

The theme for our readings today is quite obviously forgiveness - a habit that is necessarily integral to the Christian life, but often completely misunderstood by many well-meaning members of our community. Very often we're not sure how to forgive, practically speaking. We can attribute this difficulty to three main causes; firstly, *we confuse forgiveness with forgetfulness*...secondly, *we fail to see forgiveness as a practice that is meant to be a perpetual act of the will*...and thirdly, *too often we forget our own desperate need for forgiveness*.

Let's begin with the first premise: Forgiveness is not forgetfulness. Forgiving another is not a matter of whitewashing the past. In fact, if we think about it, forgiveness as a virtue is negated by forgetfulness. I have nothing to forgive, if I have no memory of the event to begin with. It is, in fact, the oversimplification of the virtue that leads to us linking forgiveness with forgetfulness. Forgiveness implies repairing a wounded or fractured relationship. This means that we often think of forgiving someone as returning to "the way things were" before we

suffered an injury at their hands. We instinctively assume that our memory of the past transgression will cause us to treat them differently, or - at the very least - harbour a grudge in our hearts. This is where the willingness to love comes into play. We can look at God's relationship with the Israelites in the Old Testament for a perfect example of this dynamic in action. From the time they were released from bondage in Egypt, all the way up to the coming of Jesus - some 1400 years - the constant pattern of God's chosen people was faithfulness for a time, followed by waywardness and sin, repentance, back in favour with God, then fall again, and so on and so on. Through all of this, our Heavenly Father was never unwilling to forgive His chosen people. He is eternal and omniscient - everything that has ever or will ever happen is constantly before Him as a single moment in time - He is literally incapable of "forgetting" anything. The key is in how God proceeds each time His people were unfaithful. He tells us through the prophets that He casts the sins of His people behind His back (Isaiah 38:17). God's forgiveness is oriented toward a larger goal...it is meant to be the

means by which we can receive the gift of salvation, achieving the greatest possible good for ourselves by obtaining the deepest desire of our heart - perfect, eternal unity with God.

In this way, forgiveness is not denial of the past; rather it is hope for the future. Forgiveness is forward looking, by nature. It requires us to discipline our hearts and minds, while embracing faith in the contrition of the other. This is what God has done with us since the very beginning, and it is what we are called to do every day with those who have harmed us.

This brings us neatly along to the second point of contention when it comes to our understanding of forgiveness - what we might refer to as “longevity of practice” or, more simply, the formation of a *habit*.

Forgiveness is not a single act of the will on one brief occasion...it is a choice we make each and every time we are confronted with the inevitable reminders associated with an old injury. It is in this light that we can properly understand the distinction between forgiveness and forgetfulness as a great spiritual gift. Every time we are confronted by

the reality of an injustice done to us, we are given an opportunity to grow in sanctity by imitating our Heavenly Father. We have far more control over our own emotional state than we often think...we can absolutely choose to hope that the people who have done us harm really are sorry, and have actually made an effort to avoid repeating the mistakes of their past. This is the way God chooses to see us when we kneel before Him in the Confessional, regardless of how often or how many times we have let Him down before.

It is our comprehension of this profound truth...our grasp of God's limitless mercy in light of the profound debt we owe Him that should round out our understanding of forgiveness as we ought to practise it. How often do we contemplate the weight of sin? Do we ever stop to think about sin in all its forms as an immediate and absolute death sentence? Do we really comprehend that even the smallest and most trivial of sins is enough to separate us forever from God, if He were not willing to extend to us His precious mercy? This is not a theological theory, it is reality. When we speak about the sacrifice of Jesus as

opening the gates of Heaven, this is what we mean...that without that great gift, none of us would have any hope of returning to our true home.

If God were not willing to do what He did for us, life would be meaningless...everything we might engage in here on earth would be pointless, because it would all end with us suffering the everlasting torment of hell. This is the central lesson of the Gospel today; that we, who have been relieved of a debt so great that only the Sacred Blood of Jesus Himself could save us, have absolutely no legitimate cause to withhold forgiveness from our brothers and sister who, regardless of their crimes, could never owe us more than we owe God. This is why it is so beneficial for us to remember our own sinfulness...to boast of our weakness, as St. Paul puts it...not in a degrading or depressive way, but at the service of calling to mind the depth and breadth of God's love for us, and the call for us to reflect that same love to all those we encounter.

We all ought to ask our Heavenly Father today for an increase in the virtue of forgiveness. Resolve to understand what it means to forgive, to work on building the habit of forgiving time and time again,

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Fr. Charles Deering

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and to contemplate frequently on the forgiveness we are constantly

offered by God. In doing these things, we can grow in the perfection our

Lord demands of those who bear His name, so that we may also merit to

spend eternity with Him in His Kingdom. In the name of the Father, and

of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen!