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“UNLESS YOU FORGIVE...”

Not so long ago, I read a story in a magazine about three young brothers whose parents were killed in a plane explosion along with forty- two other passengers. It also carried a picture of them, kneeling in their Catholic school chapel. It was discovered later that this explosion was connected to a terrorist group.

The children attended St Gabriel’s School and the Principal had organized a prayer service for these boys’ deceased parents. The eldest brother asked their teacher if they could also pray for the people who murdered their parents. Their teacher asked this boy, “Don’t you want these people punished by the Law?” The boy replied, “Jesus forgave those soldiers and those responsible for his death on the cross. We must also forgive those who killed our parents and the other passengers.” The teacher was somewhat surprised at the maturity of this young boy. In reply, she said, “Jesus has truly found a friend in you.”

What can we learn from this story?

As members of the Franciscan Family, we too are called to have this type of maturity to be ready to forgive ourselves and those who sin against us. We are called to become instruments of forgiveness and peace in God’s loving hands. However, to be moulded into an instrument of forgiveness and peace, there is a prerequisite, which is that we can accept the gifts of forgiveness and peace ourselves, and only then I believe can we bring and give these gifts to others.

As individuals, we too need to be reminded often to put the Lord’s difficult teachings into practice. When we recite this great Charter of Christian Charity, the Lord’s Prayer, we constantly say, “...forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us...” How often do we say these precious words and not hear what they are telling us? Do we look at the mirror of the Crucified Lord and then forget the image of the God-Man whom we see on that Cross of love?

We cannot be redeemed outside of our humanity; hence, we need to ponder on the ‘why’ we don’t allow these gifts emanating from the Sacrament of Confession to have a more immediate healing action in our life. What is stopping us from forgiving ourselves? Our Loving Father made our soul in the image of himself and our body in the likeness of his Son, the God-Man, Jesus the Lord. We should then strive to become that image and likeness. How can we become ‘forgivers of ourselves’ and of our own trespasses? We can learn to forgive ourselves by recognizing that in baptism we have become a “new creation” of the Crucified and Risen Lord. Since through Baptism we share in this ‘image and likeness’ of the Lord, then one sure way of ‘becoming more like the original image’ is to accept that we are children of God and that we are redeemed. As redeemed children and sinners, we can respond in the right manner of love to our God and Father. It is difficult to return love with love if we have a ‘hardened heart’ from the prolonged practice of sinful actions and attitudes towards God and one another. With hardened hearts we have closed all the doors and windows to God’s healing, forgiveness, and to the liberating graces offered to us through the Sacrament of Penance and the Eucharist.

The Prophet Ezekiel reminds us what God did for his people throughout Israel’s salvation history and that still holds good today in our salvation history. “I shall give you a new heart, and put a new spirit in you; I shall remove the heart of stone from your bodies and give a heart of flesh instead...” (Ezk 36: 25-27).

When we receive in Confession the graces of forgiveness and freedom and accept them, then the healing power of the Lord begins to flow into our hearts. We can truly say then that the Sacrament of Confession is a true participation in Christ’s passion through which he raises us

into victory over sin.

Jesus was truly a man, he often used the title, 'Son of Man.' If we take that title and reflect on it, we can see that Jesus was talking about his humanity. Hence, Jesus uses this title to say that he too knows what it is like to be fully human, yet without sin. This allows him to enter infinitely more deeply into those spaces of the heart where we dare not tread. There He sees and experiences with us the pain and alienation that sin causes, that is, to be separated from the Father who thirsts so deeply for our love and our friendship.

It is only through the ministry of the Church and the power and work of the Holy Spirit that we can be restored into that image and likeness that Jesus assumed for our salvation.

St. Francis saw in the Cross how sin truly separates us from our Loving Father and why Jesus suffered, died and rose again for us. Let us not be afraid to seek what Francis sought: to love the Lord our God with all our hearts, turned from stone to flesh and enlivened by his Loving Spirit.

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