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Losing Each Other to Find Each Other Again About Forgiveness in Marriage

The Two Forms of Christian Radicality

Throughout my journey of consecrated life in celibacy, from the very first steps, I have never missed the company of those called to marriage. Between the way of consecrated virginity and the married and family way there is a complementarity of support and accompaniment, a possibility also of mutual correction, which over time I have increasingly recognized as a grace and a task that Christ has left to those who want to live in the communion of his Church. I found myself walking with those who live the vocation to marriage at all stages and levels of this state of life: from young people to first fall in love to older couples who have followed their vocation for fifty years or more, or with people who live the pain of widowhood, which is perhaps the most definitive form of married life because it implies a love truly stronger than death. The conferences collected in the book now published in German are one of the fruits of this mutual company, of this great and multiform friendship¹.

A few months ago, on a day when the liturgy proposed the Gospel passage asking Jesus if it is lawful to repudiate one's wife, Matthew 19:3-12, I realized for the first time that this page describes the vocation to marriage and celibacy "for the kingdom of heaven" (19:12) as two distinct forms of radicality. Before it was as if I were reading this page with the idea that radicality was only on the side of virginity, the vocation of which Jesus says that only "those to whom it has been granted" can understand it (19:11). Instead, Jesus emphasizes the radicality of the vocation to celibacy for the kingdom of heaven precisely to emphasize the radicality of the vocation to marriage. Even the spouses are called to a "leave everything" to follow their vocation, a "leave everything" that seems to refer to the paradigmatic vocation of Abraham: "Have you not read that the Creator from the beginning made them male and female and said: 'For this man will leave his father and mother and will join his wife and the two will become one flesh?' So it's no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, man may not separate." (19:4-6)

¹ Italian: Mauro Giuseppe Lepori, *Fu invitato anche Gesù. Conversazioni sulla vocazione familiare*, Edizioni Cantagalli, Siena, 2006

German : Mauro Giuseppe Lepori, *Auch Jesus war eingeladen - Gespräche über die Berufung der Familie*, EOS Verlag Sankt Ottilien, 2019.

Only the Gift of Life is Worthwhile

If Jesus speaks immediately after of celibacy for the kingdom of heaven, he does so because the disciples, frightened by the indissolubility of marriage, speak to him of celibacy as a way of comfort to escape the commitment of married life: "If this is the situation of the man compared to the woman, it is not convenient to get married" (19:10).

We live in an age and in a cultural climate in which this „it is not convenient“ has become the ultimate criterion of all relationships. Life is governed by decisions almost exclusively dictated by selfish convenience, by convenience for oneself in conflict with convenience for the other or for others. This leads us to refuse the prospect of being definitively bound to someone: it is not convenient to be bound forever to a woman or a man, but also to children, to a community, or to the migrant received in one's own country; it is better not to be bound forever to anyone.

To this instinctive reaction of his disciples, which reduces the value of both marriage and celibacy, Jesus does not respond with a moralistic discourse or with an annoyed reproach, nor with a catechesis on marriage. He responds with a very brief but incisive catechesis on Christian virginity: "There are still others who have made themselves such [eunuchs] for the kingdom of heaven. Whoever can understand, understand" (19:12).

Jesus wants to highlight the profound Christian sense of the “advantage”, of the benefit which concerns the nature of our heart before the way we live our sexuality or the life choices we can or cannot make. The problem of life is not first of all to choose between marriage and celibacy, but to be aware, in the light of Jesus Christ, that life only makes sense if it is given. Jesus speaks of virginity as a renunciation whose meaning is "for the kingdom of heaven," that is, "for" something greater than oneself.

