

Can and Does God Forgive Everything?

February 29, 2008

Can and does God forgive everything?

It is an important question.

It is a daunting question.

It is an *unavoidable* question, for us who sometimes fail to love.

We could perhaps even ask the question:

How do we know that God forgives *anything*?

When we ask God, in the secrecy of our prayer, to forgive us for an unloving act, how do we *know* when or that we are forgiven?

When we receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation, how do we *know* that have been reconciled with God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit?

“Well, the priest said, ‘I absolve you...’”

This is true, but, are the words of the priest *proof* that we are forgiven?

It is difficult to know.

Moreover, it is difficult to know when we seem to fall in the same way, over and over, and are left wondering about the effectiveness of the forgiveness we claim to receive.

Should God’s forgiveness not bring about some sort of change?

How do we really know that we have been forgiven by God?

A non-believer would probably say,

“You *tell yourself* that you are forgiven, and that makes you feel better.

It’s the old game of self-persuasion.”

Strictly speaking, there is no proof that we are forgiven by God.

The questions

“Does God forgive everything?”

“Does God forgive anything?”

“Does God forgive?”

are answered *in faith*, based on what we believe to be revealed.

And so we proceed in faith,

trying to answer the question in reference to what we believe to be revealed.

Now, in order to answer the question “Can and does God forgive everything?”
we would do well first to define forgiveness.

We need to situate what it is to forgive

before we can address the question of *God* performing this very unique act.

Our experience of forgiveness is first that which we experience between human persons.

In other words, we understand what it is to forgive in observing and analyzing
our experience and the experience of other human persons performing this act.

And therefrom, by analogy, we consider God in His forgiveness of us.

Forgiveness is a supreme act of mercy. And mercy is a supreme act of love.

Otherwise put, love has a particular face we call mercy,

and mercy has a particular face we call forgiveness.

As Thomas Aquinas (+1274) says,

“To love someone is nothing else than to will good to that person.”

(Summa Theologica Ia Q. 20 art. 2 corpus)

Of course, this presupposes an attraction of sorts.

As the same Thomas Aquinas says,

“The person’s goodness calls forth our love,

by which we will that he should preserve the good he has,

and receive the good he has not.”

Such willing of good characterizes true love.

“To love someone is nothing else than to will good to that person.”

Now, to will good to a person there where they are lacking

– be it materially, emotionally, mentally – whatever, is to be *merciful*.

Mercy is love for a person

- there where they are lacking
- there where there is deficiency
- there where they are broken.

The worst deficiency, the worst poverty is that of the human mind and heart.

All deficiency is bad, and we are, of course, particularly impressed and struck
by visible deficiency, e.g. a physical disability.

But the worst deficiency is that of mind and heart.

As you may recall, Mother Teresa used to say that the worst form of poverty
is that of not loving and not being loved.

Now, when a person’s “poverty of not loving” is *directed towards us*,

that is to say, when someone is unloving with us, when someone hurts us,

the love that is mercy takes on a particular form called *forgiveness*.

Forgiveness is a *supreme* act of mercy, for, in this particular case,

- the deficiency of the other person *directly* affects us
- the deficiency of the other person is particularly ugly

Whenever we are merciful, it is because the deficiency of the other person affects us.

This deficiency, a lack of love that implies our being hurt,

Requires heroic love, for it requires supreme mercy.

To forgive is, therefore, to will good to the person who has hurt us.
It sounds absurd, n'est-ce pas?
In a certain sense, it *is* absurd.
And it is seemingly masochistic.
We will return to this.

Can and does God forgive everything?

In other words, does God *always* will good to those who hurt him?

The pivotal revelation in the light of which we can answer this question
is found in John first epistle: "God is love" (I John 4:8)

It is actually quiet overwhelming, for, in the realm of human affairs,
we have no experience of someone who *is* love.

If God is love, then the answer to our question is obviously "yes".

But we need to see the implications and ramifications and repercussions.

If God is love, then God is merciful, and God forgives.

If God is love then, as Saint Isaac of Nineveh said in the 7th century,
"All God can do is love"

This means that God *only* wills us good.

If God is love, then His love for each one of us originates in Him,

that is to say, is not determined by us – unlike what we experience in human relationships

In human relationships our love is determined by the other person, by the person we love.

That is why we are drawn to some people and not others.

In human relationships love is fundamentally a deep attraction.

For a relationship to grow and deepen, the love must become a choice,
but, fundamentally, it is a deep attraction.

