**24th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME [September 14, 2014]**

READINGS: Sirach 27:30 – 28:7/ Romans 14:7-9/ Matthew 18:21-35

THEME: FORGIVENESS

By Very Rev. Fr. John Louis ([http://frlouis.com](http://frlouis.com/))

To **forgive** means ‘to stop feeling angry with somebody who has done something to harm, annoy or upset you’ [OXFORD ADVANCED LEARNER’S DICTIONARY (2000)]. The word is ‘for-GIVE’ and not ‘for-KEEP’. So, let us GIVE up our anger; we should not KEEP it. Beloved, when we KEEP the offence and grudges, we appear to God like a mad person accumulating refuse. That is why the first reading says: ‘Resentment and anger; these are FOUL things and both are found with the sinner’ (Sirach 27:30).

Someone has written that ‘to say, “I forgive you” is to free yourself from the shackles of holding a grudge that weighs on the mind and burdens the soul. Telling someone you forgive them does not condone the wrong nor is it weak. One must be strong to forgive’ [A. P. Castle, ***Quotes and Anecdotes: the Essential Reference for Preachers and Teachers*** (1994), p. 40]. Yes, ‘one must be strong to forgive’, if we agree with Alexander Pope that ‘to forgive is divine’. Forgiveness does not only show the strength of divine grace in us, it also depicts the beauty of communal living. Thus, Jean Paul Richter says: ‘Humanity is never so beautiful as when praying for forgiveness or else forgiving another’ [A. P. Castle, p.117].

Another reason why we should forgive others is that God forgives those who forgive their offenders. In other words, by forgiving our offenders a BRIDGE is erected between God and us. On the other hand, if we do not forgive the BRIDGE breaks down. The unforgiving servant in today’s gospel reading broke the bridge. Let me further illustrate this point with a story. A man had a son by name Gee [short form of Gerald]. Seriously offended by his son who squandered his property, the man disowned Gee. Years later on his sick bed, the man listened to a hospital chaplain and decided to accept Jesus as his Saviour. The chaplain asked the sick man to repeat the prayer of acceptance after him. In the middle of the prayer, just when the sick man had to say, ‘**Jesus** you **died** for me’, his son whom he had not seen for years appeared in his ward, and so, in his anger, instead of repeating after the chaplain, the man sick rather said, ‘**Gee** you will **die**!’ dying in the process after an instant massive heart-attack. Thus he broke the BRIDGE of forgiveness because he was not ready to forgive.

Furthermore, the gospel reading gives us another reason why we should forgive others: our offences (ten thousand talents) forgiven by God are more grievous than offences (hundred denarii) we experience from others. And if, like St. Peter, we want to know the limit for the number of times we can forgive, let us listen to the following: ‘Every person should have a **special cemetery plot** in which to bury the faults of friends and love ones’ [A. P. Castle, p. 117]. Beloved, let us bury even the harm that can’t be corrected. If the harm is good for only the grave, then the longer it stays with us, the more our health is affected. Heeding Jesus who says we should forgive 70 X 7 times, therefore, we can say, let us bury these offenses as often as we are offended.

Probably we are saying that: ‘I want to forgive, but I am still hurting’. In that case, let us remember that Jesus forgave us while he was still experiencing the pain on the cross. So let us bury in our special cemetery the offenses of the past. We may say, Jesus is God, so he could forgive while hurting. In that case, what about the deacon, Stephen? He prayed to the Lord to forgive those who were stoning him to death, while stone after stone were being thrown at him (Acts 7: 60).

If the story of St. Stephen seems far remote, then let’s listen to the story of a modern day teenage saint. In 1902, in Italy, there was an 11-year old girl called Maria Goretti. A 19-year old man attempted raping her and when the innocent girl, Maria Goretti, resisted, the man stabbed her. When she heard (on her sick bed) that the man had been imprisoned, she said: ‘May God forgive him! **I want him in heaven’**. And if St. Maria Goretti’s story seems a century too old, let us recall that St. John Paul II visited and forgave the man who shot him.

CONCLUSION:

Edward M. Kennedy says: ‘It takes two to make a lasting peace, but **it only takes one to make the first step’**. So, I hope today each of us will be the person who takes the FIRST STEP towards reconciliation with the brother or sister who has hurt him or her (*cf*. Mt. 5:23-24). The first STEP is to decide to forgive the offender and approach him or her to talk about reconciliation; may God grant us this grace, amen!