The human being is educated from the beginning to perceive that the gift for other than oneself is more corresponding to the heart than of one's own interest. God created man and woman by placing in their hearts the feeling of mutual correspondence that drives them to give one another. Adam expresses his amazement by feeling within himself a perfect correspondence with the otherness of Eve (cf. Gn 2:23), in contrast to the mismatch that he perceived in front of all the other animate beings: "Man gave names to all the cattle, all the birds in the sky and all the wild animals, but a helper who would correspond to the man, he could not find" (Gn 2:20). Only by having the affective experience of correspondence with the heart do men and women find themselves called to an indissoluble communion: "For this reason a man will leave his father and his mother and join his wife, and the two will be one flesh" (Gn 2:24). In the relationship between man and woman, God offers everyone the opportunity to experience that only the gift for others corresponds to the need of the heart. Therefore, choosing not to marry for selfish convenience betrays first of all the nature of our heart.

Celibacy also makes sense only if it is to give life for something other than itself, for a "kingdom" that is not ours, but "of heaven," that is, of God. Radicality, both in marriage and in the renunciation of it, is the inescapable need for self-giving so that the choices of life correspond to the nature and happiness of our heart.

Even those who are celibate without formal consecration "for the kingdom of heaven" are called by the nature of their hearts, that is, by God, to the fruitful radicality of the gift of life. The free heart capable of loving is in fact the fundamental vocation of every human being. The meaning of every state of life is always God who creates us for communion with Him and to be His image in the love that gives life.

Thinking that „it is not convenient to get married,“ the disciples show that they are tempted to think that life can be achieved without giving it. Jesus immediately makes it clear that this temptation is not against marriage or celibacy, but against God who gifts us with existence in the image and likeness of His Unity in three Persons bound by an ontologically indissoluble and eternal Love.

Mercy: True Fullness of Heart

Jesus says to the Pharisees: "Because of the harshness of your heart Moses allowed you to repudiate your wives; but at first it was not so" (Mt 19:8). Jesus knows very well that at the beginning there was no sin, and that the need for indissolubility, like any other need for the gift of life, cannot be proposed again without coming to terms with the reality of sin that creeps into relationships, as in fact it crept immediately between Adam and Eve. How then can we guarantee a bond whose indissoluble unity, willed and created by God, immediately after the beginning is found to be constantly threatened and often broken by sin?

This is where forgiveness comes into play, the way of forgiveness, as the only real possibility of reaffirming the indissolubility of marriage, as well as the possibility of a definitive consecration to virginity for the kingdom of heaven. What forgiveness restores is the gift of life to the other. In the case of the spouses, forgiveness enlivens the mutual gift that the spouses have promised themselves to fulfill the yearning for love of their hearts that has led them to unite forever.

Christianity is a way of radicalism that does not censor fragility, that does not censor our being sinners. True Christian radicalism is not based so much on knowing how to guarantee fidelity, but on accepting that it is constantly restored, redeemed and renewed by forgiveness. Jesus knows that He cannot ask Peter *not to sin* seventy times seven, but He asks to *forgive* seventy times seven times the sin suffered (cf. Mt 18:22). This means that mercy is now the *sine qua non* condition of fidelity to every vocation, because it is the condition of every endless fidelity to the relationships that constitute it.

After all, reaffirming the indissolubility of marriage, against the apparent „no-convenience“ that it entails when in the couple the reciprocal gift is put to the test by the fragility of each one, Jesus shifts the level of *convenience*, that is, of what is good for the life of every man or woman.

The true convenience of every bond of belonging, the true convenience of every fidelity for ever, is precisely the possibility of living the mystery of the Redemption in their sphere, and therefore the possibility that binding oneself forever allows us to experience in ourselves and among ourselves the image and likeness of God in the form revealed fully by Christ and in Christ, that of mercy: "Be merciful as your Father is merciful" (Lk 6:36).

The mercy that forgives is no longer simple *repair* or *restoration* of something dirty, ruined or broken. Mercy is the heart of our likeness to God, and therefore of the full realization of our destiny, of the fullness of our humanity. It is not a question of *acting* merciful like the Father, but of *being* merciful like Him. Mercy is the way of our divinization in Christ through the work of the Spirit.

For this reason, forgiveness in marriage, as in any other state of life, is not the emergency lane to be engaged when there is a breakdown in the car: it is the main lane, the main road! Forgiveness is not limited to *repairing* married life: it simply allows us to *live it*, and to live it with fullness.

