



LENTEN PASTORAL NOTE

AS WE FORGIVE

By: Archbishop Samuel J. Aquila

As we begin this season of Lent, I want to remind each of us that mercy is at the heart of the Gospel message, of the essential importance that forgiveness plays in our lives, and how crucial it is for our country right now. Those of us who have received the mercy of God play a unique role in extending forgiveness to others and healing our land.

In this Pastoral Note, I want to emphasize four points about forgiveness and mercy and why they are especially needed now. First, forgiveness is God's nature. Jesus is clear that he did not come to call the righteous, but to call sinners to repentance (Lk 5:32). The mercy of God the Father, who welcomes sinners with open arms and propels us to conversion, is a gift to everyone seeking it and is meant to be shared with others.

Second, you have been forgiven by God for your sins, and in turn you need to forgive others for theirs. Forgiveness is not only in God's nature, but it is required of those who have received it. We can ask God for help if we find it difficult to understand what it means to forgive or how to do it.

Third, forgiving others is necessary for our own healing and freedom.

And fourth, it is desperately needed to renew our society.



LENTEN PASTORAL NOTE **AS WE FORGIVE**

Forgiveness is the Way of God

In the story of creation, human beings are the pinnacle of the visible created world. The reason for this humbling distinction is revealed in the book of Genesis: “Then God said: ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness’” (Gen 1:26). This is an honor only humans and angels have received. Since we are made in the image and likeness of God, we can only understand ourselves if we understand who God is.



In short, God is communion, a communion of three persons: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God is not just loving, he is love itself, and our God who is love is also merciful. When Jesus is confronted by the Pharisees, a powerful legalistic Jewish sect, for dining with sinners, Jesus justifies his decision and refers them to the prophet Hosea¹, “Those who are well do not need a physician, but the sick do. Go and learn the meaning of the words, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice’” (Mt 9:12-14). The Son of God became man to bring us mercy, to forgive sins, and to heal.

Yet even before the incarnation of Jesus Christ, God’s desires to show mercy and offer forgiveness were abundant to his people. The prophets, Psalms, and stories of the Old Testament are full of God’s promises of forgiveness.

The Psalmist captures this beautifully when he writes, “Merciful and gracious is the Lord, slow to anger, abounding in kindness. God does not always rebuke, nurses no lasting anger, has not dealt with us as our sins merit, nor requited us as our deeds deserve... As far as the east is from the west, so far have our sins been removed from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on the faithful” (Ps 103:8-14).

This is who God is. God himself desires to be merciful. He desires to forgive us in our sin. It can be easy for us to imagine God as angry with me, not distinguishing the sin from the sinner, unapproving, and unpleasable. While God is angry at our sins, he is so because he loves us. He is always calling the sinner back to him. When we acknowledge that our view of the Heavenly Father is inconsistent with the Gospel, we must ask ourselves, who told us God is like this? Where did this image come from?

The false image of God comes from the evil one, and his purpose, which has never wavered since the time of Adam and Eve, is to separate us from God the Father.

¹ Hos 6:6



LENTEN PASTORAL NOTE **AS WE FORGIVE**

God Forgives You. Can You Forgive Others?

In quoting the prophet Hosea, Jesus points us to one of the most profound stories of God's mercy in the Old Testament. Hosea lived in the mid-700s BC, and God commanded him to marry Gomer, a harlot. Gomer, because of her brokenness, was repeatedly unfaithful to Hosea yet God instructed Hosea to continually forgive her.

God used the tragedy of marital infidelity that Hosea experienced as an image of God's own relationship with his people. At that time in history, the nation of Israel was, simply put, a mess. Despite their many blessings and God's repeated forgiveness, the nation of Israel was a people unfaithful to the Lord and in desperate need of repentance. God repeatedly forgave the sins of Israel and asked Hosea to do the same with Gomer. Today, God asks us to do the same with those who sin against us.

