

**Our Lord blessing St. Peter –
Church of St. Joan of Arc,
Rouen (France)**

²¹ Peter approached Jesus and asked Him, “Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive? As many as seven times?” ²² Jesus answered, “I say to you, not seven times but seventy-seven times. ²³ That is why the Kingdom of Heaven may be likened to a king who decided to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ When he began the accounting, a debtor was brought before him who owed him a huge amount. ²⁵ Since he had no way of paying it back, his master ordered him to be sold, along with his wife, his children, and all his property, in payment of the debt. ²⁶ At that, the servant fell down, did him homage, and said, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back in full.’ ²⁷ Moved with compassion the master of that servant let him go and forgave him the loan. ²⁸ When that servant had left, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a much smaller amount. He seized him and started to choke him, demanding, ‘Pay back what you owe.’ ²⁹ Falling to his knees, his fellow servant begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.’ ³⁰ But he refused. Instead, he had the fellow servant put in prison until he paid back the debt. ³¹ Now when his fellow servants saw what had happened, they were deeply disturbed and went to their master and reported the whole affair. ³² His master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you your entire debt because you begged me to. ³³ Should you not have had pity on your fellow servant, as I had pity on you?’ ³⁴ Then in anger his master handed him over to the torturers until he should pay back the whole debt. ³⁵ So will My heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives your brother from your heart” (Mt 18:21-35).

Must I Forgive Only Once?

The problem of forgiveness is complex. The Old Law gave the offended party the right to retaliate. The Gospel prescribes the duty of pardoning offences and praises those who do so. But what are the limits? How far should our mercy extend?

I - APPEAL FOR GOODNESS, COMPASSION, AND CLEMENCY



here is a frequent tendency, among those starting out in the practice of virtue, to seek precise rules that promise salvation. Pragmatic spirits, these persons only feel secure when their spiritual life is under their own control, independent of others and, perhaps, even of divine grace.

They want to accrue supernatural merits in more or less the same way that money is deposited into a bank, with the guarantee that it will yield a fixed amount each month. Just as established arrangements confer stability to earthly life, they desire the same for the attainment of eternal life.

No one has sure knowledge of his state of soul

However, not even the most virtuous individual can avoid a trace of uncertainty regarding his state of soul. Only God knows the condition of each one absolutely; therefore, no one may judge



Sergio Hollmann

“If I am not [in the state of grace], may God place me there; if I am, may God so keep me”

St. Joan of Arc – Béziers Cathedral (France)

himself to be definitely in the state of grace as the Angelic Doctor explains: “And hence man cannot judge with certainty that he has grace, according to 1 Corinthians: ‘But neither do I judge my own self ... but He that judgeth me is the Lord.’”¹

A compelling historical fact illustrates this truth. When St. Joan of Arc faced the process that was pitted against her, one of her interrogators, Jean Beaupère, professor from the University of Paris, put a cunning question to her:

“Are you in the state of grace?”

An affirmative response would warrant reproach for contradicting

Catholic doctrine; a negative one would goad on her accusers. Nevertheless, the young shepherdess stood up to the insidious question perfectly, like an experienced theologian: “If I am not, may God place me there; if I am, may God so keep me.”²

This salutary doubt regarding salvation differs from the proud and pragmatic mindset of the Pharisees of Our Lord’s time, who had developed hundreds of rules whose simple fulfilment, they believed, justified a person before God. They saw religion as a contract, in which they were obliged to closely follow a list of external

1) ST. THOMAS AQUINAS. *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q.112, a.5.

2) PERNOUD, Régine; RAMBAUD, Mireille. *Telle fut Jeanne d’Arc*. Paris: Fasquelle, 1956, p.259.

precepts, for which God would reward them, regardless of their interior dispositions.

As we will see, in asking the question found at the beginning of today's Gospel, St. Peter shows himself to be tinged by this way of thinking. Human psychology is such that people tend to make judgements according to the setting in which they were born and live, adapting themselves to the vicissitudes of everyday life.

