
ALONG THE PATH OF FORGIVENESS



Abide in my love is the title of Level Three of the family- and parish-based catechetics programme. To abide in God's love is a wonderful challenge, and one that is possible to attain. After receiving as a gift the earth as our home, after having received unsuspected talents, after perceiving God's great desire to live among us, He invites us to abide in His friendship by offering us the path of forgiveness.

LIFE IS SO FRAGILE

Like life itself, love is a fragile affair, and we must remain constantly watchful and vigilant. God loves us infinitely, and we can count on Him at all times and in all places. But we feel ourselves very small. We know our limitations, and we have a kind of fear of not being faithful enough to the love that is shown us. We are afraid not to "return love for love" to the One who loves us so, to Him who created us in His image and from whom we receive so many gifts. How then could we find again that seemingly broken love, and how can we renew the covenant that seems broken? How can we return like a child to such a prodigal Father, so good and so understanding? I can run to Jericho like Zacchaeus did, climb a tree and try to get a glimpse of Jesus. Or like Bartimaeus, I can turn to Jesus and ask him to restore my sight that I may have light to henceforth guide my life. Or like the Canaanite woman, I can cry out my misery for as long as I am not noticed. And like Peter, I can recover my senses and discover the horror of my infidelities and betrayals, and recover the friendship of Jesus.

A FRATERNAL PATH

Since we ask the Lord to forgive us our weaknesses and sins as we forgive those who have offended us, it is important that we be coherent with ourselves. If we ourselves are to be forgiven, we must be able to forgive the people around us, to forgive the faults that could have been committed towards us. Poor Saint Peter who thought that it was sufficient to forgive once or twice, in order to really be one of Jesus' disciples! The answer he got was a little more demanding: "I am not saying that you must forgive seven times, but seventy times seven times!" A few moments before, the disciples had learned an unforgettable lesson on fraternal correction: "If your brother should commit some wrong against you, go and point out his fault, but keep it between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. If he does not listen, summon another, so that every case may stand on the word of two or three witnesses. If he ignores them, refer it to the church. If he ignores even the church, then treat him as you would a Gentle or a tax collector." A very fraternal path, but how very demanding! It may be that even in our youth we have had difficult choices to make: the abused child must be able to tell his parents, and with them he can confront those who have harmed him. If these violent people refuse to listen, then we must go further, for truth and justice to prevail. The unloved child needs to recover the love that was snatched from him. But the child who has lied or stolen must also be enabled to do restitution, with help from those adults who are close to him.

A PATH OF LIBERATION

Jesus says to his Church: "Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." He who had forgiven over and over the sins of people he met, and who had delivered them from Satan's grip, was teaching a new path to receive his forgiveness. He would share his power of forgiveness with his Church. That first Easter Sunday, he said to his disciples: "Receive the Holy Spirit. Those to whom you forgive their sins, they are forgiven, and those you hold bound, they are held bound." Energised by the power of the Holy Spirit, the apostles travelled the world, urging people to convert and to receive baptism for the forgiveness of their sins. Great crowds were converted and believed the Good News. The first disciples were faithful to the teaching of the apostles and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayer. They were of one heart and one mind. Such a change of life has happened to them! But

the disciples soon realised how fragile they were, and Church history tells us about the means of conversion and reconciliation the Church offers us.

A WONDERFUL PATH

When we have sinned, the usual way of seeking forgiveness from God in the Church is to receive the sacrament of forgiveness and reconciliation. This is such a great grace! By humbly and contritely acknowledging our faults, we receive divine forgiveness from the priest. He says: "I forgive you your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." If Zacchaeus was filled with joy when Jesus went to live at his house, joy is all the greater when we receive divine forgiveness and recover our friendship with Jesus. It is so good to take the time needed, to prepare to celebrate this sacrament through time for prayer, Scripture reading, and speaking with the confessor: these are as many ways of making the period of recollection a meaningful exercise. We are lucky, in our milieu: we have regular times to celebrate the sacrament of forgiveness, and there are the community celebrations during Advent and Lent, to help us discover the richness of God's forgiveness. "Where sin has abounded, grace has superabounded!"

A PRAYERFUL PATH

Like those who came to Jesus, we, too must often say "Lord, have mercy on me!" We are so weak and fragile, but when God's forgiveness is with us, there is so much praise coming from our hearts! "We pray for your Church, Lord, and for all its members. Help us to love it as it is, in its greatness and its weakness. Help us recognise its unity in the thousand faces of your people. Help us discover, beyond appearances, the vast network of hidden holiness, the living stones of the Church."

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