



The Orthodox Church in America
DIOCESE OF PHILADELPHIA AND EASTERN PENNSYLVANIA
The Most Rev. Mark, Archbishop of Philadelphia

February 18, 2018
Leo the Great, Pope of Rome

Dear to God,

Christ is in our midst! As we enter Great Lent, I ask your forgiveness for my sins, known and unknown. Embracing bodily fasting, let us remember that the intent of the fast is to gain control of our bodies and offer ourselves as a living sacrifice to our Lord. We are to consider the members of our bodies dead to sin, yet alive unto God. Please read the homily of Metropolitan Anthony Bloom below and hide his words deep in your heart. Read them weekly, as a reminder of why we fast. Our salvation, our forgiveness is dependent upon our ability to forgive others.

Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh
FORGIVENESS SUNDAY
11 March 1973

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.

Today's Gospel, in the beginning of our Lent that starts tonight, speaks to us divine words of hope and divine words of warning: Forgive those who trespass against you, forgive, because unless you do forgive you cannot be forgiven. The Kingdom of God is a Kingdom of mutual recognition, of mutual acceptance and of love, which is simultaneously the joy of communion, but also the readiness to carry one another's burdens.

Forgive — but how? Where does forgiveness begin? It would be so easy and so wonderful if forgiveness could begin by such a change of heart that those who are repellent to us should become dear, that things that have hurt us should be forgotten, that we could begin as if nothing had happened before.

But this is not what happens. We feel the pain of the past, we cannot forget, we cannot simply begin as though there had been nothing before. But this is not what forgiveness means. Forgiving is not forgetting, forgetting leads nowhere. When we forget how, for what reason, in what circumstances, because of what weakness, what frailty someone has done wrong, we leave him unprotected. Someone who

has done wrong must be protected against another fall. What he has done, the reasons and circumstances of his fall should not be forgotten because he needs our thoughtful, loving care not to slip again, not to sin again.

And this is where forgiveness begins: forgiveness begins at the moment when, realising the frailty of others as I realize mine, the need of others for help, for mercy and for protection, I am prepared together with them to bear the burden of their weakness, their frailty or their sinfulness. Forgiveness begins at the moment when I take upon myself to put up with others, without waiting for them to change, to put up with them as they are in order to make lighter their burden and to make it possible for them eventually to change.

But the condition of forgiveness is in me: my readiness to take up this cross, this burden, that others should be healed or at least protected against evil. And this everyone can do, it takes a moment of understanding and it takes an act of determination and of goodwill. Everyone of us, side by side with them, have people who are difficult to bear, who are a cause of suffering, of misery or of anger; we can undo this anger and outgrow this misery if we make our task, the task of our life, our business, to carry their burden together with them, to be the person who, wounded and offended, and rejected will turn to God and say, 'Lord, forgive, because I bear no grudge, I want to become and to remain solid with this person in his frailty and his sinfulness. I will not stand in judgement against him, and if I am not yet capable of doing this, You do it for me: do not endorse my judgement, do not endorse the condemnation I rashly have pronounced, do not stand by me in my anger. Stand by the person who has done wrong, because he, because she needs help, forgiveness and healing for that very reason.'

This is where forgiveness begins and unless it begins there, it will never develop into anything at all. Bear one another's burden, accept solidarity with those who have done and are doing wrong, love them into newness of life and then only will forgiveness become what it is to be: an act of intercession before God that heals, transforms. This beginning of forgiveness we all can make, it is within our power to take up this task. Let us then do what we can, and let us wait for God to do within us, for us, in our midst, more than we can out of goodwill to build gradually a kingdom of mutual love, a kingdom which is truly the Kingdom of God. Amen

Your unworthy father in Christ,

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