



## Homily: On Forgiveness

*Fr. Paul Kidner, O.S.B.*

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"The Lord is kind and merciful, slow to anger and rich in compassion." The words of the responsorial psalm set the theme for this 24th Ordinary Sunday. God is continually and overwhelmingly forgiving; we in turn must forgive one another. As we prepare for this eucharist let us consider times when we have failed to forgive or to accept forgiveness.

Forgiveness is not easy. But our readiness to forgive our brothers and sisters and to accept forgiveness from them is an essential part of our relationship with God. Peter expected a pat on the back for going beyond the rabbinical teaching of forgiving a brother three times when he suggested that one might forgive seven times. Jesus reply of seventy-seven times must have taken him by surprise. Jesus uses the double seven, the perfect number, which amounts to saying that your forgiveness must be unlimited. The force of the reply is underlined by the comparison between the sums of money in the parable. If the debt owed by one servant to the other was \$100, then the amount owed by the manager to his master was about \$50 million. To believe that an employee could ever pay such an amount was ludicrous; the sum is absurd. And that's the point; there is no way of comparing what we might have to forgive a brother or sister with what God forgives us. But Christ teaches that if we have a spirit of forgiveness towards our fellow men and women, then God will forgive us the enormous debt that we have accumulated through our sinfulness. And our first reading from the Old Testament foreshadows Christ's teaching; those who are vengeful will suffer God's vengeance; those who are forgiving will be forgiven. Forgiveness involves giving. Therefore to forgive is an act of love. Like love, forgiveness is outgoing, a giving of oneself to the person who has offended us. The reverse, which is equally necessary, is the acceptance of forgiveness offered by another whom we have offended. And that is not easy. We have to learn to receive forgiveness gracefully, not resentfully, in a manner which restores a loving relationship, not one which cuts off further dealings with the other. Agreeing never to speak to each other again is not forgiveness! Forgiveness is a positive reaching out, not a negative closing off. Unless each of you forgives your brother or sister from your heart, you cannot receive the loving forgiveness of a merciful God.

Today's anniversary of the terrorist attacks in our own country in New York and Washington provide an additional challenge to our understanding of forgiveness and vengeance and to our spirit of forgiveness. While we pray that justice may be done, today's Old Testament reading teaches that vengeance, wrath and



## SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



judgment are all acts of God alone. When humans engage in them we take the place of God; we repeat the sin of the garden when we reach for the fruit of retribution.

When we pray the Our Father in this Mass today, let us say the words "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us" with heartfelt conviction and real meaning.