

Warning: getimagesize(images/priore/priore_articoli_quotidiani/14_09_26_fabre_misuratore_nuvole.jpg): failed to open stream: No such file or directory in

/home/monast59/public_html/plugins/content/multithumb/multithumb.php on line 1563

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Forgiveness

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by ENZO BIANCHI

The message forgiveness conveys is that our relationship with the one who has offended us is more important than the offense

The event at the heart of Christianity, the revelation of God in Christ crucified, is interpreted by Paul as an event that reveals God's love for human beings even in their sin, and even when they make themselves God's enemies (Romans 5:8-11). It is an event that reveals God's love and his free initiative, rather than a juridical desire for compensation for the offense of human sin. This means that the gift of the Son to humanity is also, and at the same time, forgiveness, or remission of sins. Biblical revelation expresses very clearly the fact that forgiveness is unconditional. It is not preceded by repentance, as if repentance were a necessary first step toward obtaining forgiveness. On the contrary, forgiveness makes repentance possible and is the source from which repentance flows. In the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) we learn that the son's change of heart begins only when he realizes the depth of the faithful love shown to him by his Father, who did not stop loving him during his absence. What the son experiences as forgiveness is, in his Father's eyes, nothing other than faithful love, love that is never withdrawn. We will be able to understand forgiveness only if we realize that it is tied to the freedom of loving and giving. The word forgiveness itself suggests the giving of something extra that takes place when we renounce a juridical relationship in favor of a relationship of grace. We can see why forgiveness is central to Christian identity: God's statement (what God has accomplished in his Son Jesus Christ) has become a human imperative (what each individual Christian and the church is called to give witness to).

It is not surprising, then, that the three critical steps in the formation of the church, as they are described in the Gospel, are marked by the forgiveness of sins. The authority conferred upon Peter, the rock upon which the church is built, is essentially the power to forgive (Matthew 16:19). The Eucharist, which gives the entire ecclesial community its structure, is a powerful memorial of the event in which Christ poured out his blood "for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:28). The missionary responsibility entrusted to the disciples enables them to forgive sins (John 20:23). These events show us that "the church is a community of forgiven sinners who live because of the grace accorded to them through forgiveness, and who pass this grace on to others" (Joseph Ratzinger). We find the idea of forgiveness in other cultural and religious environments, but in the Christian economy forgiveness is inseparably tied to the scandal and paradox of the cross - that is, to the Paschal event. The strength and weakness of the cross are reflected both in the omnipotence of forgiveness (everything can be forgiven) and in its extreme weakness (there is no guarantee that a person who has been forgiven will make a change of heart, nor is there any assurance that he or she will not use forgiveness as a pretext for continuing to behave wrongly). The message forgiveness conveys is that our relationship with the one who has offended us is more

important than the offense. The one who has been offended places the wrong he or she has unjustly suffered in the past, where it will not affect the future of the relationship.

There is a fundamental asymmetry in Christian forgiveness: by forgiving the offender, the one who has been offended hands over to him or her, in a unilateral way, the only possibility to continue the relationship. For Christians, only faith in Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit make such a gesture possible. Christ experienced this asymmetry on the cross: "The Just One whose resurrection we celebrate on Easter is the one who, in an asymmetrical way, restores reciprocity, answers hatred with love, and offers forgiveness to those who do not ask for it" (Francis Jacques). It is the Spirit, breathed by the crucified and risen Christ upon the disciples (John 20:22-23), who enables them to forgive sins. In the Christian economy, forgiveness is not ethical but eschatological. It is a prophecy of the Kingdom of God, a sign of the Spirit's action, a manifestation of the spiritual energies of the Risen Christ, and a revelation of the love of God the Father. As a reflection of the Triune love of God, forgiveness is a participation in Christ's victory over death. If the resurrection 'says' that death does not have the last word, forgiveness 'says' that sin does not have the last word and is not the truth of who a person is. It reminds us that a person who sins is a human being, not a sin personified, and that he or she is much more than the sum of his or her actions, however negative those actions may be. In this sense, forgiveness is a sign of our humanity and a force that makes us more fully human. Certainly, it is worth repeating that forgiveness is not a law, but rather a possibility that knows no limits (we should recall the command to forgive "seventy times seven" in Matthew 18:22) set before the faith and freedom of each person. Even less is forgiveness a law we can impose on others. It is possible only within the space of freedom. If forgiveness were not offered freely, it would not be a gesture of love and would not communicate to others the free initiative of God's actions.

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