We know, in fact, that to Luke's "Be merciful like the Father" corresponds Matthew's "Be perfect like the Father" (cf. 5:48). This means that marriage, like every human life, and like every human relationship, reaches its fullness and perfection when it is lived in mutual mercy, when its true consistency is forgiveness.

The awareness that the true fullness and perfection of life is mercy, that is, having a heart that forgives the misery of the other, makes us understand that the real problem that Jesus highlights in the marriage relationship when he answers the question of the Pharisees are not so much the reasons for discontent and division that may arise between husband and wife, but the harshness of heart with which we face them. "Because of the harshness of your heart, Moses allowed you to repudiate your wives; but at first it wasn't like that" (Mt 19:8). I think we can understand these words not only in the sense that at the beginning it was not allowed for the couple to separate, but that at the beginning the heart was not hard, the heart was not made of stone, it was not closed to the tenderness of mercy.

It is important, every time we reflect on marriage, as on every vocation, that we allow Jesus to tell us that the fundamental problem is not the laws, nor the errors we make or others make, but the nature of our heart created not to be a "heart of stone," but a "heart of flesh" in which, as the prophet Ezekiel says, the Holy Spirit can make the merciful charity of the Father live and flow, as from the pierced Heart of Christ (cf. Ez 36:26-27).

Cancelled debt, source of gratitude

In this regard, it is interesting to note that the discussion on marriage and virginity recounted in Matthew's chapter 19 immediately follows Jesus' teaching on forgiveness, expressed in the parable of the two debtor servants, in response to Peter's question whether one should forgive up to seven times (cf. Mt 18:21-35).

The parable of the two debtor servants, like the prayer of the Our Father (cf. Mt 6:12, 14-15), defines sin by the concept of *debt*. It thus helps us to think of forgiveness in terms of *remission*, i.e. the decision of the creditor to waive receiving from the debtor what would have been due to him. Debt forgiveness in the Bible is the great expression of God's mercy that we are called to imitate.

To describe freedom and commitment in relations between the brothers and sisters of the Christian community, Saint Paul speaks of a *debt of love*: "Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another" (Rom 13:8). Based on the demand that the only debt is mutual love, the marriage relationship is certainly a paradigmatic sign, so much so as to constitute the image of reference of Christ's relationship with the whole Church, as Saint Paul stresses in his letter to the Ephesians (cf. Eph 5:21-33). By equating the relationship between the spouses with Christ's relationship with the Church, the Apostle clearly defined the new Christian nature of the debt of love which concerns all spouses, including pagans. In fact, the Church-bridegroom has a debt of love towards her Spouse, a debt that has the infinite measure of the Blood of Christ totally shed for her, a "debt of blood" that deserves the love of the total Church, that destined to embrace all humanity of all times, because Christ died for all and wants all men to come to salvation.

However, the debt of the Church is actually a credit, because the Blood of Christ was paid to *freely* cancel our debt of sinners: "With him God also gave life to you, who were dead because of your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, forgiving us all sins, cancelling the written document of our debt, whose conditions were unfavorable to us. He took him out of the way by nailing him to the cross." (Col 2:13-14)

As in the parable of the two debtors, we owe our love to God and our brothers and sisters because our debt has been cancelled. God's mercy thus transforms into a credit the small debt that our neighbor has towards us. The other's debt to us, absorbed by the remission of our great debt by the crucified Lord, becomes a credit that our neighbor has, so to speak, the "divine right" to ask of us.

What makes us indebted to love, what makes us "no more indebted to one another than love for one another" (cf. Rom 13:8), is paradoxically the fact that we are no longer indebted to anything, to nothing but the thankful love of having been released from all debt. The love of the Church, and love in the Church, draws with gratitude from the gratuitousness of God's forgiveness, from the infinite gratuitousness of Redemption.

This is how Christ loves the Church and must be loved by it. In discharging her debt of love, the Church increasingly and ever more universally welcomes the total remission of every debt that Christ has already accomplished on the Cross. Those who come across the mercy of Christ understand and feel that the debt to be paid to God is then *an inexhaustible gratitude*. Loving Love with gratitude is the only "currency" we have to "pay" the debt we have contracted with God.

