

## **A Slant of Light on Forgiveness**

Homily of September 11, 2005

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Oh, Please! After hearing some Sunday gospels, don't you, much as your reverence for Our Lord is (And, if it weren't here, you wouldn't be here yourselves.), but don't you sometimes hear a gospel, if you are listening to it (Sometimes we don't. We've heard it so often!), but when you have listened, don't you sometimes say, "Oh! Pu-lease!?"

Forgive seventy-seven times? I know it's a Jewish metaphor meaning "on and on...." These cretinous clowns who have hurt me and defrauded me! .... And from my heart? Forgive, from my heart? Pu-lease! There's a man who works on the property on which I freeload, and I knew this was the Sunday gospel. His name is Chris. He's a Catholic gentleman. I went up to him yesterday morning and said, "Chris, the Sunday gospel, Our Lord says you have to forgive your enemy, your debtor, from your heart. Now, Chris, I want you to think of someone that you have been mad at in your life. Think, Chris, think!" He said, "I am." (I think some of these workers duck behind shrubs when they see me coming.) "I'm thinking...." I said, "Have you got somebody in mind who really hurt you, got you mad?" .... "Yes." .... "Now, Chris, Our Lord says you have to forgive that person from your heart. Can you do that, Chris?" .... "I'm thinking," he said. And then he said, "I think in time I could do it from my head, but from my heart??" Wasn't he refreshingly honest? And naturally he, as I have until recently, thought that "from the heart" meant emotionally. Oh, not only do I forgive you. I love you. Let's go on a picnic!" No. I know you know it doesn't mean that. And we know a lot of these things that Our Lord said because in our lifetimes so many brilliant scholars of Aramaic and Greek and Bible literature know exactly what the word means to the people who are listening to Jesus. To the Jewish ear, the "heart" meant the entire person. It didn't mean emotions. It meant will, decision, brains, intelligence.

I am paranoid because I think I have been here six years and I think every time a certain gospel comes along, I get the talk. I know I gave this one many times. I'm an old man so I am falling back on the same anecdotes. One person said "your anecdote." But I have got to tell the same things, but I will try to make them quickly about forgiving from the heart, not emotionally. It means you make a human decision. That is what "heart" meant in the Jewish ear. OK. And I have told you this before. This very saintly, smart priest, back in New York (And that's a great combination, smart and saintly!).... And he was dying. I went to see him a lot. And I talked about this thing, forgiving. I said, "There is a cretinous clown that I am still mad at and...." He said, "Would you give this person a cup of water if there were no other water and you owned all the water?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "if you were cooking a lot of pasta, would you give him a small plate of pasta?" I said, "Do I have to eat with him?" ... "No. Would you simply give him the plate

of pasta?" I said, "Yeah." I have asked that question in and out of confession, and some people have been honest enough to pause. But I have never gotten a "No." I have always gotten, "Yeah, I would. Thirsty and hungry? Yeah. I would. I don't have to like 'em?" No. "Go on a picnic with them?" No. But to forgive to the extent of feeding the hungry and the thirsty? Yes. That's all Our Lord asks. And some people still say no.

Now, when I first arrived here, luckily, in 1999, from New York, I made a tour of San Francisco by myself and I fell in love with that city. And that night I was on the phone with a priest colleague back in New York and I said, "You know," (And I have been to a few places in this world, luckily.) in San Francisco there is a certain slant of light. It's beautiful. It's iridescent. There is a certain slant of light all during the day. I have never seen anything like it. It's so lovely!" To which he said, "Are you on something?" I said, "No. Wait til you see it for yourself."

And then, going over this gospel in the past six years, I thought, "That's what Our Lord was trying to do for the human race, for you and for me, and for us up here. Our Lord was trying to give us a certain slant of light about God, about his Father, God. Now five times you and I very obediently said, a couple of minutes ago, "The Lord is kind and merciful... The Lord is kind and merciful... The..." Pu-lease! Haven't there been moments in your life where you wanted to say, much as you love Our Lord, "Oh, pu-lease, kind and merciful? I've been reading headlines. And I have seen sufferings in my own heart and in people I love..." But that's the angle, the slanted light Christ wants to give us about God. It's just a little light but he's a loving Father. Hang on. I am telling you. There's an after-life. He sees you every day. He does love you. Why he permits pain, we'll get to that in a minute, but please, that's the slant of light.

The kind of God Jesus was talking about was revolutionary. The Greek philosophers and many, most, of the Greek people thought that the gods were a bunch of orgy-asts who lived in some celestial condominium and they were full of lust and greed, always knocking off the booze and playing the human beings as if they were pawns in a chess game. The Greek gods, what a bunch! And even in Our Lord's day, the Pharisees, the Scribes, many of the people, their God, when he came, would be a rich Mr. America. You know, big bucks and biceps, and he'd belt the Romans out of Jerusalem and take over, a force and power, be tough.

And then Christ comes, this carpenter, and he gives us a certain slant of light. There is a God. He knows every moment of your life. He loves you. He forgives in a minute if you are genuinely sorry. He has prepared a place for you. There is an afterlife. A certain slant of light. And sometimes you have to hold on very tight, very tight to that light because we are surrounded by all kinds of things that seem to militate against it.

