

Chapter 15THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS

The last articles of the Creed are explained on the basis of the presence of the Holy Spirit Who acts in the Church through the sacraments. Therefore, the article of our faith about “the forgiveness of sins” comes to fruition in baptism, a fundamental sacrament of the Church that evolved historically into the sacrament of reconciliation. The statement about forgiveness is explained also with reference to the sacrament of the Eucharist, celebration of Jesus’ Passion, Passover from death into life that frees man from his sin.

Forgiveness is recorded all throughout the Gospels. We find it in the Sermon on the Mount, when the Lord exhorts us to go to be reconciled with our brother before offering a gift on the altar (cf. Mt. 5:23ff). We express this in the 5<sup>th</sup> petition of the Our Father: “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us”. We encounter the same teaching in the conclusion of the parable of the merciless servant, “I forgave you your entire debt because you begged me to” Mt. 18:32-33). Jesus’ intercession from the cross, “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do” (Lk 23:34) is the clearest expression of Jesus’ teaching about forgiving our enemies (cf. Mt. 5:44), etc.

Conversion and communion are declared to be the framework of the Church. Both imply an interior process which never ends; a process which began with baptism with conversion and the forgiveness of sins, and finds life in the sacrament of the Eucharist<sup>1</sup>. Baptism founds communion and communion makes all the baptized into “one body”. These are not two separate effects which are glued or successive but two aspects of the same reality. Forgiveness is required for communion. To lead man from being trapped in his sin to participation in the goods of communion requires him being torn away from his sin.

*Baptism for the forgiveness of sins*

“Baptism remains - Benedict XVI explains – as the start of a lifelong conversion”<sup>2</sup>; it has its biblical roots in the preaching of John the Baptist. His baptism was an act of penance, a human effort to address God in order to ask Him for the forgiveness of sins and the possibility of beginning a new life. But that baptism was only a human desire to go to God with their own human strength.

John the Baptist was the precursor to the Messiah and his baptism with water was the prefiguration of Jesus’ baptism “with the holy Spirit and fire” (Lk. 3:16). This was a baptism through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit for the forgiveness of sins (cf. Jn. 20:22ff). The expression “*to baptize with the Holy Spirit*” summarizes Jesus’ Messianic mission announced in

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. J. Ratzinger, *Introduction*, 339

<sup>2</sup> J. Ratzinger, *Introduction*, 335

Scriptures (cf. Is. 32:15, 44:3; Ez. 36:26-27). These texts present the Spirit of God as the source of interior purification and renewal, of spiritual fruitfulness and fidelity to the divine requirements.

This Spirit was the one Jesus promised to his disciples before His death. The promise comes to fulfillment on Good Friday when Christ, bowing His head He handed over the Spirit (cf. Jn. 19:30) and the day of the resurrection at the moment when Jesus breathed on the disciples and said to them “Receive the Holy Spirit, whose sins you forgive are forgiven them...” (Jn. 20:22-23).

This is how you can perceive in the baptism with the Holy Spirit a movement contrary to that of John’s baptism; it is not man approaching to be washed; it is Christ who shows the initiative: He is the one who comes to us, he gives us His Spirit and purifies us from our sin.

Naturally God does not act in a magical way; He respects human freedom, He needs it, He challenges it, He invites us to cooperate with the Holy Spirit. These two things must go together: God’s gift and man’s answer. That is to say, He will require our cooperation, the availability of our freedom to say that “yes” which makes divine action effective<sup>3</sup>. “God is a God who forgives – says Benedict XVI – because he loves His creatures; but forgiveness can only penetrate and become effective in one who is himself forgiving”<sup>4</sup>.

And lastly, let us not forget that the forgiveness of sins in the sacrament of baptism, goes hand in hand with a new birth “of water and Spirit” (Jn. 3:5). To be born of the Spirit is essentially to be born to a new life of faith. A life that assumes a new way of being and acting. Baptism incorporates us to God’s family in the communion of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; it marks the moment when the human being is reborn as child of God.

### *The Eucharist and the forgiveness of sin*

The expression “one body” allows us to delve, one more time, into the specific topic of our study: the knowledge of God through the symbol of the cross. The Cross of the Apostolate with its visual language takes us inside the freeing meaning of Easter. It refers us back to the mystery of Jesus Christ’s passion, death and resurrection which saves and redeems, to the Passover of Christ that is the source and summit of the life and the mission of the Church.

The words of Christ when He institutes the Eucharist, “*this is my Blood, the Blood of the Covenant for the forgiveness of sins*”, make reference to the statements of the prophet Isaiah concerning the expiatory sacrifice of the Suffering Servant. Jesus is now the one who expiates in His own flesh the sins and crimes of mankind through his expiatory sacrifice. He endures our sufferings and shoulders our pains in order to return to us God’s peace and friendship (Is. 53:10-11). “He was pierced for our offenses, crushed for our sins, Upon him was the chastisement that makes us whole, by his stripes we were healed” (Is 53:4-6).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, *Homily*, January 7, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 157

And so, when Matthew explicitly mentions “*forgiveness of sins for a multitude*”, he is merely accentuating the features of the Suffering Servant: poor, suffering, giving up his life in favor of sinners, interceding for the rebels and justifying them through His misfortunes, bearing their guilt (cf. Is. 53:11).