Forgive in gratitude

For this reason, the infidelity of the Church, the infidelities of its members, of which today, unfortunately, much must be said with pain and scandal, at the root do not denote above all a lack of virtue, purity or discipline, but a lack of love, of this love of the redeemed prostitute who has no other debt to Christ except that of infinite gratitude.

Faced with the infidelities and sins of the members of the Church, the first question we should ask ourselves is whether the love of the Bride has not cooled, the "first love" (Rev 2:4), the essential love, that which, as the Cistercian author of the 12th century William of Saint-Thierry says about the monastic vocation, is born while "after the Passion of the Lord, the recent memory of his shed blood is still warm in the hearts of the faithful" (*Golden Letter*, §13). The "first love" is born by looking at the pierced Heart from which, in the blood and water of the redeeming birth, the Bride is born with her inexhaustible dowry of love.

Let us think of the gratitude that the newly weds at Cana owed to Jesus for saving their wedding feast.

Only within this horizon of gratitude to Christ does the exercise of forgiveness in marriage acquire its profound meaning and it is always an experience of fullness, even when it is necessarily declined in the remission of petty, small debts, such as the one hundred denarii that the second debtor owes to the first to whom ten thousand talents have been remitted (cf. Mt 18:24.28). Often, to endure a small defect or fragility of one's spouse throughout one's life is as much and perhaps more difficult than to forgive a great, punctual infidelity. Let us not forget that the love of the Church-bridegroom is expressed as much in the violent martyrdom that cuts the head off at once as in the martyrdom "with a pin stroke," as Saint Teresa of Lisieux said, that is, that of the patience required in the interminable duration of daily life. But it is the same love due to the Redeemer that is expressed and consumed in both martyrs.

We have an overly painful and penitential idea of forgiveness. Of course, forgiving implies a sacrifice of oneself, a renunciation of something of oneself that we throw into the fire of love, so to speak; even if this love that binds us to the other is only embers under the ashes to uphold this love. But after the death on the cross of the Son of God for us, this gesture, this throwing something or all of ourselves into this fire, can only be a "Eucharistic" gesture, a gesture that gives thanks to God. Now there is no more sacrifice than that of the Eucharist. We cannot truly forgive except in gratitude to God for having given us his Son to forgive the whole world.

The radiance of gratuitousness

But how can we awaken in those who find themselves in a situation of betrayal, abandonment, indifference, violence, the gratitude necessary to decide on the choice of forgiveness, perhaps unrequited, perhaps mocked, not accepted and, therefore, apparently useless? I often wonder when I have to accompany couples in situations

of crisis and conflict, but also people who are or feel victims of lack of love in their community, or in any human, family or professional relationship. How can we arouse a gratitude greater than the evil we suffer, a gratitude from which the gratuitous freedom to forgive can always flow?

Just as I was meditating on these things, on a plane between Berlin and Rome, a young stranger, of Balkan physiognomy, offered me and the girl sitting between us an excellent biscuit wrapped in a layer of chocolate. In low cost flights, passengers often feel a bit of an 'enemy' to each other, or at least competitors, because you "fight" from the check-in to try to be first at each stage of the obstacle course that has become today's air travel. If before it was said *homo homini lupus*, now you could say *viator viatori lupus*: the passenger is a wolf for the passenger... The free gesture of that young man, made with a smile and a sweet insistence, so much so that neither I nor the girl dared to refuse, immediately created another atmosphere, not just between the three of us, but within me towards all passengers. A very simple gesture of gratuitousness put me mysteriously in debt of gratitude to all.

I then became aware of the logic inherent in the gestures of gratuitousness.

In my life, I have experienced far too many free gestures of sacrifice for myself, far greater than offering a chocolate chip cookie. On the eve of my election to the abbey, an elderly father suffered a serious cerebral hemorrhage, and when I went to visit him at the hospital after the election, from the bottom of his bed, with his body twisted by paralysis, he told me that he had offered everything for the new abbot, that is, for me. A month later, my spiritual father, to come to my abbatial benediction despite his serious illness, literally risked his life from the onset of a pulmonary embolism.