The concept of justice at the time of Our Lord

Throughout the Liturgical Cycle, the Church highlights varied aspects of the infinite attributes of God, so that we may better know, love and imitate Him. On this Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, the Gospel invites us to kindness, meekness and clemency: we should be kind as He is kind, compassionate as He is compassionate and clement as He is clement. Jesus exhorts us, "Learn from Me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart" (Mt 11:29).

For a clearer understanding of the Gospel passage proposed by the Church for our consideration today, we should bear in mind how rampant was the hatred, vengefulness and failure to pardon in societies before Our Lord's coming.

The concept of justice in the biblical East was based on the talion law, by which a criminal was punished *taliter*, that is, with rigorous reciprocity for the harm inflicted: "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth"—punishment equalled the crime. Yet, it is worth noting that this legal principle was designed to mitigate the even more violent customs of ancient peoples, by which the rule of revenge generally led to further harm than was received.⁴ The custom was to take justice into one's own hands; the stronger party prevailed, and pardon was seen as weakness.

In ancient Mesopotamia, for example, "penalties were acts of vengeance, and rarely did decapitation suffice; impalement and flaying were frequently used, especially in Assyria. The body would be left unburied as a warning to others. For

lesser crimes, the cutting off of hands, the nose, ears and the plucking out of eyes was common. The unabsolved debtor became the lifelong slave of the creditor, who could sell him or press him into service.”³

We turn to today’s Gospel passage within this perspective.

II - WHAT ARE THE LIMITS OF FORGIVENESS?

²¹ Peter approached Jesus and asked Him, “Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive? As many as seven times?”



he Apostles had been formed in a completely different school from that of the Messiah. The Law of Moses itself was extremely severe, and some faults, such as blasphemy against God, were punished immediately with death by stoning (cf. Lv 24:14-16).

St. Peter had just heard Our Lord speaking about human relationships, how to treat children, the parable of the lost sheep and fraternal correction. He surely thought himself correct in suggesting: “Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive? As many as seven times?” Lagrange comments: “Peter knows very well that it is necessary to forgive a brother. But what are the limits? He judges himself to be in true consonance with the spirit of Jesus by proposing seven times.”⁴

Maldonado goes further, in recalling the opinion of Chrysostom and Euthymius regarding this passage, that St. Peter “was moved by a certain spirit of vainglory, desiring to gain a reputation for mercy, since he deemed it a great feat to say, although cautiously, that it was necessary to forgive the sinner seven times.”⁵

However, in reality, the attitude of the Prince of the Apostles shows that he was still influenced by the criteria of his time, accord-

3) WEISS, Juan Bautista. *Historia Universal, vol. I.* Barcelona: La Educación, 1927, p.509.

4) LAGRANGE, OP, Marie-Joseph. *Évangile selon Saint Matthieu.* (Ed.4). Paris: J. Gabalda, 1927, p.358.

5) MALDONADO, SJ, Juan de. *Comentarios a los Cuatro Evangelios, vol. I: Evangelio de San Mateo.* Madrid: BAC, 1950 p.652.

ing to which the doctrine taught by Jesus seemed absurd. According to St. John Chrysostom, his question essentially said: “If my brother keeps sinning, but when reproved, repents, how often do You command us to endure this? For regarding him who neither repents nor acknowledges his own faults, You have set a limit, by saying, ‘Let him be to you as the heathen and the publican.’ But not so for one who repents: You have commanded to accept him. How often, then, should I bear with him who admits his faults, and repents?”⁶

Christ came to bring infinite mercy

²² Jesus answered, “I say to you, not seven times but seventy-seven times.”

Seven was a symbolic number in Antiquity, signifying “innumerable times.” To show how forgiveness toward one’s brother should indeed be unlimited, Our Lord used the formula “seventy-seven times;” in other words, many times multiplied by many more.

