



A question of forgiveness

Gemma Simmonds CJ

Adjusting to life without their usual access to the sacraments is a huge challenge for many Catholics. Perhaps we can use this moment in the life of the Church to ask ourselves how the sacrament of reconciliation in particular can and does permeate our everyday lives, says Gemma Simmonds CJ. ‘The definition of a sacrament is that it is a sign which makes real what it signifies. What is made real by the signs of forgiveness that we offer one another in the ordinary unfolding of our daily lives?’

Lent is a time for reflecting on our sins and therefore, presumably, on the forgiveness that we seek for them, but this particular Lent has challenges all of its own. We cannot meet physically to worship together and suggestions on how we do socially distanced confession have ranged from the hilarious to the solemnly bizarre. Perhaps this is a good time for us to reflect on how we do domestic Church, and how the great liturgical moments in the year or the great theological themes that underpin them permeate our ordinary lives. After all, we all want and need forgiveness in our lives, don't we? Or do we? It is one of the great ironies of the Christian faith that its founder apparently teaches us to pray for something that few of us in our right minds would actually want. In the Our Father, Christians pray on a regular basis to be forgiven ‘as we forgive those who trespass against us’. There can surely be little worse than for God to forgive me in the way that I usually forgive others. Such forgiveness would be decidedly partial, offered grudgingly and hedged with conditions. ‘I forgive you’ – if you grovel suitably and for a proper length of time. ‘I forgive you’ – as long as you never come within a whisker of ever doing something like that again. ‘I forgive you’, but part of me will never quite forget, and will bring up the list of your past misdeeds at the least hint of any future conflict between us. Most of us would be inclined instead to pray that God will forgive our sins more thoroughly and permanently than this.

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In the Catholic tradition forgiveness has been enshrined within sacramental status but this seems to have done little to extend the phenomenon of reconciliation and the forgiveness of sins in everyday social and spiritual practice. We are prepared to ask for and to receive absolution of our sins through the ministry of the Church, which offers us pardon and peace when we ask forgiveness after a

sincere confession made with a firm purpose of amendment, but this does not lead inevitably to a heightened capacity or willingness to forgive others. In many religious orders the monastic *culpa* was enshrined in regular practice, whereby members accused themselves, or were accused by another member of the community, of infringements against the rule: breaking the silence, or the rules of fasting, or a piece of china. They would kneel in the chapter room or the monastic refectory, holding the broken bits of china in their hands until their penance was deemed to have been fulfilled. It was by no means easy to do this, but people were generally willing to ask pardon for broken china. They were less willing or able to ask pardon if they broke each other's hearts. In the end such practices were judged to be empty and inappropriate gestures, and have largely disappeared from the discipline of religious orders. They were rarely replaced by something more likely to encourage genuine mutual confession and reconciliation.

The definition of a sacrament is that it is a sign which makes real what it signifies. What is made real by the signs of forgiveness that we offer one another in the ordinary unfolding of our daily lives? Forgiving another person can be an immensely hard challenge. We often mistake forgiveness for excusing. Excusing another is a rational exercise. We seek to find an explanation for why they have behaved so badly: they didn't know any better, they had a terrible childhood, they were having an off day, they were under terrible pressure, they were stressed or provoked or in some way pushed off balance. These are excuses, and often reasonable ones, but this is not forgiving. Forgiveness is what is offered in the face of the inexcusable and, as such, is not generally within our human capacity. It is an attribute of God – indeed it is *the* attribute of God. Jesus knew this, and perhaps that is why he taught us to pray for forgiveness, so that by experiencing God's willingness to forgive us seventy times seven – the Jewish number of infinity – we might learn to open our hearts and minds to the grace offered by God whereby we become able to forgive each other.

The sacrament of confession, as practised in the Catholic tradition, is considerably in abeyance these days, compared with former times. It's another irony of modern life that as it has fallen into disuse in terms of sacramental practice, it has become a regular form of popular entertainment. From kiss-and-tell newspaper articles, to lurid public confessions followed by harrowing recrimination and tear-jerking reconciliations on daytime TV shows, there is nothing that people like more, it would appear, than watching others 'fessing up and being absolved or condemned. But the real-life dramas lived by those who have been deeply wounded by others are too terrible to turn into the modern gladiator shows that appear on our television screens. When we do come face-to-face with unspeakable evil in the public domain, we hardly know how to react. The vocabulary of sin has largely disappeared from social discourse, but we have managed to keep a firm hold on the language of condemnation. Banner headlines in our tabloid newspapers shrieked, 'ROT IN HELL!' when a perpetrator was convicted of child murder some years ago.

