11*). It means to build with Someone who, from the Cross, extends his arms and repeats for all eternity: ‘O man, I give my life for you because I love you.’”^[9] —

Forgiving our debtors

In response to Peter's question about the “terms and conditions” of forgiveness, Jesus speaks about a king who sets none: he forgives, and that's enough. Only from such forgiveness, only from God's forgiveness, are we capable of loving ourselves *to the end* (*Jn 13:1*).

Forgiving others may sometimes entail a heroic and extreme fidelity to the divine message of unconditional love for all men. It means recognizing others as a gift from God, as Saint Paul did, telling the Ephesians, *I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers* (*Eph 1:16*).

If we want to be faithful, it is best to think, rejoice, and rely on God's fidelity. "As we progress in the spiritual life, following the impulses of the Spirit, who delves into the innermost being of God, let us think of the sweetness of the Lord, how good He is in Himself. Let us also ask, with the psalmist, to enjoy the sweetness of the Lord, contemplating, not our own heart, but his temple, saying with the same psalmist: *When my soul is downcast within me, I remember You.*"^[10]

Each of us asks for forgiveness as best we can, but God always responds with greatness, personalizing his affection for each person. This is how we want to forgive, not automatically or coldly. The attitude of the prodigal son's father teaches us how to do it. Faced with his son's harsh self-condemnation, the father interrupts him, with a gesture that, without

saying anything, says it all: “My son, what are you saying...?” The father is not interested in that discourse, solemn and detached from the reality of his love. He only sees his son, who is helpless, hungry, and coming home.

When we see the father’s reaction, Jesus’ words about faithful servants who vigilantly awaited their master may come to mind: *Truly, I say to you, he will dress himself for service and have them recline at table, and he will come and serve them (Lk 12:37)*. The master’s approach is unconventional, but the father’s is even more unusual. His son had disrespected him, distanced himself from the family, and squandered his inheritance. But the father gives him countless gifts, calls for music and celebration, and offers him a fattened calf. Jesus spares no details in this narrative: the father runs out to the son and embraces him, despite

the smell of the pigs he had been tending. He has been waiting for him all the time, never forgetting him for a moment, and he does not want to lose him again.

The Virgin Mary never had to ask God for forgiveness, but she was very aware that her fidelity was founded on the rock of God's love for her. She never claimed the merits of her fidelity: *The Almighty has done great things for me (Lk 1:49)*. Somehow, she intuited that she had been granted the grace of her Son's passion and death to preserve her from sin. She also felt an infinite debt, but the debt did not crush her; it filled her with gratitude and, therefore, fidelity. That's why she was able to forgive us for nailing her Son to the Cross... And to welcome us as a gift from God.

[1] St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II-II, q.21, a.2, c.

[2] St. Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 64.

[3] St. Josemaría, *The Forge*, no. 333.

[4] Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral Letter, 19-III-2022, no. 2.

[5] St. Josemaría, Letter, 28-III-1973, no. 9.

[6] F. Ocáriz, Pastoral Letter, 19-III-2022, no. 3.

[7] *Ibid*, no. 4.

[8] Francis, Homily, 15-IV-2020.

[9] Benedict XVI, Meeting with young people in Kraków-Błonie, 27-V-2006.

[10] St. Bernard, Sermon 5 on various subjects, 4-5.

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