Faced with these gestures of gratuitousness, of undeserved gift of the life of others for us, how can we not feel indebted? But, as I said about the example on the plane, it is important to realize that the gestures of gratuitousness, of which we are beneficiaries, trigger in themselves a dynamic that is not limited to gratitude to the person who has done us good. The dynamic of gratitude is not a *quid pro quo* between two people, as if they were saying: "You have given life for me and I give it for you." This, after all, is simple justice, not gratitude. Gratitude, on the other hand, is like throwing a stone into a pond: an irradiation of circles is formed that move and revive the whole pond. This real, free gesture cannot be returned by us to those who have expressed it, precisely because it is free. The two fathers who offered or risked their lives for me, and also my parents who sacrificed their lives, their strengths, their patience for me and my brothers, did so *without return*.

Of course, we can and must feel a debt of love to them for the gift of their lives for us; but this is not enough, it is not enough to give meaning and fulfillment to their gesture and to the experience of gratuitousness that they have given us to do. The gratuitousness of their gesture demands an irradiation, ideally without borders.

Jesus expressed it with a synthetic formula that is basically the definition of both love and God himself: "Freely you have received; freely give again" (Mt 10:8). God is the One who loves in total gratuity, without return. Even when we love God because He loves us, our love for God is still a free gift that we receive from Him, it is still and always an extension of the radiance of God's original love. To love God is for us the greatest good that we can live and experience. The man who loves God always and exclusively radiates God's love for him.

Felix culpa

This is an Easter experience, in which the negative of human life, even sin, even death, is won by a greater positivity, which transforms the negative, which transforms it into something that exceeds even what was before the negative experience.

It is the logic of the "*felix culpa*" that is sung in the *Exultet* of the Easter Vigil. What is given to us by the dead and risen Christ is so positive for us that we can bless the negative that caused the event. Blessed is the guilt that gave God the opportunity to redeem us with such infinite love, so gratuitous, so undeserved! This is what the Church's liturgy sings from the earliest centuries on Easter Night. To be created would already be a reason for endless gratitude, but to be redeemed, saved, even after rejecting and betraying love, is a surprise that wounds our self closed consciousness and makes it capable of expressing a gratitude greater than our heart.

A few years ago, I welcomed a young married couple who already had a baby. The wife, however, had a fleeting relationship with another man and found herself pregnant. But she wanted to stay with her husband and their first child. For this reason, she wanted her husband to welcome as his son the child conceived with the other man. At that moment, her husband agreed to forgive and to let the baby be born and raised as if it were generated by him. He realized that if his wife had cheated on him it was also because he had not shown her enough affection and availability. Unfortunately, I lost contact with this couple and years later I learned that they had not been able to stay together.

Of course, the memory of betrayal, of infidelity, would have remained as an open wound, always remembered by the presence of this son in the family who was not conceived by their love, but that their love restored by forgiveness could receive. It was clear, however, that such extreme forgiveness could only be a grace, to be constantly asked for. An impossible love that only the gift of divine charity can make possible in us. A holy love, and therefore, paradoxically much greater than the love that these spouses exchanged before this moment of crisis. And one day, perhaps this child could come to know his story and recognize that his adoptive father had loved him with a love far greater than the instinctive love that every parent has for his children.

The Church Company

What did this couple really miss? What prevented you from experiencing through their crisis that everything could have been a "*felix culpa*," giving them a more positive and beautiful experience of Redemption than the relationship that existed between them before the fall?

The more time passes, the more I accompany couples and people on the path of their vocation, and the less I seek in others the responsibility for what is wrong. I understand that I must look for it in myself, or rather *in us*, in the "we" of the Church, of the Christian community. It is the company of the Church that is truly responsible for ensuring that in couples, in families, as well as in communities the superabundance of forgiveness can be born from gratitude for the boundless forgiveness that we receive from the Father in Christ through the Holy Spirit. In other words: only if the Church offers a clear witness and a real experience of Christ's Paschal Redemption does it become possible for individuals or couples to have this experience in their lives and in their history.

