



# Forgiveness and ~~SIN~~

## FORGIVENESS

FORGIVENESS makes a difference, individually, in families, nationally and internationally. It is life-giving.

I voted in the first free elections in South Africa. As an international observer I was sponsored by Caritas Australia and at a ballot box in Capetown one old fellow was illiterate and asked me to mark his voting paper for him. "What party do you support?" I asked. "Mandela," he replied.

It was a marvellous day with long queues of black South Africans waiting patiently to vote for the first time. I found it difficult to believe they were so good humoured.

They took their lead from the man who became their first president, Nelson Mandela, who had been jailed by the white authorities for 27 years. He explained "When I walked out the gate, I knew that if I continued to hate these people, I would remain a prisoner forever." He knew that vengeance creates more evil.



Mehmet Ali Agca was the terrorist who shot Pope John Paul II in St Peter's Square, Rome in 1981. Years later the pope visited him in jail as a gesture of reconciliation to speak with him.

After Easter this year a pilgrim group of Sydney teachers was present for the Anzac Day celebrations in Gallipoli commemorating the landings on April 25, 1915.

Although the Republic of Turkey has from the start followed a hard line policy towards all Christians, the Turkish authorities welcome the Australians and New Zealanders and participate in the memorial services.

They follow the lead of the father of modern Turkey Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who was a general in the campaign. In 1934 he penned a wonderful tribute to "those heroes that shed their blood and lost their lives... You are now lying in the soil of a foreign country, therefore rest in peace. There is no difference between the Johnnies and the Mehmets to us...

"You, the mothers, who sent their sons from far away countries wipe away your tears.

"Your sons are now lying in our bosom and are in peace.

"After having lost their lives in this land they have become our sons as well."





A person does not need to be a Christian to forgive, but forgiveness is a distinctive Christian teaching. In the only prayer he taught, Jesus told us to ask God to forgive our sins as we forgive those who sin against us (Matthew 6:12).



“And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” Matthew 6:12

Dying on the cross he asked his Father to forgive those who condemned him because they did not know what they were doing (Luke 23:34).



“And Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.’ And they cast lots to divide his garments.” Luke 23:34

When Peter asked Jesus whether he should forgive seven times (Matthew 18:21), he thought he was being very generous. Imagine his surprise when Jesus rebuked him insisting that everyone must forgive “seventy times seven times” (Matthew 18:22). To forgive always is more than common sense.



“Then Peter came up and said to him, ‘Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.’” Matthew 18:21-22

Forgiveness is not an easy option and never a sign of weakness. Often it is easier to forgive offences against ourselves than forgive sins committed against our loved ones; e.g. the family of a murder victim needs God’s special grace or strength to forgive the murderer.

In the “Our Father” we pray that we do not come into these extreme situations where the required act of forgiveness is heroic (Matthew 6:13).



“And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” Matthew 6:13

Sometimes, perhaps often, adults, such as mothers who have had an abortion, find it hard to forgive themselves for what they have done. They need to be shown God’s mercy and believe in His all powerful capacity to forgive.

Forgiveness comes in all shapes and sizes and even, once given, can disappear, drowned by new waves of resentment. Untreated wounds fester.

Forgiveness can be imperfect. The great Protestant English queen of the sixteenth century, Elizabeth I, who lived

in terrible times when political and religious opponents often killed one another, acknowledged that one should forgive, “should bury the hatchet but remember where you buried it.”

### SIN

THE preparatory discussion this year by the school leaders on the topic of sin and forgiveness was particularly lively. It surprised me a bit and I mentioned this to a university leader. He claimed that one reason for the animation was that the world tells young people there are no sins, only different points of view. Like their elders young adults can be confused on moral issues, but they know sins are real. They also know evil is real.

Some Christians don’t like to talk too much about sin. It is not affirming. Doesn’t it imply that we are judging others, being condemnatory or at least condescending towards those who do not recognise the Ten Commandments?

A foundation of Christian moral life is the acknowledgment that the Ten Commandments are not optional extras and not like an examination on ten topics, where only six questions need to be answered. The seven deadly sins: pride, greed, envy, anger, lust, gluttony and sloth (better called a crippling cynicism) all lead to unhappiness and hurting others.

All civilized societies place limits on their tolerance. Only in the jungle does “anything and everything go” for the powerful at the expense of the weak.

Sin erodes our relationship with God. It is an offense against reason, truth and right conscience, turning our hearts away from God in an act of revolt. However temporarily, when we sin we claim from God the right to decide what is good or evil. Sins wound human nature and damage human solidarity.

Christians make the traditional and classical distinction between sin and sinners, which is sometimes followed messily. Christians are called to love everyone and hate sin. A child can hate a parent’s alcoholism, but still love the parent.

Sins are categorized according to their gravity, not according to our feelings or appearances and obviously some acts are worse than others. Murder is more grave than theft and cyber bullying is bad although often the oppressor cannot see the victim.

