

Forgiveness: At the Heart of the Matter

Louis J. Cameli

Anger is rampant in our society. When newspapers report the violent results of road rage, we are shocked but not greatly surprised. We ourselves have probably been provoked by other drivers and have wanted to take some kind of retaliatory action. It is not, however, just road rage. Anger leaks throughout all our social networks. I have seen seniors angrily bang each others' shopping carts in the supermarket. I have seen sports fans and little league parents be enraged by a missed play or a bad call. I have witnessed vicious attacks and counterattacks in church meetings. There seem to be no sacred precincts protected from anger.

What is all this anger about? Where does it come from? Why does it happen? How is it so pervasive? I suspect that many commentators are ready to provide explanations—psychological, sociological, political, or whatever. And I wonder if we can ever get at a root cause of it all. What we can do—at least from the perspective of faith—is to rediscover the remedy for anger. Very simply, it is forgiveness.

To say, however, that the remedy is simply forgiveness does not mean that forgiveness itself is simple, especially in our context. At the height of the abuse crisis when the United States cardinals were summoned to Rome, Cardinal Francis George offered an extraordinary observation that was reported in *The Tablet*. He said that United States culture was suffused with a kind of secular Calvinism. In this environment, everything is permitted and nothing is forgiven. Much could be said about our culturally shaped understanding of freedom as choice and autonomy. It is a very limited take on human freedom, and that has been amply explored, notably by Pope John Paul II in *Veritatis Splendor*. The other half of the statement—and nothing is forgiven—bears further scrutiny, because it has been, I believe, less explored.

As I understand it, Cardinal George is identifying with his sense of “a secular Calvinism” a kind of secular predetermination. Once one has transgressed, there is no recovery, no restoration possible. The case is closed. For those of us deeply immersed in the Catholic experience, this impossibility of forgiveness is impossible to imagine. We have the Sacrament of Penance, we have acts of contrition, we have the blood of Christ “poured out so that sins may be forgiven.” Has the “ease” of forgiveness gotten us into trouble? Is it more likely that we will misbehave if we know that forgiveness is readily available? I hope that is not the case, and it certainly does not square with the authentic nature of God's forgiveness. Even the misuse of available forgiveness, however, cannot allow us to lose sight of this grand horizon of the Christian life. If Cardinal George is correct, forgiveness may run counter to our cultural currents. So be it. But we cannot forget the centrality of forgiveness, and we cannot be remiss in standing for this possibility, even in an unforgiving and angry environment.

Of course, it is not a neat and tidy package. For example, how ought the process of re-integration go after the act of forgiveness? Is it business just as it was before? Probably not. The story of the Prodigal Son may give us some clues about what it means to come home again. Are there consequences and commitments that follow upon forgiveness? Absolutely. The story of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18 tells us as much. Forgiveness must beget forgiveness or it is not forgiveness.

So, when will the anger stop? Probably, when the forgiveness begins.

Postscript

About a week ago, there was a selection from the writings of Blessed Isaac of Stella, a monk of the early Church. He, too, wrote about forgiveness and related it to the Church. The forgiveness of sin, he said, properly belongs to God alone. When Christ came, however, he wedded his bride, the Church. Although this bride had her weakness, he made her one both with himself and with the Father. He entrusted the Church, the bride of Christ, with the power to forgive sins. Blessed Isaac writes: *The Church is incapable of forgiving any sin without Christ, and Christ is unwilling to forgive any sin without the Church. The Church cannot forgive the sin of one who has not repented, who has not been touched by Christ; Christ will not forgive the sin of one who despises the Church.*

This power belongs to all of us as the Body of Christ. In a particular way, it comes alive and is available through the Sacrament of Penance or Reconciliation.

God bless you.

Father Cameli