Today we risk slipping into a too penal conception of the responsibility of and in the Church. Faced with the sad spectacle of many clergymen who have committed serious offenses, we recognize that the Church is responsible for remedying these shortcomings. That's good, that's right, that's owed! But we must not forget that the Church is above all responsible more than for repairing evil, but for transmitting the good, the great gifts, the great graces, the treasure of grace and life with which her divine Spouse gives her. The Church is above all responsible for transmitting the experience of the Redemption from evil, and the experience of mercy, of grace and of forgiveness, and first of all the gratitude that we owe to the Lord for Salvation.

The Church is not only an unfaithful bride when her members sin, but also when she does not accept and transmit the grace of Christ, the paschal joy of Redemption. The Church is an unfaithful bride when she does not proclaim, when she does not transmit to the world everything she receives from the Risen Lord, that is: his Gospel, the sacraments, faith, hope, charity and Easter joy. The Church is unfaithful when she does not feel responsible for transmitting the gift of the Holy Spirit that continues to pour out on her from Pentecost, to blow through her like a glaring wind and to burn in her like a living fire of charity to be administered to all as a gift of God without measure.

This positive and missionary awareness of the responsibility of the Church, which all the Popes have particularly awakened since the Second Vatican Council, helps us to live with faith and generosity the exchange between the different members of the Body of Christ which allows each member to find in communion the strength and love to exercise his task, vocation and mission.

It is with this awareness that I realize more and more that the quality of love and forgiveness to which the spouses are called is not sustained by itself, but needs the synergy of communion with other states of life, with the other members of the Body of Christ, in particular with those in the Church who have received a pastoral

mission, and especially with those who live the renunciation of marriage and family "for the kingdom of heaven." Perhaps, as I noted while meditating on the episode of Matthew 19, it is for this reason that Jesus instituted the vocation to consecrated virginity at the time when he reaffirmed the indissolubility of union in the flesh of the spouses. He wanted people to live directly the mystery of the spousal union of the Church with Christ so that they might be a sign of support for those who, in marriage, are called to incarnate in history the "great mystery" of Christ and the Church (cf. Eph 5:32).

A Eucharistic Path

I realize that for that couple in crisis of which I spoke earlier I did not embody this company, I did not sufficiently convey the experience of the embrace that the Church offered them. I may have inspired and supported the forgiveness that they agreed at the beginning, but I did not accompany them in continuing to live it. And probably other members of the Church, other consecrated persons, other pastors, and even lay people and families who knew them, also failed to ensure that the Church would accompany them on their difficult journey.

The real problem of forgiveness in a couple is not forgiving this or that, but that reconciliation, mercy, become a way, a good and joyful way of life. To solve the problems and difficulties of each one, especially of couples and families, it is not necessary to give recipes or methods, but to *walk together*, like Jesus who reached out the two disciples of Emmaus who were lost and sad, who were perhaps a married couple, and simply started to walk with them (cf. Lk 24:15). Then he also spoke, instructed them, corrected them, but everything was offered by accompanying them on their way.

Only when they broke the bread did they realize that it was Jesus who had walked with them. Before, they perceived him in their hearts, but only in the Eucharist did they recognize him as truly present and alive (cf. Lk 24:30-31.35).

It is in this way that the Church has the mission of accompanying the joys and efforts of every man, every couple and family, in the synergy of communion of all its different members, nourished by the Eucharist. In the Eucharist, all the members draw from and express the communion in which it becomes possible to walk together, accompanying one another towards the ultimate destiny of life and of every state of life.

From this mystery springs the invincible hope in the good fulfillment of every vocation, especially the vocation to marriage, because the Church has received not only the power to transform water into wine, but wine into the Blood of Christ who redeems man in all the dimensions of his humanity, especially that of being created man and woman, to unite in love and to transmit life through love.