Now, five times you said "The Lord is kind and merciful." Now, here's the repeat story. I always hope a couple of people weren't here before. About light, in 1969, the principal of the high school where I was a teacher gave us, a couple of guys on the faculty, gave us a trip to Spain for

Christmas Holiday. And I thought, “Oh-h-h, sunny Spain. .... It was freezing in Spain at Christmas, in 1969, freezing. We went to Midnight Mass. The next day, the day after Christmas, they stayed in and I decided to go for a walk, at eight o’clock in the morning. It was very cold and, a couple of blocks later, I came to the Prado, one of the great museums of Europe, the Prado Museum, right around the corner from this hotel. So I went in. It was about eight o’clock. It was open. It was amazing. There was nobody there, but a couple of guards, guarding the art and one American! There was a sign, “Cafe.” I knew that meant food. I went downstairs and the waiter came up, and he said, “Cafe?” and I said, “Si,” with full command of my high school Spanish. “Si!” When he said, “y cognac?” I didn’t know what “y cognac” meant, but I said “Si.” Cognac is a little dollop of very strong booze, brandy. And he put it in his coffee. And later he came back, “Mas?” (That means “more.”) “Si!” I think I had about three of those. But I was very cold. That’s my alibi. And the coffee was very strong, and for the next two hours, I walked all through the Prado. I really was completely alone, the day after Christmas, just a few guards in different corners.

And I had read, before going to Spain, that there was the greatest painting “in Western Christendom,” one critic said, by Velasquez, the greatest painting, and it was on the third floor on a corridor. I walked up there. Now, I was cold. It was two hours later. I was cold sober too. I was. And I looked at this painting, a huge mural of a family, a distinguished-looking Spanish family, gazing out at us. Elderly gentleman, a little old lady, small children, the court jester, a dog... and I said out loud, “I don’t know what’s so great about that!” A guard was standing behind me, whom I had not seen. But what a gentleman he was! And he said, “Sir.” (His English was flawless!) He said, “Sir, have a seat.” He took the little chair he would sit on and he put me in front of this Velasquez masterpiece. He said, “Now wait. Wait.” He went behind me and he pulled open the heavy damask drapes, and he pulled up the blinds. It was very dark, I guess to keep out the cold maybe. And then there was a certain slant of light that cut across the painting, at least across all of the faces. And I sat there and then I said, “Oh, now I get it. Now I get....” because you could see the eyes of the faces of the people, some rather formidable, one old woman looking so tender and forgiving and young prince looking arrogant and virile and strong, and the little kids peering out. And then even the dog, you could almost touch his whiskers. And I said, “Now I get it.” because that particular guard, on that particular cold morning in Spain, decided to pull aside the drapes and give me a certain slant of light.

That's what Jesus Christ came to do for the human race, about God, about suffering, about love, about forgiveness, about violence, about greed, about getting along, about an after-life, a personal, living, physical afterlife. That’s his slant. And I can never understand why people drop out of the Church and then join some other religion. If Christ didn’t have the right light, then what is there but Nihilism? The whole thing is a sick cosmic joke and we’re stuck! I know that’s just my extremism but I can’t see.... It’s one or the other. And I vote, as I hope most of you do, for the light of Christ. Now, he didn’t sell us a bill of goods. Did he (Jesus)? The night before he died, and nobody tells stories the night before you know you are going to die, he told his friends at the Last Supper, in this world you are going to have lots of trouble. Now, the scholars who study the original Greek and going back to the Jewish word, “trouble” is not what Jesus said. It’s

weak. Our Lord said “tribulationes” (big pain), not always but often enough, major big league suffering, now and then in your lives. He said “In this world you are going to have tribulationes.” But then, he said, “Have confidence. I am with you in the world.” I’m with ya!

I was leafing through my Pascal last night. (I love dropping names! The Prado and the Velasquez painting.... I’m reading my Pascal!) Pascal was a French scientist, brilliant, brilliant scientist, intellectual, Catholic, smart Catholic. His was the original concept of the calculating machine. Says so in the encyclopedia, way back in the seventeenth century, regarded as a genius of science. He was also a smart Catholic. And he said two things, very fast. The name of the book is “Pensees, the Thoughts of Pascal.” They are little passages. You can take them in sips. And one of the things he says, “If the light gets so dark, the light of faith gets so dim and seems to go out,” he says, “make a bet, and the bet is ‘there is a God’ (Make a bet, a wager.) and then spend your life as if there is the God of Jesus Christ.” He said “act as if “ because if you do, and he is talking as an empirical scientist, if you do, even your human physiology, your brain chemistry, your pulse, your heart rate, even that will be healthier by following the light of Christ. You may not have more money than others or any of that stuff but you will have a better life, even if there is no God. Bet that there is! Act as if! And if there is, you will have all that and heaven too.

Now he puts it much more philosophically, and then he has the famous line which everybody remembers, I think, who studied Pascal, “The heart has reasons that the mind knows nothing about.” He says that with approval. You know what that is about falling in love, deciding that this is good or that’s beautiful. ....“The heart has reasons that the mind knows nothing about.” And Pascal says if you just travel with your heart, the light of Christ, hang on!

Anyhow, when the priest was dying, the one I told you about in New York, he said, “Hold tight to that light of faith.” And I was an English teacher. Leave it to me! I said, “That’s a mixed metaphor. You can’t hold tight to light.” He said, “Well, if it’s a candle, yeah, you can hold tight.” And then he said a prayer and I wrote it on a napkin, but I kept it. “Lord Jesus Christ, please don’t let the light get too dark. Don’t let it get dim. Jesus, Lord, and human being, don’t let my light of faith go out. Pu-lease!”