



From A Bishop's Journal (772)

Living and Celebrating Forgiveness

One of the most beautiful and greatest sacraments that is given to us to celebrate is the sacrament of forgiveness. In His infinite mercy, God the Father reminds us that through His Son Jesus and in the power of the Holy Spirit, we are reconciled with God and with one another. I pray that the doctrinal and pastoral guidelines that I offer today help you discover the deep joy that comes with this sacrament.

The Meaning of Forgiveness

Before leaving his Apostles Jesus left them an awesome legacy: “love one another as I have loved you.” Christians today know that these words are also addressed to them and that they, too, are invited to learn how to love like Jesus. To do this, they acknowledge that they must turn away from themselves in order to turn to God who is kind and merciful, and who is close to us in Jesus, his Son. The power to forgive sins was given to the Apostles by the risen Christ: “receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the people their sins, they are forgiven them. If you hold them bound, they are held bound.”

To Understand Better

In His great mercy, God the Father decided to reconcile all things in His Son by making peace through the blood and the cross. In Israel's history, the prophets had already called the people to penance, and Jesus did not simply talk of penance and conversion. He welcomed sinners and brought them back to God. To show that he had the power to forgive sins, he healed the sick, and he himself died to free us from sin and rose again for our justification. It was for the forgiveness of sins that he instituted the sacrifice of the New Covenant in his blood. It was in the death and resurrection of Christ that God showed His immense love for humankind: “I have come so they may have life in abundance.” Jesus' love is boundless, and he always makes the first step. He looks with kindness on those who are rejected by their own, and he shares their meal. All have value in his eyes, they feel loved by God, love themselves more, and become more and more capable of loving one another.

Mercy of God

The God to whom Jesus introduces us always allows us to start over again. He does not destroy us. Quite the opposite, if we have sinned, He picks us up and does not condemn. In his first letter, saint John has these comforting words: “No matter what our consciences may charge us with; for God is

greater than our hearts and he knows everything.” Jesus calls us to conversion. What does this mean? To convert is to change our point of view, our way of looking at things. It means looking around us with the eyes of God. It means hearing God speak to us as we meet one another. It means to acknowledge our successes and failures, and our troubles. Converting means to acknowledge that God is close to us, and that He speaks and acts through us. He never abandons us, and His forgiveness covers all our sins. He is a merciful God who accepts us no matter what, just as we are.

Sacrament of Forgiveness

The sacrament of forgiveness reminds us that the initiative of conversion and reconciliation does not come from us, but from God himself who comes to us. It tells us of God’s wonders for each of us, and it re-welds the link that sin has broken. This new creation between God and us is created when the priest speaks the following words: “I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” Thus the sacrament of forgiveness calls back to life those who have been estranged from His love. We can therefore say that the aim of this sacrament is to reconcile us with God. This sacrament is so great that it restores or repairs the fraternal communion that sin has broken. Christ died for all humankind, and in his Church he wants the doors to be wide open to welcome all those who want to turn away from their sins.

Basic Elements

In the basic structure of the sacrament of forgiveness, there are two equally essential elements: the first refers to the person who, under the action of the Holy Spirit, desires conversion; the second element refers to God’s action. For this, three conditions are needed: contrition, which is the regret of the sin committed; confession, which is acknowledgement of one’s fault before a minister of God; and satisfaction, which implies a change of direction in life and repairing the harm done. There is no requirement on God’s part: absolution is the free gift of forgiveness given by God.

Possibilities

Since the time of Jesus Christ the sacrament of forgiveness has had several different forms, either collective or private. Nowadays, the Church proposes three forms of penitential celebration: individual celebration, community celebration of forgiveness with individual absolution and, in certain cases, a community celebration with collective confession and absolution. The following directives concerning the forms of absolution are taken word for word from the [French] Ritual for the sacrament of forgiveness, *Celebrating Penance and Reconciliation*: “Individual reconciliation allows, in an irreplaceable way, to show that forgiveness touches that which is the deepest and most personal in us. Community celebration with individual confession and absolution: A common celebration shows more clearly the ecclesial nature of penance. After everyone has confessed and received absolution, all together praise God for the marvels He works for His people whom the Son has redeemed by his blood. Community celebration with collective confession and absolution: One cannot give collective absolution to several penitents without having this preceded with individual confession, except in the following instances: where there is danger of death and there is not enough time for the priest to hear each individual confession; in cases of grave necessity, that is when, because of the number of penitents there is not a sufficient number of confessors to hear them within a convenient time limit, and there is danger that these penitents would be forced to be deprived –

through no fault of their own – of the sacramental grace or of holy communion. Judging whether the required conditions are met is reserved to the diocesan bishop who in doing so takes into consideration of the criteria established with a common accord by the Conference of Bishops.”

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