

“For the Forgiveness of Sins”

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“...new in expression”

Because I think our ideas of forgiveness, relating to sin, are severely truncated, I am offering in this short paper a broader, more comprehensive way to think about forgiveness and reconciliation. We almost instinctually think of forgiveness as some kind of reprieve - reprieve from a punishment that we deserve. It's rather like the image children who disobey their parents, then are told they cannot have pizza and must go to their rooms; but the parents eventually relent and invite the children down for hot slices covered with peperone.

With this view of forgiveness, the energy is mostly on the part of the one who forgives, trying to get someone offended to get over his or her offense, so that punishment will not happen. The one who forgives lets go of a grudge; the one who is forgiven feels a sense of relief because some impending punishment will not happen. Certainly for centuries our thinking about forgiveness was punishment-centered. We had not only the actual forgiveness of punishment, but also an accrued idea of “temporal punishment” which was yet due, even after we were forgiven.¹ While the teaching on “temporal punishment due to sin” carried a crucial insight—that sin has residual effects in our lives—the teaching basically helped the Catholic imagination profusely populate purgatory²

On this view, forgiveness basically got rid of punishment which was due to sin. How inevitably, then, did God become the chief punisher, the enforcer of a divine justice that had rules so severe that not even God could suspend them! How stunningly the image of a merciful, generous God became one of a God who could control the universe, but could not get anyone off the hook. Spiritual life became a court scene where sentences were metaphorically handed out, and forgiveness became a back door way to skirt the punishment that was due.

Such images, which can easily be derived from ways of understanding the Deuteronomistic view of Israel's covenant (if you keep my commandments you will live; if you do not, you will suffer and die) became ways of interpreting the history of the ancient Jewish people.³ They also became the prism through which we looked at the crucifixion of Jesus. God's justice demanded punishment; who was going to undergo the punishment? Wait, let's send Jesus to be brutally murdered by foreign invaders and maybe God will be appeased.

I only partially apologize for the caricature of the previous paragraph because, while painting the picture in pretty bald terms, it is not too inaccurate. Theologians have historically interpreted Anselm's “Why Did God Become Human?” (*Cur Deus Homo?*) in fairly crude terms, with God demanding “satisfaction” which only a divine being could provide in order to make up for the infinite disruption of divine justice.⁴ Certainly, Anselm need not be read as crudely as this—

Jesus' can be seen as God's gift to repair the brokenness of human existence—but this cruder reading has dominated the popular Christian imagination, both Catholic and, to an even greater extent, fundamentalist Protestantism which sees “substitutionary suffering” as one of its major tenets.⁵ Am I the only one who cringes when I see teenagers with t-shirts showing a graphically brutalized Jesus, with red blood drops all over the picture, and the words “He paid the price”?

I would like to present other images of forgiveness which move away from notions of “punishment” and “reprieve”—with their inherent coloring of the divine-human relationship—into something which might do greater justice to broader notions of forgiveness which the New Testament gives us. I think a broader reading of forgiveness can yield a very cohesive picture between forgiveness, conversion, and discipleship and, in the process, help us see the catechumenal process more clearly.

Forgiveness as a New Realm

In the consecration of the Mass, we hear the phrase “for the forgiveness of sin.” In both Latin and Greek, the idea behind the phrase “for the forgiveness of sin” is represented by a sense of motion, of movement. “Unto” the forgiveness of sins would be better; but “into” the forgiveness of sins more accurately captures the Greek “eis” and the Latin “in” followed by the accusative case. This kind of “movement” imagery helps situate forgiveness as a kind of new place that is set up, a space into which a person moves; or, perhaps better, a realm which a person enters that changes his or her total state.

We initially see the idea of “forgiveness” as it is given in our formula (“the forgiveness of sin”) in Luke's Gospel, as part of the ministry of John. In Zachariah's canticle, John is described as one who will “give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins” (Lk. 1:77).⁶ So there is a relationship between “salvation” and “forgiveness” of sin. The word used for forgiveness in Greek—aphesis—basically means “a taking away.” The Latin translation of this word—remissio—has the idea of overlooking, or not taking into account, a more juridical, or even a banking, notion than “taking away.” In any event, in this canticle verse, the whole idea of forgiveness of sin is to bring about a consciousness of salvation—an awareness of what God is doing in the world to bring it to fullness. The sense of salvation and forgiveness correlate with each other. “Salvation” has to mean more than being saved from the fires of hell; rather, it has to mean being part of God's work to transform humankind and the world. Forgiveness is related to this realization of, and becoming part of, God's transforming work

