



Apostles for Today

Reflection and Prayer - January 2008

Fundamental Rule 26

Jesus, with infinite love, prayed to the Father for those who crucified him.

St. Vincent Pallotti writes:

Our Lord Jesus Christ, having just been crucified, with infinite love prayed to the Father for his Crucifiers, that he would forgive them: therefore, for love of Our Lord Jesus Christ, we are obliged in the same way to regulate the feelings of our hearts, so that we may always be disposed to pray for our enemies, and to forgive any serious or minor offence done to us by anyone, even those we have helped most; and therefore the prayers of the Congregation will be directed also to pray for all our enemies. (OCCC III, p. 55-6).

Through this point of the Fundamental Rule, St. Vincent directs our attention to something at the very core of the Christian life, something that marks true Christian love and is of its very essence – in imitation of the God who is love itself, and who has revealed the unfathomable depths of this love to us in Christ his Son, we are called to love not only those who do good to us and to others, but also to love and forgive even those who hurt us, who do evil to us and to those we love. In the Gospel, Christ himself calls us to go even one step further: ‘Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who treat you badly’ (Lk 6:27-28) We are called to a love that not only forgives those who hurt us and the people we love, but that even reaches out to do good to them, ultimately to love them as brothers and sisters – we are called to a love without limits! ‘You must therefore set no bounds to your love, just as your heavenly Father sets none to his’ (Mt 5:43-48 - this is either a cf, or a very particular translation of the text!).

This is one of **the** great challenges of the Christian life, and one that is impossible to meet by human resources alone. St. Vincent himself knew first-hand the demands that this kind of love makes on us as we struggle with ourselves and with the effects that the actions of others have on us. It

is said of him that he was of an innately passionate temperament ‘which incited him naturally to anger, disdain, and resentment’ and that he only managed to keep this natural irritability in check with great effort, ‘with indefatigable vigilance over every irregular motion of the mind... in such a manner as not to do the least act inconsistent with the meekness and sweetness of Jesus Christ whom [he] had chosen as his model’ (*Fr. R. Melia “The Life of the Servant of God Vincent Pallotti”, p. 160*). This he managed, amidst numerous, prolonged and serious trials, not by mere force of will, but as a fruit of his profound personal experience of the infinite love which is God himself and of his own deepest identity in the light of this love. God is infinite merciful love; our deepest identity is that we are made in the image and likeness of this love; this image and likeness has been damaged and distorted by sin; it is only through Christ that this love of God within us is restored and deepened, that we are filled with the love which is God himself, who through us desires to reach out and do good even to those who do evil to us and to others.

This can seem like an impossible dream when we look into ourselves and see all those petty resentments and feelings of irritation raging up within us, sometimes at the slightest misunderstandings or unintended slights, not to mention the truly monumental struggles we can have when we have been deeply hurt by another or when we look out on our world and see the terrible things that human beings do to one another. And yet as followers of Christ we are given no opt-out clause when it comes to forgiveness of others: ‘If you forgive others their failings, your heavenly Father will forgive you yours; but if you do not forgive others, your Father will not forgive your failings either’ (Mt 6:14-15).

Let us call to mind again St. Vincent’s conviction that if anyone believes in Jesus and strives to imitate him with humility and trust, then Jesus himself will destroy in that person all that is lacking and will come and live and work in and through that person, continuing his life through them (cf. *OCCC III, p. 37*). Again and again he reminds us that we must begin this path with prayer and continuously deepen it with prayer. Let us make our own some of St. Vincent’s thoughts and advice on learning to imitate Jesus in his spirit of forgiveness, some of which he puts on the lips of the Blessed Virgin Mary (*Month of May for the Faithful*):

When tempted to pettiness in relation to others:

'If sometimes you find yourself ... disappointed, or offended by a brother [or sister], or see others, even undeservedly, chosen or distinguished, then in order not to lose charity remember that you must be patient and kind, you must not carry resentment or envy...nor be rude, but rather remember the precept of Jesus Christ, who expressly commands us to love our enemies, to do good to those who do us evil, to bless those who curse us, to pray for our persecutors ...' (OCC VI, p. 256).

