

# "FATHER FORGIVE THEM..." RE-ECHOING THE CHRISTIAN VIRTUE OF FORGIVENESS IN THE FACE OF PERSECUTION.

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## INTRODUCTION

Forgiveness lies close to the heart of Christianity: the injunction to forgive others, and the promise of receiving forgiveness from God for one's own sins, are central tenets for most Christians.<sup>i</sup> Forgiveness is multiform.<sup>ii</sup> First there is the fact that, with forgiveness, sometimes the task is showing it, other times finding it. It may come in the form of a deep yearning, as when in making amends we seek it from others. Other times it comes in the form of a duty, when as an imperative we extend it to the one who has hurt or violated us. Then there is the form of the paradox it takes, when one seeks it from one's own self. And, above all, there of course is its supreme form, God's forgiveness, which takes the form of a blessing that both assures and sustains. Over recent decades, the topic of forgiveness has become an important topic in a number of different areas, and obviously for a variety of reasons. On the other hand the theology of forgiveness is a prominent topic in the biblical revelation; it has received widespread attention among theologians and psychologists from different perspectives; for example Christian, political and social perspectives. Alongside these currents there has, more generally, been an increased theological focus upon forgiveness, as a number of theologians have taken the popular interest in forgiveness and related issues as an opportunity to demonstrate the relevance and coherence of theology in the public sphere and 'the study of forgiveness has historically been embedded in the disciplines of theology.'<sup>iii</sup> Theologians claim that "forgiveness has been a central theme of Christian's faith and they have suggested that there is forgiveness through faith in Jesus Christ" (1John 4:9-10).<sup>iv</sup> Closely related to this is a recent surge of interest in the role of forgiveness in public life, prompted to some extent by the prominence of the language

of forgiveness as it pertains persecution in our country Nigeria. Here forgiveness is a crucial junction at which moral, political, social and religious concerns intersect, and a matter of interest for public intellectuals.

Forgiveness is a complex theological concept and a complicated and nuanced reality and also a difficult matter all around. The precise scope of the concept may elude our minds and the concrete demands of the practice may overwhelm our heart and wills more so, for anyone who has ever been an object of persecution, the message of forgiveness becomes dependent or conditional at best, and impossibility at worst. This paper analyses the intentionality of forgiveness, describing how we either expand through enacting it, or contract in refusing it. We are marked most personally by what we have or will forgive, and what we ourselves have been forgiven. We shall also demonstrate that willingness to offer forgiveness should be taken seriously apart from its impacts on politically, religiously and tribally divided societies, it is a divine injunction.

### **THE IMPERATIVE OF FORGIVENESS**

Forgiveness is not only an act or a virtue, but man's overall attitude which can be formed in him as a result of the so-called "mercy experienced" from God, as well as due to his hard work to improve himself. Since the forgiving God is the source of this virtue and this attitude, one should constantly strive to enter as far as possible into the mystery of the mercy of the Father. "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."<sup>v</sup> Taken literally this famous passage is puzzling. For on the one hand if they really did not know what they were doing, and assuming that their ignorance was not culpable, then surely they should be excused and not forgiven. Forgiveness as a matter of sheer logic presupposes culpable wrong doing. On the other hand, if they did know that they were doing wrong then presumably they should

have been punished and, again not forgiven. However, Jesus' plea on the cross is a prayer of unmatched mercy and love.<sup>vi</sup> To understand forgiveness, it seems, we need to know how exactly it differs from a series of other phenomena such as punishing and blaming, on the one hand, pardoning and condoning on the other. Although scholars may disagree on the precise definition of forgiveness, it is a phenomenon in which many people have had personal experience.