Saying this, Chrysostom notes, Jesus has not “limited forgiveness by a number, but has declared that it is to be unlimited and perpetual.”⁷ The Master sets ever parsimonious human mercy in contrast with His infinite mercy.

Then, responding according to the highly imaginative eastern spirit, He offers a parable to aid in grasping His doctrine, for comparisons or analogies often clarify truths more than theory alone.

An impossible debt to settle

²³ “That is why the Kingdom of Heaven may be likened to a king who decided to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ When he began the accounting, a debtor was brought before him who owed him a huge amount. ²⁵ Since he had no way of paying it back, his master ordered him to be sold, along with his wife, his children, and all his property, in payment of the debt.”

6) ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM. Homilia LXI, n.1. In: *Obras, vol. II: Homilías sobre el Evangelio de San Mateo (46-90)*. (Ed.2). Madrid: BAC, 2007, p.268-269.

7) Idem, p.269.

The parable is simple, accessible, and arresting, introducing a figure owing a great deal of money. Some translations speak of an “enormous fortune,” while others, truer to the original Greek, specify a sum of ten thousand talents. An Attic talent was equivalent to six thousand silver drachmae,⁸ whose approximate weight would be 26 kilograms. Hence the value named by Our Lord was equal to almost 260 tonnes of precious metal. For an idea of what this means, consider that, according to the Hebrew historian Flavius Josephus,⁹ both Galilee and Perea paid 200 talents as an annual tribute to Herod Antipas.

Our Lord uses this exorbitant sum to impress upon His listeners—who are of a calculating mindset—the impossibility of settling such a debt. Here, the first application of this passage to our spiritual life arises: our inability to satisfy our debt toward the Creator.

We owe Him our life and our very being, as well as the Redemption and the innumerable graces and blessings received from Him throughout our lives. The more abundant these have been, the greater is our obligation to make restitution. This is why Chrysostom exclaims: “Should we indeed, even if each day we died for Him who so loves us, make due recompense, or even repay the smallest portion of our debt?”¹⁰

Under this prism, the Blessed Virgin Mary is by far the greatest debtor to God, for she alone received much more than all angelic and human creatures put together. “For the Angels and all the Blessed in Heaven, God did wonders ‘that cannot be told’ (2 Cor 12:4); ‘and those whom He predestined He also called’ (Rom 8:30). In Mary He also ‘did wonders,’ but truly unique wonders, because Mary’s grandeur far surpasses any other created grandeur,”¹¹ St. Lawrence of Brindisi affirms.

