

## Homily for Penance Service

### St. Matthew's Parish Retreat

Pope Francis has given us a new beatitude about forgiveness which, I believe, is relevant in light of our reconciliation service this evening.

He says, "Blessed are those who remain faithful while enduring evils inflicted upon them by others and forgive them from their hearts."

Today we are living in a very coarse and uncivilized age. The presidential primaries and election campaign of the past few years reveal there exists a lot of hurt, anger and heartbreak plaguing many Americans.

Working class whites are worried about unemployment, there is growing income inequality and people have less hope that tomorrow will be better for their children. Blacks, Latinos and other minorities are suffering from the pernicious and persistent effects of racism and xenophobia which remain pervasive, despite laws outlawing discrimination in housing, education and employment. In light of President Trump's travel ban, some Muslims feel that the First Amendment guaranteeing religious freedom may no longer apply to them. Many college graduates are coping with burdensome, and indeed, crushing student loan debt. Because of the potential rescinding of DACA, refugees and migrants are afraid that the doors to a better way of life in our land of promise and opportunity may be closed to them; and the other undocumented among us live with the anxiety that any day they might be apprehended, detained and deported – separated, perhaps forever, from other family members and friends. And we all live with the omnipresent threat of random terrorism, like in Parkland, Florida last month, the fallout from climate change and perhaps a nuclear holocaust.

In my memory of 79 years, never I believe, has our nation's morale been so low, its apprehension so great and its uncertainty about the future so prevalent. Although I must admit I was born in 1938, just after the depth of the Great Depression, and thus, did not experience its suffering. Further, I was too young to appreciate fully the tragedy which befell so many individuals and families during the Second World War.

There are also the personal hurts emerging from domestic violence, addiction to drugs and alcohol, family dysfunction, separation and divorce, unjust treatment in the workplace, being ignored or neglected by family and friends, etc.

We all have experienced one or more of these harsh realities and the pain and suffering they create! Quite frankly, it is difficult to forgive those who have inflicted such hurt. Why, after all the love and affection we have lavished on family, friends, parishioners and co-workers, do they sometimes betray us, abandon us or stab us in the back, so to speak?

However, as the Scriptures, saints, theologians and spiritual directors have taught us down through the course of the centuries – forgiveness is the most difficult and sublime of all the virtues. On the cross, in the face of extreme betrayal and humiliation, Jesus beseeched God saying, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." So many of the Christian martyrs confounded their

slayers by praying for them and forgiving them. Then there is the apostle Peter reconciling with Paul; Monica repeatedly forgiving her wayward son, Augustine, keeping the door open for his eventual conversion when he became one of the greatest bishops and theologians in the history of the church.

Let me offer a more recent iconic expression of forgiveness: Stephen McDonald who was shot over 30 years ago in his capacity as a New York police officer.

While on patrol July 12, 1986, McDonald came upon three teenagers in Central Park and stopped to frisk them because he thought one of them had a weapon in his sock. Indeed, one of the youths, 15 year old Shavod Jones, pulled out a gun and shot McDonald, leaving him for dead as the trio fled.

Three bullets struck McDonald, including one that pierced his spinal cord leaving him permanently paralyzed.

Doctors initially told McDonald's wife, Patti, who was three months pregnant with the couple's son, that the officer would not survive. However, McDonald did pull through.

At the baptism of their son, Conor, McDonald asked his wife to read a statement about his feeling toward the shooter. It said, "I forgive him and hope he can find purpose in his life."

McDonald remained on the police department payroll after being shot and later was promoted to the rank of detective.

McDonald often discussed his Catholic faith and the reason he forgave the teenage shooter, explaining that he believed that what happened to him was God's will and that he was meant to become a witness to God's message of peace, forgiveness and reconciliation in the world.

When he died, at his funeral, Cardinal Timothy Dolan, of New York, called McDonald, "a prophet of the pro life cause." "He showed us", the cardinal said, "that the value of life doesn't depend on one's physical ability, but on one's heart and soul both of which Steve had in abundance."

For many years after the shooting McDonald drew widespread attention and media coverage. He met with Pope St. John Paul II in 1995 and with the South African anti-apartheid leader Nelson Mandela. Although he was able to breathe only with the help of a respirator, McDonald crossed the country speaking at schools and other venues about the importance of forgiveness and peace. He also became an advocate for peace in troubled lands, visiting Northern Ireland, Israel and Bosnia to take his message to communities in conflict.

The list of McDonald's accomplishments could go on and on! Each of you know of personal examples of forgiveness among family, colleagues, co-workers and parishioners. But how about you?

What seething anger do you harbor against someone who has harmed you? What indifference do you show toward another who has caused you pain? What resistance do you display toward someone who wishes to say, "I'm sorry, I apologize, I was wrong?" Or what hesitancy do you have to express the same contrition to someone you have injured by thought, word or deed?

“Master, how often must I forgive someone who has offended me – 7 times?” To which Jesus responds, “I say to you, not 7 times but 70 times 7.” In other words, our openness to forgiveness must be infinite.

How we forgive rather than hate those who offend us was brought home to me and others very powerfully by Antoine Leiris whose wife was killed 2 years ago when gun wielding ISIS militants invaded a Paris concert she was attending.

The next day in a blog which went viral Leiris left a message for the terrorists.

He wrote, “On Friday night you took the love of my life, the mother of my son... if the God for whom you blindly kill, really made us in His image, then each bullet in my wife’s body is a wound to God’s heart.”

Leiris wrote further, “I will not give you the gift of hate. Even though that is what you were hoping for, responding to hatred with anger would be to fall into the same ignorance that made you the people you are.”

“Of course I am devastated by grief, I will concede you that small victory, but that will not last long.”

Leiris ended on a note of optimism: “Now it is just the two of us, my 17 month old son and I, but we are stronger than all the armies in the world. In fact, I do not have any more time to waste on you. I need to go to get my son who is waking up from his nap. He will have his afternoon tea as always and, then, we will go play as always. And by being happy and free, this little boy’s entire life will be an affront to you for he will not hate you either.” What a wonderful affirmation of the triumph of love over hatred, of peace over terror, of forgiveness over revenge.

May Antoine Leiris be an example for us and may his story prepare us for this evening’s Reconciliation Service.