We next see this idea (“the forgiveness of sin”) in the opening verses of Luke's third chapter: “[John] went into all the regions around the Jordan proclaiming a baptism of repentance for

[=into] the forgiveness of sins...” (Lk. 3:3). The next sentence relates John’s baptism ministry to the vision of Isaiah the prophet—making straight the way of the Lord with the result that “all flesh shall see the salvation of God” (Lk. 3:6) - a catholic theme that runs through Luke’s Gospel. We have in these few verses several words that have structured Christian thinking from the beginning: repentance, forgiveness, and salvation. “Repentance” translates the Greek word metanoia which, in itself, would take many monographs to unravel. Here it will suffice to mention that metanoia certainly means more than “repent” and “do penance” which is how this word has long been translated into Latin and other languages. The roots of this word, meta and noia mean the “change of one’s mind” or the transformation of one’s thinking.⁷ In Luke’s Greek, John is proclaiming a “baptism of transformation” which brings one into the forgiveness of sins. People are moving from one realm into another, and conversion is the means of transit.

Luke give us more language about forgiveness - aphesis—in the book of Acts, the second part of Luke’s arranging of the events in the life of Jesus and his early followers (cf. Lk. 1:3). Here we see Peter addressing the crowd at Pentecost - a crowd that Luke goes out his way to show as multi-national, Jews and Jewish converts from everywhere (Acts 2:8-11). Peter narrates the kernel of what we call salvation history, culminating in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. “Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:36). The Book of Acts will unfold the two-fold title of Jesus - “Lord” because he acts with the power of God, “Messiah” (“Christos” in Greek) because Jesus was anointed to bring salvation. The response of the people who have heard that Jesus, God’s chosen One, was crucified but now has been raised, leads to their question: “Brothers, what should we do?” and Peter’s response, “Repent and be baptized everyone you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:37-38).

Of course, Acts does not follow up this discourse with people going home, happy that they’ve been saved from punishment. Rather, the whole book of Acts shows exactly what repentance (conversion) and forgiveness mean: the disciples undertake a new way of life. Forgiveness of sin, in the Book of Acts, does not mean reprieve from punishment. Rather, simultaneous with the forgiveness of sin is reception of the gift of the Holy Spirit. All that the Spirit will accomplish in the lives of these early disciples of Jesus is the space into which the converted are led. The salvation that people enter into is a way of life led by the Holy Spirit who both transforms individuals and, as part of this transformation, brings them into a new way of life. “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people” (Acts 2:44-47).

Something of this broader notion of forgiveness - being brought into a new state of life - is implicit in the formula of consecration over the chalice, which comes, of course, from the Gospels and includes the formula “for [into] the remission of sins.” The statement itself is called “the mystery of faith.” Before the reforms of Vatican II, the formula contained these words itself: “novi et eterni testamenti: mysterium fidei” - “of the new and eternal covenant: the mystery of faith.” In other words, there is a mystery of faith—it’s inner secret—which is tied to the covenant that Jesus establishes. Blood—the selfless gift of Jesus for the establishment of the Kingdom—confirms the nature of the covenant. God gives us Jesus to establish a new relationship for “you and for many” - and all of this is “in remissionem peccatorum” - “into the remission of sin.”

The image of forgiveness which I propose for our consideration comes to this: forgiveness is the removal of someone from a system-of-sin, in which God is not the center of one’s life, into a new kind of system in which believers, transformed by the Holy Spirit, adopt a way of life as a sign of their entrance into the Kingdom of God. The emphasis is not on one or another particular sin. This obsession with particular sins resulted from the collapse of an ancient system of exclusion into a monastic system of doing penance. In earliest centuries of church history, major sins of exclusion - adultery, apostasy, murder - demanded a long, external process of penance and re-admission into the community. This gradually drifted over centuries into a concern for multiple sins of all kinds for which one “had to go to confession.”⁸ It certainly is obvious, in recent decades, that the goal posts of what is a “mortal” sin, have moved dramatically, even if the official language of the Church has fully not endorsed this movement⁹. Rather than this obsession with “being perfect” by having “no sin on one’s soul” - as the widespread phrase had it - a broader understanding of “forgiveness of sin” can have us talking about states of life, discipleship, which believers are living.