The prayer of Christ for His enemies on the cross embraced the world. It took in every sinner that had lived or should live, from the beginning of the world to the end of time. Upon all rests the guilt of crucifying the Son of God. To all, forgiveness is freely offered. "Whosoever will" may have peace with God, and inherit eternal life. It is important to note that the prayer does not mean that everyone was forgiven, unilaterally, without repentance and faith. It does mean that Jesus was willing to forgive them—"forgiveness was, in fact the reason He was on the cross. The words "Father forgive them" show the merciful heart of God.<sup>vii</sup> Even in his agony, Jesus' concern was for the forgiveness of those who counted themselves among his enemies.

He asked the Father to forgive the thieves on the cross who jeered at Him. He asked the Father to forgive the Roman soldiers who had mocked Him, spat on Him, beat Him, Yanked out His beard, whipped Him, put a crown of thorns on His head, and nailed Him to the cross. Jesus asked for forgiveness for the angry mob that had mocked Him and called for his crucifixion.<sup>viii</sup>

Most Christians agree that forgiveness stands at the heart of Christian faith. While Christ's death on the cross reveals more than one aspect of God's action towards humanity (such as God's presence with us when we suffer), it most certainly signifies the amazing gift of divine forgiveness.<sup>ix</sup> And from divine forgiveness springs human forgiveness.

“Notwithstanding that the idea of unconditional forgiveness is difficult to defend from a pragmatic, practical and philosophical point of view; most people still believe that to forgive unconditionally is a moral good and sometimes represents what is noble and virtuous in human being.”<sup>x</sup>

### **FORGIVENESS AS A DIVINE MANDATE**

In Christian theology we are commanded to forgive our enemies. It is not a matter of choice; it is a matter of necessity. Forgiveness is the action of God himself. In fact, it is an attribute of God; very intrinsic to his nature. Little wonder the people said “...who can forgive sins but God alone?”<sup>xi</sup> They, like many of us are right to affirm that, only in their case; Jesus Christ was only but a man and as such lacked the power to forgive sins. Conversely, Jesus Christ did forgive sins and continues to through the sacrament of Penance where the action of the priest is the very action of Christ himself. God continues this great act of forgiveness in and through the human kind which he created in his own image and likeness.<sup>xii</sup> If God who is all good or rather who is goodness himself understands our frailty and forgives us, how much more we who are frail need to forgive our fellow men. The resounding words of Jesus on the cross “Father, forgive them...” sheds light on the righteous Father who never tires of forgiving those who are in need of it even in their ignorance and indifference.

The forgiveness of God is scandalous.<sup>xiii</sup> It is only God who looks at one who has been condemned by the law, and forgives such a person. Like the criminal on the cross to whom our Lord Jesus Christ says: “today you will be with me in paradise”.<sup>xiv</sup> He charges each Christian to forgive countlessly and to the question “how many times will my brother offend me and I forgive, seven times?” he answered “seventy-seven times”.<sup>xv</sup> Etymologically, that expression carries with it an innumerable need of forgiveness. Christian forgiveness then, is to imitate the unlimited range of God’s forgiveness as is confirmed by the

eloquent parable of the unforgiving servant<sup>xvi</sup> that invokes divine judgment on those who refuse to forgive. Jesus who is the image of that Father, the Unseen God shocks us with the following words, "in so far as you do this to the least of my brethren, you do it unto me."<sup>xvii</sup> The one who has begun the work of forgiveness calls each one of us to do same.

Far from the theological necessity of forgiveness is its biological consequence. Going down memory lane, each of us may not be oblivious of the fact that in more ways than one, we have erred both against God and man. If the consequence of our actions were meted on us for every wrong deed of ours then, our existence would have been a shadow of itself if we were not already annihilated. The famous quote attributed to Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth they say will leave the whole world blind or in other words, two wrongs do not make a right'. Everyone is in need of healing not just externally but inwardly. Un-forgiveness is like toxins that block the proper flow of life in the body. One may not be able to keep the toxins from coming yet can keep it from staying. Catharsis is a process in the body that helps drain out impurities from the body. It provides relief or purgation from repressed emotions. Forgiveness is a means of Catharsis. The impurity of un-forgiveness like every other toxin would reduce the proper efficiency of the body, preventing proper digestion and proper healing in the body. While we try to detoxify our bodies, forgiveness is one of the detoxifying treatments. Interestingly the person or persons who might have offended us go about their normal life sometimes oblivious of the fact that they have even offended us. Physical healing is just one out of many facets in the human framework that needs healing. There is even greater need to heal the consciousness, imagination, emotions and desires of persons, that is, to heal people in entirety. That is exactly what forgiveness does. We channel our emotional energy wrongly when we nurse hatred

against one who has offended us. It is not affecting them, it is affecting us.

