

HOMILY FOR 5TH SUNDAY OF LENT
March 25, 2007

This “something new” that the reading from Isaiah mentions comes home clearly with Jesus’ pardon of the woman caught in adultery. The great western missionary, Vincent Donovan of the Holy Spirit Fathers, wrote about the amazement of the Masai people in East Africa when they heard that Christians are called to forgive and even love their enemies. At first they thought the missionaries were joking because in their culture a serious offense against the community brought ostracism on the offender. Donovan spoke of seeing such individuals wandering in lonely areas of Tanzania and Kenya for their entire lives, shunned by the community.

The concept of forgiveness and love of neighbor proved the gateway through which many Masai communities entered the Christian Church. It was an example of the evangelization of a culture. And the Masai, who calculated the passage of time according to generational events – the generation of the great flood, the generation of the drought, or the generation of plenty – called this era “the generation after which there will be no further generation”. Forgiveness and loving ones enemies for them was the ultimate in human progress.

I When one thinks about it, however, this forgiveness, this “something new” brought by Jesus is a multi-faceted and complicated affair. In reflecting on it, I came to a series of questions which I would like to submit for your consideration;

1. While we most often think of forgiveness as something we are called to, do we think of it also as something we need? Do we think of ourselves as offenders?
2. What are the requirements for being forgiven? In a ministry with which I was connected, we had to dismiss an employee for unacceptable behavior. Then the question arose: what about forgiving him? However, the person in question never asked for forgiveness, nor even acknowledged a need for it? How does one proceed in such a circumstance?
3. What about the forgiveness of a whole society? How do we in the U.S., for example, ask pardon of Iraq? (Some people, of course, believe we have absolutely no need to do so. A benefactor of one religious group complained bitterly when those religious called for national repentance for the Iraq War. He could not entertain the possibility that the U.S. needed to ask forgiveness.)
4. Again, as suggested above, what happens when the offender never admits guilt or responsibility for the offense? The Chilean general Augusto Pinochet, who led the brutal military takeover in that country during the 1970’s, was called to accountability in the late 1990’s both in international forums and later in his own country. However, he died without, as far as is known, ever admitting his guilt for the harm his regime did in Chile. How do the people of Chile deal with that?

5. How will we forgive the current administration for leading us into the morass that is Iraq and the Middle East today?

Conclusion;

Today is the 27th Anniversary of Archbishop Oscar Romero's assassination/martyrdom as he celebrated Mass. Recently, I heard a transcription of a homily which the Archbishop gave shortly before his death. He predicted that he well might be killed and said that all should know that he "forgave and blessed my assassins".