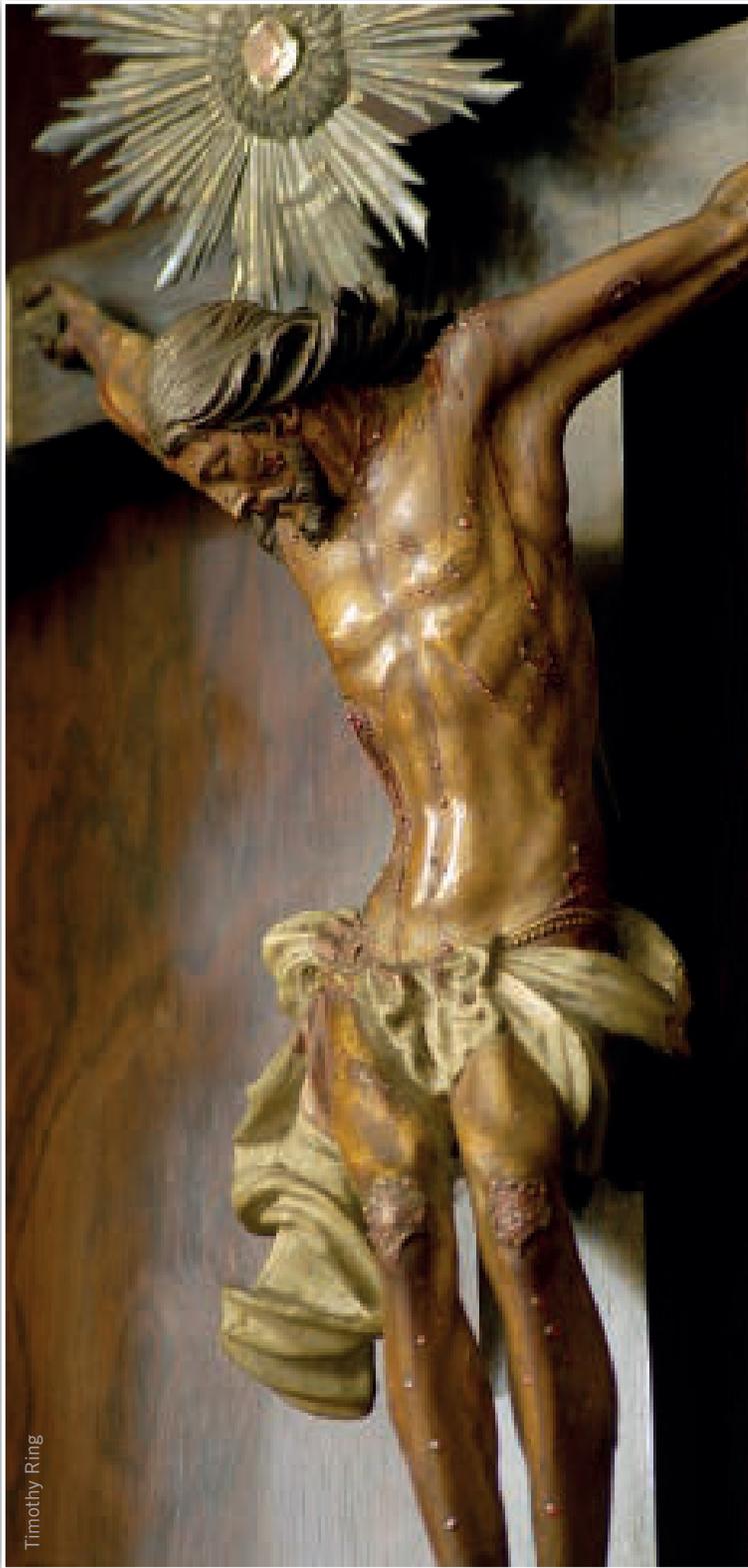
However, for us, unlike the Immaculate Virgin, each fault adds an incalculable amount to our debt, because the liability con-

8) Cf. LAGRANGE, *op. cit.*, p.359-360.

9) FLAVIUS JOSEPHUS. *Antiquities of the Jews*, L.XVII, c.13, n.754.

10) ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *op. cit.*, n.2, p.272.

11) ST. LAWRENCE OF BRINDISI. *De Laudibus et Invocatione Virginis Deiparae*, Sermo IX, n.3. In: *Mariale*. Madrid: BAC, 2004, p.309.



Timothy Ring

To God we owe the Redemption and the innumerable graces and blessings received from Him throughout our lives

Crucifix – Sé Cathedral, São Paulo

tracted by just one sin is infinite, since the dignity of the One offended is infinite.

Consequently, even if we spent eternity making arduous sacrifices, we would be unable to clear our debt. Nothing that we ourselves can do suffices to repair the sin of our first parents and our own, against the Creator.

The king's forgiveness invites our forgiveness

²⁶ “At that, the servant fell down, did him homage, and said, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back in full.’ ²⁷ Moved with compassion the master of that servant let him go and forgave him the loan.”

The bankrupt servant acknowledges his debt, prostrates, and begs for mercy: “Be patient with me, and I will pay you back in full.” Vain illusion! For no amount of time would have enabled him to pay it. However, the king, moved by compassion, neither extends the due date nor seeks to recover the money. He forgives everything.

In face of sincere repentance, God treats us in this way, overflowing with goodness, extending to us an infinitely greater mercy than we could anticipate. For this, He places only one condition: “a broken and contrite heart” (Ps 51:17).

