

How often should I forgive my brother?’

The traditional rabbinic answer is that you should forgive the transgressor three times, four at most. Maybe Peter thinks he’s being especially generous when he asks, “As many as seven times?” Jesus’ answer to Peter’s suggestion of ‘seven’ pardons is to multiply it to 77 times. The story He tells to justify this extravagance is one of His most frightening accounts of Hell.

The servant who owes his master an unpayable debt begs mercy and is forgiven. His response is to choke and then haul off to prison a fellow servant who owes him a pittance. The upshot is that the ingrate himself is locked up with the torturers until he can pay – which is never.

When Jesus died on the Cross for our sins it was that we might have divine forgiveness and the hope of of eternity with Him. When we, the bankrupt debtors to the Lord of Lords, refuse to extend that mercy to our debtors, we spit on the Cross of Christ. It is, therefore, no accident that, historically, the greatest fear of a Catholic Christian was to die *unshriven* (unconfessed), unreconciled; unforgiving and thus unforgiven. Such fear would be an entirely reasonable reaction to Jesus’ parable.

Christ’s sacramental provision for reconciliation, through the ministry of the Church, is Confession. The great thing we learn in the confessional is the joy of being forgiven. We recall, with childlike gratitude, the extraordinary liberation of the gift of God’s love for us in the sacrifice of His only begotten Son. We step into the light of Jesus’ grace and know, not only our reconciliation now but the eternal reconciliation which alone enables us to contemplate, not an eternity of torture, but the promise, being forgiven and purified, of dwelling as God’s sons and daughters in the glory of the God. This mercy is, therefore, at the heart of our message; of our sharing the Good News with the world. How we live that forgiven and forgiving life will influence the lives of all whom we come into contact with in this life.

In the confessional, Jesus gives us, through His Body, the Church, the means of grace and the hope of glory. There we learn the mystery of His love and walk out into the world to share that divine mercy. There we learn the joy of reconciliation and that promise of eternal reconciliation which, beyond the purification, will see us, not tortured in His absence but welcomed, as His sons and daughters, into the Eternal Presence.

Go often. Go because you love Him. Go because, liberated and thankful heart, you want to share that love with the world.