Proof for this underlying notion of forgiveness is right under our noses - in the Catechumenal process - in which people move from a one state to another state as a disciples—in a gradual process of movement from darkness to light. Catechumens become the elect; the elect become the newly enlightened; the newly enlightened become the neophytes and mystagogues that will continue the transformation of the Christian community. Notice that we do not celebrate the sacrament of Reconciliation for Catechumens; rather, we celebrate the triple sacraments of Initiation - of entrance - into the people of God. The whole process is one of “forgiveness of sin.” Forgiveness is a movement from being away from God, unaware of God, unsure of God - however this is experienced—into a state of being part of the Kingdom of God through entrance into the People God has formed. Part of being in God’s People involves living a new way of life in which the forces of sin continue to be overcome by the practices of discipleship. The realm of forgiveness, directed by the mercy of God, begins to transform the believer through the agency of the Holy Spirit leading, and empowering, the faithful to fuller participation in the Kingdom.¹⁰

Pastoral Senses

If forgiveness of sin involves, in a fundamental way, undertaking the path of discipleship, entering a new space where the grace of God holds sway, then this has implications for the pastoral approach the Church takes toward Reconciliation. Obviously the Church cannot revert to earlier forms of reconciliation, before the substantial changes that emerged at the end of the first millennium; but the Church can help put its current practice of Reconciliation into a broader, pastoral context of discipleship.

Somewhat embarrassingly for the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the term “conversion” appears mostly in the section on the sacrament of Reconciliation - and hardly at all in the celebration of Baptism.¹¹ This means that, although the adult Catechumenate is the “norm” for religious catechesis, it is not the assumption of the Catechism when it thinks about baptism. The Church would greatly benefit from understanding its entire life in terms of conversion; infant baptism should not prevent this—rather it should help identify the key issue. Children are not baptized and then, later, converted. Rather, children are baptized in order to grow in an environment of conversion, set up for them by their families and the wider community of faith.¹²

Nevertheless, the pronounced appearance of conversion in the context of Reconciliation may give a good clue as to its potential in our understanding this sacrament. The external form of the sacrament of Reconciliation includes elements that should shape the sacrament more clearly toward discipleship. Certainly the call to examine conscience and make a clear indication of repentance is analogous to the experience of conversion; and the imposition of a penance is a seed that can be understood better in terms of discipleship.¹³ What the Church is doing in Reconciliation is celebrating, in the life of an individual, the salvation won for us in Jesus Christ, a salvation that inserts people into the Kingdom of God as disciples. The sin of a Christian is the recognition that something significant has cancelled or contradicted the following of Jesus as a disciple. Reconciliation is the acknowledgement that, having turned again to a life of discipleship, a follower of Jesus is now restored by grace to a way of life that otherwise was seriously compromised by sin.

The point of Reconciliation, then, is the resumption of the way of life that the Holy Spirit began in us when we were transformed by grace and began our lives as disciples. Sin is overcome not by the internal process of feeling differently about our sin, but rather by the whole array of elements of discipleship. Forgiveness brings us to a life of prayer, of submission to the Word, of sacramental celebration, of unity with our brothers and sisters, of growth in grace, and of service to others as a way of life. Forgiveness is the work God does through divine mercy to overcome the power of sin inside of us, above and beyond justice and punishment, so that we can begin to experience the breadth of divine life again. This breadth of divine life is far more than relief because a punishment has been removed; it is restoration to a graced way of life.

The Church, then, would have to frame Catholic life much more explicitly as discipleship, as a continuation of what is shown to us in the Book of Acts, and in the rest of the literature of the first followers of Jesus which we see in the Pauline and Petrine letters, in the communities of John, in Hebrews, and reflected in a different way in the Book of Revelation. The implications of discipleship underlie every passage of the Gospels, though in the form of narration rather than the exhortation which we find in the apostolic letters. In the New Testament we are not dealing with individuals struggling with inner feelings as so much of Christian life has come to seem, particularly in the United States. Far more than being a state of mind, Christianity is a way of life, walked with others on a journey which is bringing the Kingdom of God into being. It is a new space, an arena of grace and new covenant, which the forgiven are privileged to occupy once again.