Jesus himself taught the Our Father (Mt 6:9-13) and is clear that we are to ask for the forgiveness of our sins **as** we forgive those who have sinned against us. The word "as" makes this a conditional phrase. Jesus further explains, "If you forgive others their transgression, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your transgressions" (Mt 6:14-15). This is not a suggestion; it is a stipulation for receiving God's forgiveness.





LENTEN PASTORAL NOTE **AS WE FORGIVE**

Jesus makes the same point again in the Gospel of Mark: “When you stand to pray, forgive anyone against whom you have a grievance, so that your heavenly Father may in turn forgive you your transgressions” (Mk 11:25-26). We must take seriously the need to forgive others and recognize that our own reception of the Father’s forgiveness depends upon it.

We see in the parable of the unforgiving servant a practical example of how we are to respond to the great gift of God’s forgiveness and the consequences of withholding forgiveness. The telling of the parable is provoked by Peter asking Jesus, “Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive him? As many as seven times?” (Mt 18:21).

Jesus proceeds to tell Peter the parable about the king who decided to settle accounts with his servants (Mt 18:21-35). I would encourage you to read the full parable, but in short, a king forgives his servant a debt that is so high it would take lifetimes to repay. Later, that same servant refuses to forgive one of his own servants a much smaller debt. The king, hearing of his servant’s lack of mercy, hands his servant over to be tortured. Despite receiving mercy, the king’s servant was unwilling to “pay it forward.” Jesus concludes the parable with a sharp warning: “So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives his brother from his heart” (Mt 18:35).



Forgiving others is not optional precisely because our Father in Heaven has forgiven us an unpayable debt. While we may be faced with the challenge of forgiving terrible and heinous acts, we must remember that only the spilt blood of Jesus Christ could forgive us our sins and offer us salvation. What we have been forgiven will always exceed what we are asked to forgive. Pope Francis writes, “If you do not forgive, God will not forgive you. Let us consider, ...whether we forgive or whether we can forgive...But if you cannot do it, ask the Lord to give you the strength to do so: Lord, help me to forgive.”²

² Pope Francis, General Audience, April 24, 2019, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2019/documents/papa-francesco_20190424_udienza-generale.html



LENTEN PASTORAL NOTE **AS WE FORGIVE**

Lord, Help Me to Forgive

Anyone who has had to forgive someone knows that it is not easy. Even small children have a tough time accepting the apology of another child who has hurt them. As we grow and the transgressions against us become more complicated and even malicious, forgiveness can appear to be an impossible hurdle to overcome. Yet, Pope Francis urges us to ask the Lord for the strength to forgive.

In the prayer of absolution during the sacrament of reconciliation, the priest proclaims, *“God the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of his Son has reconciled the world to himself and poured out the Holy Spirit for the forgiveness of sins...”*

While this proclamation is in reference to the authority given to the Church to forgive sins (Jn 20:21-23), the same is true for every believer because forgiving others is a duty of Christians. The Holy Spirit desires to help us to forgive because forgiveness helps us to grow into the full stature of Christ (Eph 4:13).

It is helpful to understand what exactly is meant by the word “forgiveness” and what happens to us when we refuse to offer forgiveness. In my experience as a priest and bishop, both the misunderstanding of the concept of forgiveness and the ignorance of the harmful effects of unforgiveness have caused unnecessary obstacles to many of the faithful.

It is said that not forgiving others is like drinking poison and hoping the other person gets hurt. Withholding forgiveness has no value and only builds anger, bitterness, vengeance, and resentment in the soul. These grow into a heavy burden that darkens our outlook on the rest of life, makes us question God’s goodness, and inhibits our ability to trust and receive love. On top of this, our suffering very rarely affects the people who have harmed us. In that sense, unforgiveness becomes a “double suffering” in that we suffer from the original transgression and then suffer further from harboring a grudge.