We know how to pass judgement and sentence, but we have not kept the terminology of absolution or forgiveness, because, by and large, we have not kept the mechanisms that enable this process to take place. We have lost them because, apart from within restricted religious circles, the basic concept of sin itself has been largely lost. This leaves us stranded, for without such a concept, it's impossible for us to get our minds round the phenomenon of gross evil within society.

When we are dealing with lesser transgressions, there's a tendency, even within religious circles, to think that dwelling on sin is part of the negative, embarrassing shadow-side of primitive religious attitudes and best avoided. We fall back on pop psychology or motivational positive-speak in order to show that we have a healthy approach to human frailty. Saint Ignatius, in his *Spiritual Exercises*, will have none of this. He encourages us to contemplate our sins as vividly and honestly as possible. This is not, however, in order for us to wallow in our guilt, but so that we can experience at depth the fullness of amazing grace. If we don't think our sins amount to much, then God's forgiveness doesn't amount to much either. When the woman with a bad reputation fell on her knees before Jesus in the house of Simon the Leper, bathing Jesus's feet with her tears and wiping them with her hair, Simon was disgusted by this public freak show of repentance. Jesus rebuked him, reminding him that 'her sins, her many sins must have been forgiven her, or she would not have shown such great love. It is the man who is forgiven little, who shows little love'.

What it comes down to, in the end, is love. Jesus himself makes a direct correlation between being forgiven and developing the capacity to love and to be loving. Many years of experience in prison ministry taught me that the most difficult act of forgiveness for many people is that of forgiving themselves. If we can be harsh with others, we can be harsher still with ourselves, acting as judge, jury and executioner at our own trial. If we are taught to pray daily for God's forgiveness as we forgive others, then part of that prayer is also for the grace to forgive

ourselves. That capacity is developed through encounters with the mercy and compassionate understanding of others. This comes in personal relationships but also through the various formal and informal healing ministries of the Church, of which we are a constituent part. In his exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* Pope Francis says, ‘a small step, in the midst of great human limitations, can be more pleasing to God than a life which appears outwardly in order but moves through the day without confronting great difficulties’.¹

If we begin to experience forgiveness through an honest confrontation with our own sinfulness, we may experience an extraordinary transformation and expansion at the level of the heart. When we enact forgiveness in our encounters with others, we initiate for them a process of encounter with God which will make of our churches truly transformed and transformative communities. It is a high-risk strategy both at the personal and at the corporate levels but, Pope Francis continues,

I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. [...] More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving...²

Prior to that paragraph in *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis speaks of open and closed doors within the Church. There may be an allusion to physical entrance here, but far more important is the space that we make for anyone, whatever their moral failings, to find a home where they feel accepted. Pope Francis speaks of the Eucharist as ‘the fullness of sacramental life’, but he warns that it is not ‘a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak’. The sacrament of reconciliation may not be the fullness of sacramental life in that sense, but we are called to approach the whole notion of forgiveness with the same prudence and boldness that he calls on us to use with the Eucharist. The Church, whether institutional or domestic, frequently acts, ‘as arbiters of grace rather than its facilitators. But the Church is not a tollhouse; it is the house of the Father, where there is a place for everyone, with all their problems’.³

Whatever our experience and expectation as part of that Church, it is primarily driven by that hunger for encounter with God’s mercy, mediated by human compassion – what Pope Francis later refers to as the ‘revolution of tenderness’.⁴ Jesus preaches such a revolution at Simon’s house in the parable in which the whole equation of debt and precise repayment is cancelled in an act of unreasonable generosity. Such liberality and openness of heart is beyond most of us, but we need it as much as we need to eat daily bread. So, as we approach the bread of the Eucharist in new ways during this time of exclusion from physical community, it’s perhaps worth our asking to be also nourished with the grace of forgiveness for ourselves and for others, so that we can become instruments of peace in a wounded and unforgiving world.

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¹ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), §44

² *Ibid.*, §49

³ *Ibid.*, §47

⁴ *Ibid.*, §88