Recall the words of Thomas Aquinas, "The person's goodness calls forth our love."
"God is love."

His love for each one of us springs entirely from Him, flows purely from Him.

Consequently, His love for us never diminishes.

Nothing that we do or do not do can diminish His love for us.

Hence the words of Paul to Timothy :

"If we are unfaithful, he remains faithful,
for he cannot deny himself." (II Timothy 2:13)

It is an amazing statement.

We can, of course, close ourselves to His love.

But that is not diminution of His love.

All that God does for us is done out of pure love.

When we sin, that is to say, when we commit an unloving act,

- God's love for us does not diminish
- God's love continues to flow in our regard

The challenge for us is to receive it, and thus be forgiven, and thus be healed.

The challenge is for us to believe it so that we receive it.

We struggle sometimes to believe it, because

- we are guilt-ridden
- every other love that we experience is, in some way, conditional

We need to

- “dig deep”
- exercise our faith in this unique and unconditional love
- rise above what we might spontaneously think and expect

If God’s love for us is unconditional, then the only thing that can keep us from that love, from being loved, is ourselves.

Because forgiveness is an act of love,

- its reception is never obliged
- it is never forced upon someone

God forgiving is not God wiping clean some imaginary slate.

God forgiving us is God loving us when we have been unloving.

God forgiving us is, therefore, God giving Himself to us
there where we have been ugly.

Such a gift must be freely received, for only love can receive love.

God *can* forgive everything for nothing stops His love.

Does God, however, forgive everything?

God forgives, that is to say, God *loves* those who *let* Him love them.

Deliberate, calculated refusal – to be distinguished from emotional refusal,
closes the door to love and thus forgiveness.

Now, if God’s ultimate pouring forth of Himself is the gift of the Holy Spirit

Who can be called “Gift”, then there is one unforgivable sin,

that is to say, one instance in which God is impeded from loving:

refusal of the Holy Spirit

“Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven;
he is guilty of an eternal sin.” (Mark 3:29; Luke 12:10)

To blaspheme is to revile or speak untruth.

To speak untruth about the Holy Spirit, at a deeper level, is to deny or negate who He is,
that is to say, the Gift who effectively forgives.

And so, to blasphemes against the Holy Spirit is, in a sense, to refuse forgiveness.

God can and does forgive everything.

But God never forces entry and so there is one instance in which His love does not reach:
the closed and bolted door.

Now, how often this occurs is another question.

I personally tend to believe that there is much “refusal”
prompted by fear or pain or ignorance.

But we do remain free.

Love always presupposes freedom.

Now, because we are children of God, that is to say,

we participate in the very life of God, and thus the unconditional love of God,
Jesus commands what he does, in particular,

“Love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another.”
(John 13:34)

and its daunting repercussion: "Love your enemies." (Matthew 5:43: Luke 6:27, 35)

To love an enemy is to forgive.

To forgive is to love an enemy, that is to say, love a person insofar as they are an enemy.

A person is our enemy insofar as they hurt us.

How about a few thoughts, therefore, on our experience of forgiving?

How humanly normal is it to love one's enemies?

How humanly possible is it to love one's enemies?

It is true that we are made, in our humanity, to love.

We are not made to hate.

And we do see astonishing occurrences of forgiveness in non-believers.

Yet...

If a person hurts us, the normal response is that of hatred.

The way we keep hatred from translating into hateful acts,

is often to keep said enemy at bay.

Such distance is to be recommended in fact (homicide can be so ugly!).

Calling enemies close is masochistic (*not* to be recommended!).

What we most often do, humanly speaking,

is exercise prudence with respect to those who have hurt us.

The human heart does have a regenerative capacity, a capacity for healing, which allows for persons to continue eventually their relationship.

But the question remains:

How humanly normal and possible is it to love one's enemies?

Does the forgiveness that we witness in non-believers perhaps not testify to God at work in their hearts?

I pose the question...

What is certain is that Jesus commands

- that we go further
- that we go to extremes in love

Jesus commands

- something superhuman
- something supernatural
- something only fully possible by grace

Jesus commands that nothing stop us from loving.

Such is the new commandment.

Saint Therese has an insight that is tremendous, is tremendously liberating.

We spoke along her lines in stating why Jesus can command this of us.

Saint Therese says,

In the Old Law, when God told His people to love their neighbour as themselves, He had not yet come down upon earth; and knowing full well how man loves himself, He could not ask anything greater. But when Our Lord gave His Apostles a New Commandment--"His own commandment"[21]--He was not content with

saying: "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself," but would have them love even as He had loved, and as He will love till the end of time.

