

A Proper 18
7 September 2008
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Father, Forgive

I walked through the English cathedral doorway, turned toward the altar, and burst into tears.

Ah, but there I go again, starting in the middle of a story. Let me go back to the beginning. It is the summer of 1977 and I have been ordained a Christian priest only a few months. This is my first trip to England and I am enthralled by everything, though a little bit disoriented by culture shock. This is an old civilization and, though we are children of these folk, we Americans have lived differently for two over hundred years. It takes a bit of effort to understand them. But I'm liking the process; the English are friendly and especially so if they meet a Yank who is making an effort to appreciate them and their culture.

As you might guess for two Episcopal priests on their first tour of England, the itinerary included lots of cathedrals. But this one is special. It is the Cathedral of Saint Michael and All Angels. One enters through glass doors made by the Lalique crystal people. The doors are etched with figures of angels; you almost feel as if you're entering heaven through those doors. The inside is cool with stunning colored light filtered through beautiful stained glass. Behind the altar is a huge woven tapestry of the risen Christ. It covers the entire wall behind the altar and weighs several tons. On an exterior wall is a Jacob Epstein sculpture of the warrior angel Michael defeating Satan, who lies supine before the angelic spirit.

But this is not the cathedral that brought me to tears. For this is the city of Coventry, and it has two cathedrals: this new one built after World War II and the old one, a bombed out shell destroyed in a German air attack in 1941. They have left this wreck of a building as a monument to the insanity of war.

After marveling and praying in the new cathedral, I went out those angelic Lalique doors, walked across the plaza, and entered the gaping doorway of the roofless, windowless, old cathedral. Turning toward the altar I saw its charred remains surmounted by a cross made of two fire-scarred beams from the collapsed roof. On the morning after the bombing and burning of the cathedral, the provost had entered, found these planks, and tied them together in a cross that he placed on the altar. It remains there to this day.

All this was tremendously moving on that morning in 1977, but it was not this that brought me to tears. It was what was written on the wall behind the altar. There, engraved in stone, were only two words: Father, forgive. Father, forgive. That was when I broke. A new priest, I had not yet accumulated the experience of loving a place through years of prayer and worship. But I was started. I thought of Saint Andrew's and wondered: if someone had bombed and burned this

humble church building, would I have the greatness of spirit to say, Father, forgive. I didn't think so then, and I'm not sure I would now.

The community of people that is the real church at Saint Michael's Cathedral has dedicated itself to the work and proclamation, the ministry, of forgiveness and reconciliation. There is a lovely, plain chapel in the new cathedral dedicated to reconciliation. The cathedral congregation has reached out to German cities and churches bombed by the Allies, and worked toward understanding and forgiveness. There was a group of German tourists in the cathedral on the day I visited, and I understand this is a common occurrence. They were quiet, humble, reverent. The tragedy that had scarred this place was also their tragedy.

There is another cross at Coventry. While the smoke was still rising from the smoldering ruins, someone took three nails from the collapsed roof and made a cross of them. These nails are huge, about two feet long, I think, so this cross is also impressive, It is reproduced in miniature millions of times and used throughout the world as a symbol of forgiveness and reconciliation. The Community of The Cross of Nails is a worldwide organization dedicated to this ministry. It is headquartered at St Michael's Cathedral and its director is a Canon of the Cathedral Part of our Prayers of the People today are from this Community's Litany of Reconciliation.

We are approaching the anniversary of a great tragedy in our own national life, the death and destruction of September the eleventh, 2001. The wound is still fresh, the loss still unimaginable, the pain of the families still horrendous. It seems impossible to forgive. But then there is Coventry to tell us otherwise. The only way to lay to rest the rending of life of these tragedies is forgiveness, not vengeance. It is not easy, the people of Coventry will tell us, but it is possible and it is necessary. Forgiveness does not mean, of course, being naive and vulnerable. All life must be prudent in protecting itself from the murderous predation of the outlaw. But that is precisely the point: it is the outlaw who must be checked, not his innocent cousin. Somehow, we Americans must find the strength to join the people of Coventry in the work of reconciliation and re-building.

Forgiveness and reconciliation are not only national and congregational necessities. They are also personal. Everyone one of us has been wounded by someone else, some grievously, some repeatedly. We must forgive. That, of course, does not mean being naive or vulnerable. We can still protect ourselves from the predator. But not in anger, not in vengeance. Rather in humility, remembering our own failings; in reality, knowing that real forgiveness takes time and is an incremental process; in love, because those who hurt us are also children of God, beloved, as we are, of the Divine; being purposeful, because only by truly intending and working at forgiveness will it eventually come to be real in our lives.

Maybe we can close by asking the old question that all detectives ask in solving crimes: cui bono, who benefits? Who benefits by forgiveness and reconciliation? The answer is everyone. The offender may be put in mind of a higher way of living. Society is spared the endless round of mutual vengeance that sometimes has gone on for centuries and cost the lives of millions. God is validated in Her trust of His human children. But the one who benefits most is the victim

of the crime, the one who has been hurt and now, unjustly, is called upon to do the work of forgiveness. But the one who forgives is relieved of the burden of anger and retaliation, that in the short run seem satisfying, and in the long run are soul-destroying. Forgiving heals wounds, restores relations, makes life worth living. It is not easy. It is not fun. But it is possible. It is necessary. It gives life to offender and offended alike. It's hard work, but we can do it. Just ask the people of Coventry. Just ask the Lord Christ, who in His death agony cried out, Father, forgive.