LENTEN PASTORAL NOTE **AS WE FORGIVE**

Many people withhold forgiveness because the person who hurt them has never asked for forgiveness. To be clear, reconciliation is the ideal when one person has sinned against another. Reconciliation implies a regaining and a renewal of the former relationship with the person who has hurt us. This is not always desirable or wise. Think of a person who has bullied us and would continue this behavior if the relationship were resumed in the same manner as when we experienced the injustice. Forgiveness is still possible even when reconciliation is not. We cannot allow someone's lack of repentance to hold us in a prison of unforgiveness.

When we forgive, we are not saying that what the other person did is "OK." We are not condoning their actions, and forgiving them does not take away the need for their repentance. **When we forgive, we are saying we will no longer allow the sin committed against us to have power over us. We will not hold resentment or wrath toward the person, and we desire and will their good.**

Admittedly, merely saying aloud that you forgive someone may or may not be enough to free yourself from the burden of pain they have caused you. This is why it is important when we are struggling to forgive, or even struggling to want to forgive, to ask for the Lord's help that we may forgive with our hearts as the Lord instructs (Mt 18:35). A simple cry of the heart such as, "Jesus grant to me the grace to forgive as you forgive" can begin the process of forgiveness. We depend on Jesus to move our hearts, not ourselves.

The Great Need for Forgiveness Today and Our Role

When I was in college, my family had a Hungarian Jewish friend who had lived through the Nazi occupation and survived a concentration camp. She had lost family members in the camps. I noticed she had no anger or bitterness towards the Germans. I asked her about it, and she shared with me that in the 1950s she was bitter, angry, and resentful. She said she gradually realized there was nothing she could do to undo what had happened. She said she was moved to forgive them and let go and she received great freedom and peace from that time forward. She taught me an unbelievably valuable lesson that day about forgiveness, one that I still remember today.

We live in a time of great volatility. Unlike God, our society is quick to anger, abounding in judgement, and seems to remember publicly every past sin captured through social media. Bitterness, anger, vitriol, and hatred abound in social media, the media, the floor of Congress, and in our schools. Society, and yes, the Church too, has a great need for forgiveness.

In this upcoming Lenten Season, I invite you to pray about and offer forgiveness in three major areas.

First, I invite you to consider if there is anything you need to forgive God or the Church for.



LENTEN PASTORAL NOTE **AS WE FORGIVE**

To be clear, God is perfect and is not guilty of any wrongdoing. However, it is common for us to experience great pain in not understanding actions and events which God has allowed to happen. Why did he permit the Holocaust, the World Trade Center attack, the abortion of over 60 million unborn children in the United States, and other seemingly endless atrocities. Many of these are brought on by the freedom God has given to human beings who choose an evil over a good. We tend to blame God rather than humanity for the evil we experience.

We also experience the pain of prayers not answered in the ways we wanted, or loved ones who are estranged from us or God and never come to know the Lord. In these situations, we can become angry with God and become closed off to a relationship with him.

In both, we do not let God be God. We forget that we are called to trust God's will. We are to be confident that he knows and wills what is for our good. If you find yourself in this position, I invite you contemplate your image of God. Is your God the loving Father that Jesus reveals in the Gospel, or a God you want to control?

Too many times, the faithful and unfaithful alike have been harmed by representatives of the Church. This is especially tragic because clergy have a responsibility to faithfully represent God's mercy, love, and compassion. When a leader in the Church harms someone, it can be interpreted and felt as if God himself committed the offense.



I felt the pain of betrayal from leaders in the Church when the McCarrick scandal broke in 2018. It can be easy to demonize public figures who have committed horrific crimes, but the call to forgive extends to them as well. I have forgiven the former cardinal, and regularly pray that he repents of his sins and publicly asks for forgiveness for the damage he has caused.

Take time in prayer to pray and think about your image of God, then write about it. If you are at a point where you are ready to move forward from pain you have experienced, ask the Lord if there is anything you blame him for and seek forgiveness for that. Ask the Lord to reveal his love for you as his beloved daughter or son. Go to the image of the Prodigal Son in the Gospel. Imagine the Father's warm embrace and his total forgiveness of you. Or, for those of you who watched the final episode of season three of *The Chosen*, imagine Jesus holding you as he held Peter in this powerful scene.