Sins cannot be committed by those who are innocently ignorant, although people naturally have a sense of right and wrong.



Particular actions can rupture our relationship with God. These are called mortal or death-bearing sins and can only be committed by those who fully know what they are doing and fully and freely consent, e.g. they are not pressured to act and not suffering from pathological disorders.

### CONSCIENCE

EVERY Christian has to develop and refine his or her general sense of right and wrong according to Christ’s teachings. Our reasonable instincts can be misled and indeed deadened by repeated sins. A clock with the wrong time is misleading and a clock which is too slow or too fast can cause us to miss the bus. This is happening.

Misunderstandings are common on lifestyle issues where pagans and money makers run the line that the Church’s views are outdated.

The traditional Christian teachings linking love and fidelity to sexual activity, on marriage and family, on the value of human life are ancient, but they survive and continue because they work to protect adults and children and produce better individuals and communities.

It is not Christian teaching which is producing infidelity inside and outside marriage, the 90,000 abortions a year in Australia, high divorce rates, more disturbed children, rising addiction to pornography and a disturbing increase in sexually transmitted disease.

If we continue to pretend that our social capital is not being run down, that our social fabric is not fraying, then the children of today will be paying an even higher price tomorrow.

### REPENTANCE

WHEN speaking with ten to thirteen year olds, I teach by asking questions and inviting answers.

I regularly require them to vote “yes”, “no” or “I’m not sure” on the two following hypothetical situations.

Can God forgive me, even in the sacrament of reconciliation, if I confess to bullying violently a school mate as I plan to “kick his head in” again?

Can God forgive me, if I confess to robbing a bank as I am planning my next robbery?

Much depends on how the questions are asked but many of the youngsters are confused and tempted to think they are forgiven if they confess, even without repentance.

Just as people who deny God’s existence cannot ask for God’s forgiveness, so people who do not acknowledge they are sinners cannot be forgiven.

The prodigal son had to return home before he could be welcomed by his father (Luke 15:11-24) and when Jesus saved



the adulterous woman from death by stoning and refused to condemn her, he did not urge her to keep up her old habits. “Go and sin no more” was the instruction (John 8:11). When we receive the ashes at the start of Lent, the priest says “repent and believe the Gospel”.

Without repentance there can be no forgiveness from God.



“And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry; for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to make merry.” Luke 15: 21-24



“And Jesus said, ‘Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again.’” John 8:11





## JUSTICE AND FORGIVENESS

FORGIVENESS does not eliminate the need for justice, merciful justice. Every society needs its jails and God will finally judge us all.

We know that “an eye for an eye” produces more and more blindness, but the rudimentary justice in Noah’s covenant with God represents an enormous advance in restricting indiscriminate and entirely disproportionate vengeance for real or imagined wrongs.

The scales of justice are often quite distinct from this-worldly success and failure, often quite distinct too from the world of human appearances, because God’s scales of justice are balanced in eternity and based on truth.

All Christians believe that Christ will return when human history is complete to judge the living and the dead, to separate the sheep from the goats for all eternity, who will be judged according to their level of self-worship or self-centredness, to the extent that they served the hidden Christ found in all the wronged and unfortunate.

This doctrine is an immense consolation to the millions, perhaps billions in human history, who have suffered beyond their deserts.



The Church brings God’s forgiveness to us through the sacraments and especially the sacrament of penance or reconciliation. Older Catholics called this “going to confession,” which is accurate in identifying what is difficult (personal acknowledgment of wrong doing), but perhaps does not emphasise so well the more important reality of forgiveness, reconciliation with the community and the benefit of a clear conscience, the lifting of the burden of guilt.

Personal confession of sins to the priest demonstrates sincerity, goes beyond mere words, is not “cheap grace” and brings healing.

After a family spat it is usually not enough for the offender to feel sorry. This person is expected to express this sorrow. So too the Church needs a ritual to bestow God’s forgiveness, acknowledging that courage is needed to confess what shames us, although this is usually a bit easier with a stranger.

Non-Catholics increasingly see the value of the ritual, even when they cannot receive the sacrament. Non-Catholic students in our secondary schools regularly want to talk with the priest during reconciliation ceremonies.

Not too long ago on an Australian troop ship which was heading for trouble, there were about 80 Catholic soldiers, but about 120 attended the reconciliation ceremony and spoke to the priest.

## CONCLUSION

FROM Old Testament times believers have asked God to make our hearts clean (*Psalms 51*). He does not ask the impossible, understands human weakness, but wants honesty and sincerity.

I often tell adults and children about Christ’s words on the cross to the so called “good thief.”

This robber had been condemned to death and was probably a man of violence who deserved his fate.

Yet after he had asked Jesus to remember him when He came into His Kingdom, Jesus promised “today you will be with me in paradise.” (*Luke 23:43*)

What a promise! There is hope for us all.



“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.” *Psalms 51:10*



“And he said to him, ‘Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.’” *Luke 23:43*

+ George Card. Pell.

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