“Forgive and forget” is a statement that has made many scrupulous on their desire to forgive. Forgetting that one has been wronged is not synonymous with forgiving such a person. One may forgive and yet not forget. It is very erroneous to opine that since one has not forgotten the offense of the other then, one has not properly forgiven. Forgiveness is not forgetting but remembering without anger; remembering that one has offended you yet loving the person regardless.<sup>xviii</sup> Despite the fact that one has been forgiven does not mean that consequence of one’s action would disappear. Newton’s third law may be applicable here “for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.” But at all times Christians must leave the punishment or consequence of such actions of persecution to God who is the just Judge. It is difficult for all of us to recognize that we are less than we ought to be, that to some extent at least, this deficiency is our own fault-to put it bluntly, that we are sinners. We can be of great help to one another in this situation. We can assure one another, in a variety of ways that despite our faults we are still accepted in friendship and understanding. We can help one another accept the strengths and mistakes common to humanity and as such acknowledge our common need for moral healing.

Identical to every Christian is the Lord’s Prayer which has become a household form of prayer in almost every Christian gathering. The Lord’s injunction asserts a resounding imperative in the whole scheme of forgiveness so much so that the forgiveness of our sins becomes conditional. It reads: “if you forgive others the wrongs they have done to you, your Father in heaven will also forgive you.”<sup>xix</sup> But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive the wrongs you have done. Forgiving others then becomes a prerequisite for one’s

forgiveness. Important to mention is the fact that we need to go out of our own ways to forgive; for Christ said "... when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister..."<sup>xxx</sup> A critical glance at this implies that the Christian is to seek for forgiveness even when he or she is the one offended, that is, even when the other wishes one evil.

### **FORGIVENESS AMIDST PERSECUTION**

The primary symbol of Christianity, the cross, is taken from the wooden frame that Jesus Christ was crucified on by the Romans. Shortly after Christ's crucifixion, his followers, taking the name 'Christians,' were persecuted by Jewish religious authorities and Roman magistrates and emperors. Even though many Christians today enjoy greater religious freedom in many countries, Christian persecutions remain a fact of life in certain places in the world and have become part of the religion.

Christians remain one of the most persecuted religious groups in the world. While Christian persecution takes many forms, it is defined as any hostility experienced as a result of identification with Christ. Christian torture remains an issue for believers throughout the world including the risk of imprisonment, loss of home and assets, physical torture, beheadings, rape and even death as a result of their faith.<sup>xxxi</sup>

Christians were sought for, tortured and executed. Before execution, they were used to amuse the people –some were dressed in furs to be killed by dogs, some crucified, some beheaded, some burnt alive, some exposed to wild beasts. It was during this period that Peter was crucified (with head upside down) and Paul beheaded as a troublesome character, a disturber of the Roman peace.<sup>xxii</sup>

Trends show that countries in Africa, Asia and the Middle East are intensifying persecution against Christians, and perhaps the most vulnerable are Christian women, who often face double persecution for faith and gender. Every day we receive new reports of Christians who face threats, unjust imprisonment, harassment, beatings and even loss of family because of their faith in Jesus Christ.

