

SIN, FORGIVENESS, & THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE PART 5: CHRISTIAN FORGIVENESS

“Then Peter approaching asked Jesus, ‘Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive him? As many as seven times?’ Jesus answered, ‘I say to you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times’ (Matthew 18:21-22).

When someone harms us, it disrupts the order, or balance, of our relationship. We feel a need to rebalance the relationship. The natural means of doing that is to harm the offender as much as he has harmed us, what is called retributive justice - the principle behind “an eye for an eye.” But as Gandhi said, “An eye for an eye only makes the whole world blind.” Retribution does balance the scale, but it also worsens the relationship and society by leading to further alienation and retribution. We need a way to break the cycle. Forgiveness does this by forgoing the right to retributive justice. When we forgive one who has harmed us, we pass over the offense and reach out to the offender in order to renew the relationship that has been harmed.

The ultimate goal of forgiveness is reconciliation between the offender and the offended, but forgiveness alone is not enough. Just as the relationship involves both people, so too does reconciliation. The person who has been harmed forgoes retribution and reaches out to the offender with a commitment to work through the harm that has been caused in the relationship. The offender responds with repentance, renouncing the harmful act and committing to do the same. Together they then work to heal, or atone for, the wound that the offense caused, renewing their relationship. Reconciliation requires not only forgiveness by the one who is harmed, but repentance by the offender and atonement by both.

Forgiveness is not unique to Christianity, but the Christian understanding of forgiveness begins with our understanding of Jesus and our relationship with him. The very heart of Jesus’ saving mission was to reconcile sinners with God: “For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost” (Luke 19:10). To accomplish this mission, Jesus offered God’s forgiveness to sinners (Matthew 9:1-8) and offered himself, though sinless, in atonement for sins: “For the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). Even on the cross, the very instrument of atonement for sin by paying the full wages of sin, death, Jesus cried out for the forgiveness of sinners: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

Our sins rupture our relationship with God and, in justice, merit us death. But out of his desire for our salvation, Jesus offers us God’s forgiveness, and his death on the cross serves as God’s pledge of atonement for our sins. As disciples of Christ, we respond with repentance for our sins and pledge our atonement by denying ourselves, taking up our cross, and following Jesus (Matthew 16:24), loving others as he loves us (John 15:12). Thus is accomplished our reconciliation with God, dying to our old life of sin and rising to a new life of grace as members of Christ’s Body, the Church.

As members of Christ's Body, we share his saving mission: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you...Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them; whose sins you retain are retained" (John 20:21-22). While we each carry this mission out in ways proper to our unique place in the Church, we are all called by Christ to extend God's mercy to others. This begins by working for reconciliation with those who harm us: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father" (Matthew 5:43-45). By forgiving those who harm us and by committing ourselves to atone for their sins, as well as our own, we build up the Body of Christ and witness to God's unlimited mercy, moving others to repentance and reconciliation with God, and so continue Christ's saving mission.