

## **Talk 6 “And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us”.**

*O Heavenly King, Comforter, Spirit of Truth, You are everywhere present and fill all things. Treasury of blessings and Giver of life: come and abide in us, and cleanse us from every impurity, and save our souls, O Gracious Lord!*

“And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us “ (Matt 6:12). Let us notice at the outset that this petition directly unites two acts: the forgiveness of our sins by God, is connected to our forgiveness of sins committed against us. Christ says: “If you forgive people their sins, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive them their sins, neither will your Father forgive your sins” (Matt 6:14-15). And, of course, precisely here in this connection, in this relationship lies the profound mystery of forgiveness in the Lord’s Prayer.

Forgiveness is a mystical action that restores a lost wholeness so that goodness reigns once more; forgiveness is not a legal action, but a moral one. According to the law anyone who harms me must be punished, and until he or she is punished the law is not satisfied, but according to our conscience the moral law does not require a legal satisfaction, but rather the restoration of wholeness and love, which any law is powerless to effect. Only mutual forgiveness has this power. If

we forgive one another, then God forgives us, and only in the mutually related forgiveness of ours, and the forgiveness from above means our conscience is purified and light reigns within us. It is this for which every person thirsts and searches at his very depths.

Perhaps the terrible tragedy of our time, of those societies in which we live, consists precisely in the fact that while there is much talk about legality and justice, while many assorted texts are cited, these societies have almost entirely lost the power and the moral beauty of forgiveness. This is why the petition in the Lord's Prayer for forgiveness of sins of those who have sinned against us, and of us and our sins by God, is possibly that very centre of a moral rebirth before which we stand in this age. How is this to be worked out in our daily lives?

The ideal of the Christian life is a life in common with others. Whether it is the community of marriage and a family, partnership, or the monastic life, the common life is both the norm, and the foundation of life for all Christians. Even for solitaries and hermits, if they are real, have undoubtedly lived the life of a community and been in discipleship. Their solitude and separation are only the fruit of their overwhelming love, and in solidarity with the rest of their sisters or brothers. Solitaries almost always live in relationship to a coenobitic community.

How is this concept of mutual forgiveness worked out in community? Life in a koinobion - I use the Greek word because it also conveys the sense of communion, koinonia - is the means for us to live out our discipleship, curtailing our will, learning to love our neighbour, and attaining authentic personhood. Discipleship and obedience to the spiritual father or mother, working out relationships among the sisters and brothers, with visitors, work, and the discipline of the conventual or monastic program, are the means by which we are trained to overcome ourselves.

The old cliché is very appropriate: the community is like a rushing stream of water that takes rough rocks, and by pounding them together against one another, produces in the end smooth stones.

I am going to give a controversial - for our modern time, picture of a convent or monastery. Nevertheless, I think it is one that I think is still very relevant to our age, and would bear revisiting.

A monastery or convent is a kind of family: the spiritual father or mother, and their children. It is patriarchy or matriarchy at its best - when it functions properly. Often in our modern culture young men and young women have had very dysfunctional relationships with their fathers or mothers, some if any at all. The monastery or convent becomes the context to work out a new way of relating, with love and respect, in

obedience and cooperation. This requires learning how to curtail our wills, our passions, and to give and receive love. It takes autonomous, immature individuals and makes them into persons in a communion of life and being. The goal is to grow into one mind and one heart, one spirit and one will, in communion with the Father, as the Son and the Holy Spirit share a unity of will and life with Him. Thus the unity of the community is a sacramental icon of the Holy Trinity itself: one nature, many persons, united in one will and life. This is also growth into maturity, “to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ”. To enter into this communion, to learn to bear the burden of the other, takes a lot of practice. The process of personal transformation, and spiritual growth, takes years. It requires tremendous patience, love and constant repentance.

Another way of saying this, is that our goal is to become authentically our self, the person who God made us to be, to actualise our potential as a human being. We can only do this in communion with God and others, because our personhood means to be authentically open to love the other, and to receive love back. Personhood means communion. How we love our brother or sister is the criterion, and measure of how we love God. This is a radical concept. It has been said that the criterion of how we love God is the degree to which we love the one we despise the most: this is the true measure of how much we love God. St Silouan of Mount Athos said, “Our brother, or our

sister, is our life.” This, I believe, is the essence of a good marriage, partnership, or conventual or monastic community. It is the process of learning how to forgive, and how to love. We cannot learn to love God, or expect his forgiveness until we learn to forgive and love our neighbour. We have to be psychologically and emotionally mature before we can begin to consider the real spiritual task.

In our immaturity, we relate to one another on the level of our egos: who and what we want people to think we are, images of what we think we should be, or should not be. Sometimes these are over-inflated opinions of our self, sometimes they are fantasies of what a monk or nun should be like, or sometimes deep self-hatred and self-contempt. These all isolate us from others, from authentic communion in love, and from our true selves, from accepting who God made us to be. They prevent us from giving and receiving love. The only way out of this is for us to grow in relationship with God and our brothers and sisters.

Lenten Prayer of St. Ephrem

O Lord and Master of my life, take from me the spirit of sloth, despair, lust of power, and idle talk.

But give rather the spirit of chastity, humility, patience, and love to Thy servant.

Yea, O Lord and King, grant me to see my own transgressions, and not to judge my brother or sister, for blessed art Thou, unto ages of ages.  
Amen