Talking discipleship would allow the Church to frame all of parish life in a different way - how we come together to support each other as disciples - and affect how we thought about religious formation in general. For all our talk about having to reframe religious education, we still in actual practice frame it in terms of classes needed to receive sacraments rather than formation in discipleship. For all our talk about being a people of God on a journey, parish life still often comes down to people attending Mass, with only secondary thoughts about anything religious happening during the week. We still do not think of ourselves as a people formed by the Holy Spirit to be harbingers of the Kingdom who, by the structures and practices of discipleship, are showing God's new life in the world. The pious struggle more with guilt or shame than with what we, as a people, are bringing to the world.

In a broad descriptive section of "The Joy of the Gospel," Pope Francis writes:

The salvation which God offers us is the work of his mercy. No human efforts, however good they may be, can enable us to merit so great a gift. God, by his sheer grace, draws us to himself and makes us one with him. He sends his Spirit into our hearts to make us his children, transforming us and enabling us to respond to his love by our lives. The Church is sent by Jesus Christ as the sacrament of the salvation offered by God. Through her evangelizing activity, she cooperates as an instrument of that divine grace which works unceasingly and inscrutably.¹⁴

Gary Anderson, in a stimulating book called Sin: A History,¹⁵ showed that two images of sin emerged in the Scriptures. One image, earlier in Jewish history, thought of sin a burden that had to be lifted. The other, emerging later, saw sin as a debt that had to be paid. We can, of course, elaborate sin in other ways, thereby nuancing what we think reconciliation looks like. If sin is distancing oneself, then reconciliation is drawing near. If sin is rebellion, then reconciliation is like a truce. If sin is a rupture, then reconciliation is a repair. If sin, finally, is stepping outside the gracious space that the new covenant creates for us, then reconciliation is entering that

covenantal space once again, ready to undertake the way of life which the covenant entails. I believe it is this final vision of sin and reconciliation which amplifies the meaning of “for the forgiveness of sin.”

Pope Francis wants to transform parish life. One way to express this is that he wants our parishes to look more like the New Testament than they usually do. In his apostolic exhortation, “The Joy of the Gospel,” he sees parish as a space of faith, conversion, joy and outreach. Yet he knows parishes - and a fortiori, catechesis - still have a ways to go. In #28 of his apostolic exhortation he says: “We must admit, though, that the call to review and renew our parishes has not yet sufficed to bring them nearer to people, to make the environments of living communion and participation, and to make the completely mission-oriented.”

If we understand mercy as a space, a field or environment in which God’s repair of human brokenness happens, then parish can be seen as a physical location of this field. Pope Francis writes: “Such a community [i.e., the Church] has an endless desire to show mercy, the fruit of its own experience of the power of the Father’s infinite mercy. Let us try a little harder to take the first step and to become involved.”¹⁶ (24)

Adopting a much broader sense of what forgiveness means, and how it fits into the overall sense of discipleship, and the mission of today’s parish, can move Catholic pastoral life forward in those directions toward which both culture and church leadership are pointing.

¹ See Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), #1472. Also Catholic Encyclopedia, 2nd Edition (CE 2), v. 11, 817.

² Catholic Encyclopedia, 1911 edition, v. 12, p. 578

³ So, for example, in the Books of Kings, summaries of each king’s life, usually disappointing, were linked to his sins and their consequences.

⁴ See Sacrifice Unveiled: The True Meaning of Christian Sacrifice, Robert J. Daly (T&T Clark, 2009)

⁵ CE 2, v. 6, 27

⁶ All scriptural citations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

⁷ Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, v. 4, 999.

⁸ CE 2, v.4, 475.

⁹ CCC, #1845-1861.

¹⁰ Walter Kasper, Mercy, in an upcoming English translation by Paulist Press, p. 29: “[Mercy] creates a space for life and human freedom.”

¹¹ CCC, #1425-1433.

¹² Catechesis in Our Time, #19, deals with the notion that children must be evangelized as they are being catechized. Might it be dangerous for Catholics to implicitly think that conversion does not happen in Catholic life until some further point beyond well beyond baptism? See my discussion of conversion in Mission America (Paulist Press, 2012), the first two chapters.

¹³ CCC, #1460 relates the deeds of penance to a proportion of the gravity of the sin. It references Trent’s teaching that the penitent’s penance is a share in the satisfaction that Jesus made in his death. One can argue, however, on

the basis of forgiveness and discipleship, that the penance given by the priest is the sign of being restored to a way of life now shown by deeds of the re-converted sinner.

¹⁴ The Joy of the Gospel, #121.

¹⁵ Yale University Press, 2009.

¹⁶ The Joy of the Gospel, #24.