Persecution comes in various shades and colours which sometimes are over blotted. It is the systematic mistreatment of an individual or a group by another individual or group based on religious, racial or political affiliation. It has been misconceived that religious persecution especially as it concerns Christians is a thing of the past since early Christians were persecuted for their faith. Prior to the legalization of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire in the letter called the Edict of Milan at around 313 AD, Christians have been the target of persecution even to the point of being martyred for their faith. Christians still suffer persecution particularly in Muslim-dominated countries such as Yemen, Pakistan, Iran and Iraq et cetera. Christians in Nigeria are not left out especially those from the Northern part of the country. In the face of this persecution Christians are to imbibe the Christian virtue of forgiveness. That is, they are to wear the face of the Merciful Father and of Christ who echoed those healing words "Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing (Lk. 23:34). Though the verb "to forgive" as earlier stated is a difficult task; more so forgiving those who persecute you knowingly. According to Pope Francis, forgiving people who have offended us is not easy," he added, so people must pray to the Lord "to teach me to forgive as you have forgiven me." Human strength or will is not enough to be able to forgive, he said; it requires grace from the Holy Spirit.<sup>xxiii</sup>

## EFFECTS OF FORGIVENESS

Forgiveness is both a practice and an accomplishment – both an action that you undertake and an outcome that you achieve. The traditional or "classical" view of forgiveness says that it is the partially active forgoing of negative emotions for moral reasons.<sup>xxiv</sup> Therefore to forgive in the fullest possible sense is to restore the accused to full community standing.<sup>xxv</sup> It is to come to a personal position towards the accused in which he or she is no longer hated or resented, is no longer regarded as in need of making further reparation for his or her transgression and is no longer rejected, ostracized, or given a diminished community standing. Thus, for example, a woman who had completely forgiven her husband for a marital infidelity would be one who had ceased to be angry, hateful, or vengeful towards him for his transgression, had stopped feeling that he needed to "make it up to her" any further, and had included him fully in her life again as a husband.

The effects of forgiveness to humanity are largely positive. It cuts across the psychological and biological aspects of human life to the spiritual and social life of an individual. Ordinarily forgiveness aims at reconciliation.<sup>xxvi</sup> It needs not: it is possible to forgive someone at the same time that one realizes one cannot go on with them in the old way.<sup>xxvii</sup> However, our idea of forgiveness, the kind of forgiveness we most want to receive, is one that brings reconciliation. By withholding forgiveness, the wronged may withhold reconciliation and the possibility of a shared future. Thus, while those who take consolation in divine forgiveness may be interested in divine mercy as well, they have at least a *prima facie* reason for keeping forgiveness and mercy distinct, even in God.<sup>xxviii</sup>

## CONCLUSION

When analysing Pope Francis' bull *Misericordiae Vultus* in the light of the use of some words, we come to an interesting conclusion: this very

important document beginning the Year of Mercy, yet not too extensive in its volume of content, uses the word "forgiveness" in very different contexts, as many as nineteen times. If the word "forgiveness" occurs so often in a document about mercy, then it may mean that there exists a permanent, deep and multilayer connection between mercy and forgiveness. In one sentence the author of the bull ranks the two concepts alongside each other, stating that "God goes beyond justice with His mercy and forgiveness."<sup>xxix</sup> Forgiveness is a concept we find difficult to understand. We hear it every day, we see it being practiced and granted. Forgiveness has a kind of universality to it. On an intellectual level, or even in a linguistic level, we understand what the word "forgiveness" means. Despite some misconceptions surrounding it, we know what it is about even when we do not talk about it. It is a present reality that is happening in this world. Yet, at the same time, forgiveness is so simple that we take it for granted and we do not think about it that much anymore. In cases of violence and injustice, our immediate response is to seek vengeance and retribution which just entangles everyone in a cycle of hate. In making the words of NajwaZebian-a celebrated Lebanese-Canadian poet resound; let each one of us say "Today, I decided to forgive you. Not because you apologized or because you acknowledged the pain that you caused me, but because my soul deserves peace. I will not deny my soul its rights."

## END NOTES

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- xv Matt. 18:21 and 22
- xvi Cf. Matt. 18:23-25
- xvii Matt. 25:40
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xxviii *Ibid.*,

xxix Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*: Bull of Indication of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy no.4