The prophetic word becomes real in the Eucharistic celebration. The cup of the Passover meal contains the blood of Christ, blood of communion that expiates our sin. It is the teaching of Saint Paul: “In him we have redemption by His blood, the forgiveness of transgressions” (Eph. 1:7). “All who have sinned are justified freely by his grace through the redemption in Christ Jesus: whom God set forth as an expiation, through faith, by his blood, and justify the one who has faith in Jesus.” (cf. Rm. 3:23-25). The cup of the Passover meal “in the blood of Christ” tears the faithful away from the domination of sin and accomplishes communion with Christ.

Being aware of this purifying effect of the Eucharist allows us to participate in it with new fervor, with renewed confidence in Christ, who becomes present in the sacrament in order to free us from sin and so prepare our hearts in order to receive from Him the life which will introduce us into His intimacy.

#### *The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*

The image of Jesus in the Gospel of Saint John as “*Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*” makes reference to the Paschal lamb of the time of exodus, whose blood was the sign of deliverance (cf. Ex. 12:6.8.11.14.26.27; cf. 13:9; Dt. 16:3). Jesus is, now, the Lamb who proclaims a radical deliverance, freedom from the slavery of sin; the Lamb of the new Covenant, who obtains the purification from sin of the whole world through His blood poured out. “Our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed”, says Saint Paul (1 Cor. 5:7).

#### *Forgiveness in the experience of Concepcion Cabrera*

With regards to the theme of forgiveness symbolized in the heart of the Cross of the Apostolate, we should remember the function of the heart in all human beings. To the heart flows the blood from all over the body carrying the toxic waste of the organs. The heart purifies the blood. Similarly the symbol of the pierced Heart of Christ purifies our dead works. The blood and water that sprout from His heart wash away our sins.

In the spiritual experience of Concepcion Cabrera the topic of forgiveness is considered a virtue that is born out of sacrifice and generosity...

Forgiveness is a product of the divine love that makes the soul forget the grievances received and even not to appear insulted. Perfect spiritual forgiveness goes even higher and achieves, not only the forgetting of the wrong and the keeping quiet about it, but the doing good in every form possible to whoever has offended you (AC 13,338: June 1900).

This forgiveness from God that is offered to the repentant sinner is a manifestation of the love of God for man, and is reflected in the center of the Cross of the Apostolate, not only God's forgiveness, but also man's forgiveness to his brother.

“Forgiveness – according to Benedict XVI – must be more than a matter of ignoring, of merely trying to forget. Guilt must be worked through, healed and thus overcome. The person must overcome within himself the evil done to him, as it were, burn it interiorly and in so doing renew himself. As a result, he also involves the other, the trespasser, in this process of transformation, of inner purification, and both parties, suffering all the way through and overcoming evil<sup>5</sup>.

This virtue of forgiveness is so elevated – Concepcion writes – because of the effort required of our nature, that it is one of the most pleasing to God and also the one that the world heard in amazement by the Word that (Jesus) spoke from the cross. You can forgive in many ways, and not only with the mouth, truly meaning it, but, if the will is not linked to the word, it doesn't amount to anything. We forgive by pretending the offenses didn't happen, and plucking from the bottom of our heart all acerbity or sourness. We forgive by praying for the enemy who offended us, asking God to bless that soul (AC 13,339, June 1900).

The affirmation in these texts is that forgiveness is a gift from God “a product of divine love” that manifests itself in the words of Jesus from the cross: “Father, forgive them” (Lk. 23:34).

In reference to the symbol of the Cross of the Apostolate, Concepcion contemplates on the cross the message of Jesus, expressed through the following locution:

My heart [which is upon the cross] feels tenderness; I bring forgiveness to the world at the end of times through my heart and my cross; the cross is the salvation for the world, cry out, my daughter, and may your voice resonate through all the earth (AC 14:109f, June 18, 1900).

And as if reaffirming Jesus' answer to Peter at the question of: “If my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive him?” (Mt. 18:21), she hears a word that makes her understand that only those who suffer for God can love and sacrifice themselves for their brother:

With this cross, my daughter, hatreds are healed. The heart that crucifies itself does not hate but loves God, and the neighbor in God and through God. Pain softens the feelings of the soul, purifies them, ennobles them and sanctifies them. A breast who suffers, and suffers for his/her God does not hate nor is it able to hate, but loves and sacrifices itself for his/her brother (AC 14,303; June 14, 1900).

These texts only give us a pale reflection of the mystical experience of Concepcion Cabrera about the forgiveness of sins, and these united to what we have taken from Sacred Scriptures, serve

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 158

to confirm this certainty of our faith: that God forgives our sins every time that we approach Him repentantly. At the same time the texts exhort us to give the means that God puts within our reach all the importance they carry, so we can be open to His forgiveness, the sacraments of baptism, reconciliation and, in a special way, the Eucharist.

We know that we can throw our sin and all our impurity in the Eucharist to be destroyed. Jesus offers us His pure blood, the blood of the sacrificed lamb, full of life and fully holy. Only after having experienced this forgiveness are we able to understand the words of Scripture that say: “the blood of Christ cleanses our consciences from dead works” (Heb. 9:14) and also: “the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin” (1 Jn. 1:7). In truth the Eucharist is the heart of the Church.

We are now able to move on to the next chapter to consider another aspect of the Eucharist: its social dimension; an aspect that we are also able to see in the symbol of the Cross of the Apostolate. The emphasis here is in the term “communion”, understood as Christian brotherhood.