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Forgiveness: First Gift of the Risen Lord

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Forgiveness: First Gift of the Risen Lord

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Second Sunday of Easter

April 7, 2013 Sunday Readings for Cycle C:
Acts 5:12-16; Ps 118; Rv 1:9-19; Jn 20:19-31

FORGIVENESS: FIRST GIFT OF THE RISEN LORD

Lawrence E. Frizzell

If God gave you the possibility of providing a key to solve the bulk of our world's problems, what would you suggest? Many people would offer rather sophisticated answers. But would anyone recommend that the forgiveness of sin is the first step towards building a new and better world? It is striking that the Fourth Gospel reports that this is Jesus' choice of the key for coping with the dilemmas of life. Moreover, he calls human beings to share in this task.

From the beginning of his public ministry Jesus was designated as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn 1:29). His death is a sacrificial offering whereby the new Passover is accomplished to free the world from its enslavement to sin and to Satan. At the Last Supper, Jesus promised to send the Paraclete to prove the world wrong about sin, about justice, and about condemnation" (Jn 16:8). Through his resurrection, Jesus initiated the new creation of the eighth day. When he commissioned the disciples to extend the Father's work in his Name, Jesus breathed new life into them (see Gn 2:7). The first effect of the Spirit's presence within them is the capacity to reconcile human beings to God. "Receive the Holy Spirit! If you forgive people's sins, they are forgiven them; if you hold them bound, they are held bound" (Jn 20:22-23).

At the time of the Babylonian Exile (587 B.C.) the prophets taught that the forgiveness of sins must precede the restoration of the alienated people to favor with God. The new covenant will be the basis for a profound sensitivity of conscience for each person, because the Lord says: "I will forgive their evildoing and remember their sin no more" (Jer 31:34, see Ez 36:25). St. Matthew referred explicitly to this aspect of the new covenant in Jesus' world. "This is my blood, the blood of the covenant, to be poured out on behalf of the many for the forgiveness of sins" (Mt 26:28).

Because God respects human free will, the global reconciliation which we believe was accomplished in the Paschal Mystery of Jesus' death-and-resurrection must be offered to each generation and to each person in the human community. Divine grace can penetrate all hearts in secret ways, but the need for reconciliation has community aspects. Sin has social dimensions and these are the source of many woes afflicting our world. For this reason Jesus extended the divine gift of forgiveness through human agents. The commission made the Apostles ambassadors whose decisions have repercussions in heaven as well as within the Christian community (see Mat 16:19; 18:18).

Throughout the centuries when sacrifices were offered in the Temple, the priests of Israel exercised this role of ministering forgiveness and integrating the sinner back into the community of the faithful. After the Temple was destroyed by the Roman army, this priestly role and the sacrifices were replaced by the confession of sins. Thus the criminal about to be executed was told to confess, "for everyone who makes confession has a share in the world to come" (*Mishnah Sanhedrin* 6:1, referring to a rabbinic interpretation of Joshua 7:19-25).

The gift of eternal life, which begins with Baptism (John 3:5-8), must be nurtured throughout our earthly pilgrimage so that it will blossom forth in our death. The public confession of sins (*viddui*), encouraged in traditional Judaism as a preparation for death, was also demanded in the early Church when someone committed grievous faults. Because the Church had compassion for our prideful condition, and for other reasons, this demand was modified. Confession in secret to the minister of God's mercy is seen to fulfill the conciliatory dimension of repentance of the social plane, provided restitution is made for loss incurred by others, whether monetary or spiritual. Of course, a sincere search for guidance in the life of faith should offset the tendency toward greed and other capital sins. Exploring our conscience in the penetrating light of the Holy Spirit may indeed humble us, but this is the great means to wholeness, that gift of *shalom* (peace, wholeness) that the risen Lord offers the Church and her members.