Our Lord substitutes the talion penalty with a new approach: loving one’s neighbour as oneself, for love of God. To explain the need for this constant readiness to forgive, the unbending Master in the fight against sin “recalls to His disciples the Judgement in which we will have so much pardon to ask.”¹²

Thus, those who acknowledge that they deserve punishment for their faults, seeing themselves forgiven so freely and generously by God, will be disposed to do the same to their brothers.

Wounded self-love leads to the desire for revenge

²⁸ “When that servant had left, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a much smaller amount. He seized him and started to choke him, demanding, ‘Pay back what you owe.’ ²⁹ Falling to his knees, his fellow servant begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.’ ³⁰ But he refused. Instead, he had the fellow servant put in prison until he paid back the debt.”

After having been treated so kindly, this servant is implacable with another who owes him much less, and orders him thrown into prison. The narrative contrasts the attitude of the forgiven servant with that of the king, but the parable is still not on a par with reality.

Indeed, when we lack charity toward our neighbour, we act like this wicked servant, because the debts that may exist between us are nothing compared with the debt incurred by just one fault committed against the Creator. However, despite being the frequent object of divine mercy, our self-love often becomes wounded when someone offends us, and irritated, we harbour a desire for vengeance.

12) GRANDMAISON, SJ, Léonce de. *Jésus-Christ, sa Personne, son message, ses preuves, vol. II.* (Ed.6). Paris: Beauchesne, 1928, p.103.

Twenty centuries later, this vengeful attitude among Christians is still apparent, especially in inner judgement. People often forgive formally, but they hold on to hurt and rancour, and the desire for retaliation in their souls.

“What causes wars, and what causes fightings among you? Is it not your passions that are at war in your members?” (Jas 4:1), the Apostle St. James asks. Since the tendency to exaggerated self-love stems from original sin, man will always have to wage this inner battle; he must turn to divine grace to conquer this evil inclination.



The Yorck Project

“When that servant had left, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a much smaller amount. He seized him and started to choke him, demanding, ‘Pay back what you owe’” (Mt 18:28)

Parable of the wicked servant, by Domenico Fetti – Old Masters Picture Gallery, Dresden (Germany)

The obligation to denounce the sinner

³¹ “Now when his fellow servants saw what had happened, they were deeply disturbed and went to their master and reported the whole affair.”

The reaction this injustice provoked in the other servants illustrates the scandal caused by one who fails to pardon his neighbour. They acted properly in reporting this to the king, because “it is not calumny to reveal to a superior the faults of his subordinates so that he can correct or prevent the disorder resulting from them.”¹³ In fact, pointing out the faults committed by others is sometimes a

13) GAUME, Jean-Joseph. *Cathéchisme de persévérance, vol. IV.* (Ed.4). Bruxelles: H. Goemaere, 1851, p.421.

moral obligation associated with the Eighth Commandment of the Law of God; an omission can signal guilt by complicity.

A rebellious sinner must be denounced, not only for his own spiritual benefit, inviting him to amendment, but also as a warning to the good. It was with reason that Christ put an end to the scandal of the merchants in the Temple by driving them out with a whip, pouring out the money-changers' coins (cf. Jn 2:14-16); and publicly reproaching the Pharisees as a "brood of vipers" (Mt 12:34), hypocrites (cf. Mt 23:13-15) and sons of the devil (cf. Jn 8:44).

This was the same Jesus who cured the blind and lepers, multiplied the loaves and fishes, resurrected the dead, and from the height of the Cross exclaimed: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Lk 23:34).



Phillip Medhurst

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Engraving of the parable of the wicked servant, Bowyer Bible –
Bolton Museum, Lancashire (England)

In this verse it is also noteworthy that the other servants did not take justice into their own hands. Thus, Our Lord shows us that the maintenance of good order belongs to God and the rightful authorities, as St. James warns: “There is one lawgiver and judge, He who is able to save and destroy. But who are you that you judge your neighbour?” (4:12).

