

Living the Spirit

Although often our lives go on without extraordinary personal challenges, we must not forget that at present we are at war. Our basic enemy as a people or a nation is the consortium of terrorists who find many reasons to attack our way of life. Sadly some of this terrorism can be traced to religious fanaticism.

Religious beliefs have in history been at the root of many conflicts. While Christians have not been strangers to their own brand of fanaticism at times, true Christianity is at its heart a religion of peace. What is this peace that marks the Christian faithful? Recall how Jesus knew that such events as wars and persecution would come into the lives of his followers. So we can conclude that the peace that Jesus offers does not reside in the political life of the communities of mankind. His peace invades the souls of his followers, and they come to know and enjoy its many blessings.

The difference between the teaching of Jesus and that of other religious founders is his emphatic teaching on forgiveness. Without an appreciation of what forgiveness involves, communities nourish many past injuries, and individuals do the same. Soon the very value of human life is the victim of mistaken beliefs.

When asked how many times one must forgive an injury, Jesus tells his followers that forgiving seven times is not enough. Using an Aramaic figure of speech (we would call it hyperbole), Jesus says one should forgive “seventy times seven.” His meaning is clear to those who heard his words. He meant always!

When we consider forgiveness, we must look into our intimate and personal lives. As Catholic Christians our way of life is formed by the gospel. We understand a primary gospel teaching when we understand the fact that God’s forgiveness is without limits set by himself. He is ready to forgive all his creatures, all his friends, and yes, all his enemies. Jesus died to obtain forgiveness for every sin of every contrite sinner, who does not place an obstacle to this generosity on his part.

We know that God is offended by sin. To possess the grace of forgiveness, we have to bring forth a genuine and real sorrow for sin from the depths of our being. Why? Because God is so good and worthy of our love, not our rebellion against his law. Jesus said: “If you love me, keep my commandments.”

Catholics who have true faith and live it are fortunate in having the experience of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. In that Sacrament the power of Jesus comes through the Church and its duly appointed representative to cleanse us of our confessed sins. We come with contrition, a sorrow that often is beyond words.

One of the most beautiful of the parables is that of the Prodigal Son. In this parable it is the father who is prodigal, generous to a fault. Jesus explained through this masterpiece of simplicity how much God wants to forgive. His secondary teaching is that we should mirror that same generosity and forgive others who may have injured us.

I am not naïve, nor I am sure, are my readers. I know that there is little hope that nations will suddenly learn this lesson in their own dealings with one another. Can you imagine Israel forgiving Hezbollah? Or Islamic terrorists accepting religious beliefs of those they consider infidels? Yet, this does not mean that we cannot pray for peace. Is there a sense that even within our own nation there is much division that seems to come from one kind of hatred or another? Can you find examples closer to home? In families? In parishes?

I do not refer to hate in its formal and most hurtful manifestation. Some times hate is what the original Aramaic language of the gospel describes as hate. There it means to love less. When the Lord tells his follower that they must hate their own relatives, he means they must love them less than they love Him. Our love of Jesus must be real. It is a love that resides in the soul. It is a love meant to be lasting and be without end.

I pray that you, dear reader, will think long and hard about what forgiveness you may need from your loving God and Savior. I pray that you give serious thought to whether you really mean the words of the *Our Father* as you ask for this forgiveness. If your conscience is uneasy, why not try the antidote of a good, perhaps general, confession made after a deep searching of your soul?

There is one aspect of forgiveness that is often on my mind these days. What can a priest do to share his own anxiety about the failures of his fellow priests? In the midst of the constant barrage of retelling the story of clergy abuse, I find myself aware that one hears no word of forgiveness. Who does not see how hard it must be for victims to forgive? But will healing of souls come without this effort?

Victims of any kind, especially of abuse, will not find radical healing unless they can forgive. My statements here do not minimize how hard that may be. I hope no one thinks to find in them an excuse for conduct that cannot be excused. If the victims of the Crusaders cannot forgive the abuses against their forebears after so many centuries, where will present-day victims find the resources that will bring healing and peace?

One of my seminary classmates used to tell a story whenever he had to get up in class and preach his practice sermon. [We did not call them homilies in those days.] He would tell of a lad standing on a high mountain and shouting out: "I hate you." The lad heard the echo come back, and was distressed beyond description. But following good advice, he again shouted out a different message: "I love you." Do I need tell you what he heard in return?

If there is any hate in you, try crying out to the Lord your love and you will hear his answer. It is in that love that you will find forgiveness of all those hurts that life may bring your way. With the forgiveness will come healing and peace. What a gift!

God love you always!

Monsignor David Morrison

Have you made your Lenten confession? Forgiveness awaits you.