LENTEN PASTORAL NOTE **AS WE FORGIVE**

The second group I invite you to forgive is your enemies. Jesus teaches, “love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you” (Mt 5:44). In a time where our society is so divided, not over policies but over essential principles (like Israel during the time of Hosea), we must take this teaching seriously. Our temptation is to see people promoting sinful and destructive causes in the public sphere and consider them our enemies.

We must remember, “Our struggle is not with flesh and blood but with the principalities, with the powers, with the world rulers of this present darkness, with the evil spirits in the heavens” (Eph 6:12). Spiritual warfare is real, and you are on the battlefield, whether you realize it or not.

Our job is to love every single person we encounter no matter their political affiliation, ideological affiliation, or the crimes (civil or moral) they have committed. We speak the truth because charity demands it. Loving others who hold differing views from us does not include affirming or condoning immoral behavior, but it does include accepting them and treating them with dignity and civility.

As an antidote to anger, hatred, and resentment toward your enemies, I invite you to go to a quiet place, in adoration, or before a crucifix in your room, and make a list of your enemies, whoever they may be. Ask the Lord to reveal to you who you see as an enemy, and ask him to help you to forgive as he forgives, to love as he loves.

If they are committing sins, bring them in your prayer to Mass with you. Ask the Lord to forgive them their sin and then imagine the person and bathe them in the Precious Blood of Jesus that he gives us for our healing and sanctification during the consecration of the Blood of Christ. Ask the Lord to open their hearts to his love so that they may be open to his mercy and healing and repent.

Also in quiet prayer, examine your heart and ask the Lord if there are people who have hurt you whom you have not forgiven, and write down their names.





LENTEN PASTORAL NOTE **AS WE FORGIVE**

Go with Jesus to that person in your imagination and ask the Lord to help you forgive as he forgives and calls his disciples (i.e., you) to forgive.

Finally, I invite you to consider whether you need to forgive yourself. This is an often overlooked but incredibly common need. If we are honest, many of us have committed great offenses against God and others. In doing so, we can often find it is easier to forgive others than ourselves. I hear this often from people who have made the decision to abort a child or have committed another grave sin. They have experienced profound sorrow, repented, and sought the Lord's forgiveness in the sacrament, yet continue to suffer from their decision. I have even heard them say, "I know that God forgives me, I just can't forgive myself."

Shame can hold us bound and the devil, the accuser, keeps throwing the sin at us or recalling the memory of sin. He may even tempt us with words such as, "you will always be unclean," or "God will never forgive you," or "you will never be enough," or "you are a mistake." **All of those are lies!** You are precious in the eyes of the Father! Jesus tells us in the Gospel there is more joy in heaven over one repentant sinner than the 99 righteous (Lk 15:7-10).

Let us repent of holding on to any guilt, shame, or unforgiveness towards ourselves, for the Father only desires to console and forgive us at the cross with Jesus. After hearing the words of absolution in Confession, I encourage you to sit quietly in Church and simply bask in the joy of the Father. The Father is gazing at you with abundant joy at that moment. Taste it and experience it!

In closing, I pray that this Lent is characterized by a renewed spirit of forgiveness and healing for you. Let us be humble enough to offer it to those who have offended us. Let us experience the freedom and love Jesus desires to bring to us. I pray that new paths of friendship, healing, and charity will flow from our forgiveness. I pray, too, that our country will no longer continue down the path of unforgiving self-destruction but will recover faith in the God who is love and in his mercy.

May our Lord bless you this Lent and may Our Lady of Sorrows, who suffered alongside her Son, bring to light the areas of unforgiveness in our lives, so that the mercy of Jesus Christ may be received, shared, and lived for the glory of the Father.

+ Samuel J. Aquila
Archbishop of Denver