A continual readiness to forgive is required from those who feel injured. In fact, the Apostle instructs us: “Repay no one evil for evil, [...] but leave it to the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay, says the Lord” (Rom 12:17-19).

God is both merciful and just

³² “His master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you your entire debt because you begged me to.
³³ Should you not have had pity on your fellow servant, as I had pity on you?’ ³⁴ Then in anger his master handed him over to the torturers until he should pay back the whole debt.”

The Divine Teacher did not come to preach impunity or moral relativism. God is merciful, but also just. In taking our blessings into account we should ponder that one day we will render an account to our Benefactor. For, as St. Alphonsus Liguori teaches, “Mercy is promised to him who fears God, not, indeed, to him who abuses it [...] God endures for some time, yet He will not endure forever.”¹⁴

Justice and forgiveness demand one another and belong together. Justice is not blind vengeance, but reparation of the violated moral order. This is the rule that Our Lord came to establish among men.

Lack of reciprocity repels God's forgiveness

³⁵ “So will My heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives your brother from your heart.”

Our Lord emphasizes the need to forgive a brother “from your heart,” and not just formally. Therefore, we must rid our souls

14) ST. ALPHONSUS MARIA DE LIGUORI. *Apparecchio alla morte cioè Considerazioni sulle massime eterne*, con. XVII: Abuso della divina misericordia, n.1. In: *Opere Ascetiche, vol. IX*. Rome: Edizioni di Storia e letteratura, 1965, p.159-160.

of bitterness regarding offences received, which are the fruit of self-love. Chrysostom affirms: “Let us not then thrust the sword into ourselves by being revengeful. For what is the grief inflicted upon you by him who has grieved you compared with what you will work unto yourself by retaining your anger, and drawing upon yourself the sentence from God to condemn you?”¹⁵

Indeed, Christ shows clearly that if we harbour resentment against our neighbour, we will be handed over to the torturers, like the wicked servant of the parable. If, however, we endure insults from our neighbour as reparation for our infinite debt toward our Creator, we will attract divine mercy.

No limits can be placed on charity, love of neighbour, and forgiveness. Joseph, the son of Jacob, gives us a beautiful example of this in showering his brothers with favours, although they had sold him as a slave (cf. Gn 37:28). Or, the father in the parable, who ran out with haste to meet the prodigal son, embraced, and kissed him (cf. Lk 15:20).

III - IN FORGIVING, MAN BECOMES LIKE GOD



God has, so to speak, a need to be merciful. “God’s omnipotence is particularly shown in sparing and having mercy, because in this is it made manifest that God has supreme power, that He freely forgives sins,”¹⁶ St. Thomas teaches.

Therefore we should love one another following this model of superabundant clemency. In imitation of our Creator, we must forgive in such a way that we even forget the offence received.

However, it is not always easy to forgive. It requires overcoming self-love, which desires reprisal and holds inner resentments. Inasmuch as vengeance is common to fallen human nature, “nothing makes us so like God as readiness to forgive the wicked and wrong-doers,”¹⁷ writes St. John Chrysostom.

15) ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, op. cit., n.5, p.281.

16) ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, op. cit., I, q.25, a.3, ad 3.

17) ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM. Homilia XIX, n.7. In: *Obras, vol. I: Homilias sobre el Evangelio de San Mateo (1-45)*. (Ed.2). Madrid: BAC, 2007, p.409.

It is not through wealth or power that a person manifests true greatness of soul, but rather through the capacity to forgive. If repaying good with evil is diabolical, and repaying good with good a mere obligation, repaying evil with good is divine. This should be the conduct of the man divinized by the grace purchased by the Most Precious Blood of the Redeemer. ✧

Ricardo Castelo Branco



No limits can be placed on charity, love of neighbour, and forgiveness. A beautiful example of this is the father in the parable, who ran out with haste to meet the prodigal son and embraced and kissed him

Return of the prodigal son – St. George's Basilica Cathedral, Ferrara (Italy)