Christ is not merely an example to follow, but also the source of the strength necessary to do so:

'Remember, my child, that in Jesus you not only have the divine exemplar to encourage you to be peaceful, but in him you also find the grace, the virtue, necessary to imitate him perfectly (OCC XIII, p. 590, 7th Day of Month of May for the Faithful).

No one has been treated as badly as Jesus who was innocent – how can we refuse to imitate him in his forgiveness?

'...although Jesus was holy, innocent, without sin, no one had as many enemies as he, no one was cursed and calumniated as [was he]... and with all this he loved all, blessed all... and in the extreme anguish of his painful agony, with infinite love turns to the Father, and prays for his enemies, for those who hate him, blaspheme him, calumniate him. Tell me, O child, in the ineffable splendour of your divine exemplar Jesus, holy and innocent, can you refuse to imitate him?' (OCC XIII, p. 639, 17th Day of Month of May for Faithful)

The less we trust in ourselves, the more we are led to trust in God:

'If in your resolution to imitate Jesus you do not trust your own strength, do not lose courage, but rather know that such distrust disposes you and leads you to trust in the grace of Jesus himself?' (OCC XIII, p. 639, 17th Day of Month of May for Faithful)

Offer the merits of Jesus' forgiveness:

'To obtain more easily the perfect gift of forgiving offences I would like that you fairly frequently offer to the Eternal Father the infinite merit of the forgiveness which Jesus asked for his cruel crucifiers' (OCC XIII, p. 669, 24th Day of Month of May for Faithful).

The spirit of reconciliation sows seeds of the Kingdom, seeds that can truly change the world: we think of people like Nelson Mandela in South Africa and Gordon Wilson in Northern Ireland (who forgave those who killed his daughter in the Enniskillen bombing and opened dialogue with members of the group responsible).

Let us be humbled and inspired by two modern examples of the depths which forgiveness can plumb in the hearts of those open to God:

Bishop Hassam Dehqani-Tafti, the first Iranian to become an Anglican bishop – an assassination attempt on him failed and he fled to Cyprus, but his son Bahram was killed instead. He wrote the following, poignantly titled, ‘A father’s prayer upon the murder of his son’:

O God, we remember not only our son, but also his murderers; not only because they killed him in the prime of his youth and made our hearts bleed and our tears flow, not because with this savage act they have brought further disgrace on the name of our country among the civilized nations of the world; but because of their crime we now follow your footsteps more closely in the way of sacrifice. The terrible fire of this calamity burns up all selfishness and possessiveness in us; its flame reveals the depths of depravity and meanness and suspicion, the dimension of hatred and the measure of sinfulness in human nature; it makes obvious as never before our need to trust in God’s love as shown in the cross of Jesus and his resurrection; love which makes us free of hate towards our persecutors; love which brings patience, forbearance, courage, loyalty, humility, generosity, greatness of heart; love which more than ever deepens our trust in God’s final victory and his eternal designs for the church and for the world; love which teaches us how to prepare to face our own day of death. Our son’s blood has multiplied the fruit of the Spirit in the soil of our souls; so when his murderers stand before you on the day of judgement remember the fruit of the Spirit by which they have enriched our lives. And forgive.

A wonderful prayer found scribbled on a piece of paper near the body of a dead child at Ravensbrook camp where 92,000 people died:

O Lord, remember not only the men and women of goodwill, but also those of ill-will. But do not remember all the suffering they have inflicted on us, remember the fruits we have bought, thanks to this suffering – our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility, our courage, our generosity, the greatness of heart which has grown out of all this, and when they come to the judgement, let all the fruits that we have borne be their forgiveness.