O my Jesus! Thou does never ask what is impossible; Thou knowest better than I, how frail and imperfect I am, and Thou knowest that I shall never love my Sisters as Thou hast loved them, unless within me Thou lovest them, dear Lord! It is because Thou dost desire to grant me this grace that Thou hast given a New Commandment. Oh how I love it, since I am assured thereby that it is Thy Will to love in me all those Thou dost bid me love!

Listen also to her experience of the challenge and the liberation and victory of this love:

A holy nun of our community annoyed me in all that she did; the devil must have had something to do with it, and he it was undoubtedly who made me see in her so many disagreeable points. I did not want to yield to my natural antipathy, for I remembered that charity ought to betray itself in deeds, and not exist merely in the feelings, so I set myself to do for this sister all I should do for the one I loved most. Every time I met her I prayed for her, and offered to God her virtues and merits. I felt that this was very pleasing to Our Lord, for there is no artist who is not gratified when his works are praised, and the Divine Artist of souls is pleased when we do not stop at the exterior, but, penetrating to the inner sanctuary He has chosen, admire its beauty.

I did not rest satisfied with praying for this Sister, who gave me such occasions for self-mastery, I tried to render her as many services as I could, and when tempted to answer her sharply, I made haste to smile and change the subject, for the Imitation says: "It is more profitable to leave everyone to his way of thinking than to give way to contentious discourses." And sometimes when the temptation was very severe, I would run like a deserter from the battlefield if I could do so without letting the Sister guess my inward struggle.

One day she said to me with a beaming face: "My dear Soeur Thérèse, tell me what attraction you find in me, for whenever we meet, you greet me with such a sweet smile."

Jesus makes a promise.

Jesus gives us His heart.

That is why Jesus is so adamant about our loving and forgiving one another.

Jesus lays His heart on the line.

Recall Matthew 18 (which was last Tuesday's gospel):
"So will my heavenly Father do to you,
unless each of you forgives his brother from his heart." (verse 35)

Now, two important truths merit mention:

1. To forgive is not to feel forgiveness.
2. To forgive is not to forget

(Whoever coined the phrase, "To forgive is to forget" was hopefully shot and forgotten.

Oh, oops: I forgot, we are supposed to be forgiving...)

To forgive is to *will* good to someone who has hurt us.

Forgiveness is an act of the *will*.

"But why don't I feel better when I wish well upon the person who has hurt me?"

Because feeling is at a different, more superficial level,

and there is no necessary cause and effect relationship between willing and feeling.

Believe it or not, even when we still feel hatred and anger,

our willing the person good is an act of forgiveness.

Once the wound heals, our willing the person good is a simple act of love.

Wounds, however, take time to heal.

And there is no rhyme or reason to their rearing their ugly heads.

Forgiveness is a repeated act, a here-and-now act.

Do not think to yourself, as so many people do,

"I am still so upset. I thought I had forgiven"

You did. But that was yesterday. The wound is still there and so *today* you must forgive.

If forgiveness is an act of love, it is *always* in the here-and-now, in the present.

We need to forgive every day, so long as the wound remains.

Jesus replenishes our hearts so that we can.

To forgive is not to feel forgiveness.

To forgive is also not to forget.

To forgive is of the will.

To forget is of the memory.

They are two different faculties.

One can *not* forget so long as the wound remains.

Do not think, therefore, that because you cannot forget that you have not forgiven.

If you will good to the person, you have forgiven.

We must move away from thinking, as we sometimes do,
that forgiving is to recreate a rosy scenario, in which everything and everyone is blissful
like a big Hallmark card.

To forgive is not to become BFF (best friends forever).

That can *perhaps* occur much further down the road ...when the wound heals.

To forgive is heroic.

To forgive is liberating.

Jesus makes of us humble heroes of love. Jesus liberates us in enabling us to forgive.

If such is the case, then why the disturbing petition in the “Our Father”:

“Forgive us our trespasses, *as* we forgive those who trespass against us.”

It is as though Jesus says that our being forgiven were contingent on our forgiving.

It is as though Jesus says that our being forgiven is measured by our forgiving.

Again, it is a question of will, of willingness.

Willingness opens the heart.

To be forgiven, we must be *willing* to forgive.

Know that God can and does forgive *everything*, absolutely everything.

Know that God enables us to forgive, and to forgive again – seventy times seven times.

Our journey of faith

Our journey with Christ

Our life as children of God

is that of being liberated and liberating others...