Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)

Gospel text (*Mt* 18:21-35): Peter approached Jesus and asked him, "Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus answered, "I say to you, not seven times but seventy-seven times. That is why the kingdom of heaven may be likened to a king who decided to settle accounts with his servants. When he began the accounting, a debtor was brought before him who owed him a huge amount. Since he had no way of paying it back, his master ordered him to be sold, along with his wife, his children, and all his property, in payment of the debt. At that, the servant fell down, did him homage, and said, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back in full.' Moved with compassion the master of that servant let him go and forgave him the loan.

When that servant had left, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a much smaller amount. He seized him and started to choke him, demanding, 'Pay back what you owe.' Falling to his knees, his fellow servant begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' But he refused. Instead, he had the fellow servant put in prison until he paid back the debt.

Now when his fellow servants saw what had happened, they were deeply disturbed, and went to their master and reported the whole affair. His master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you your entire debt because you begged me to. Should you not have had pity on your fellow servant, as I had pity on you?' Then in anger his master handed him over to the torturers until he should pay back the whole debt. So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives your brother from your heart."

"If my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive?"

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Today, in the Gospel, Peter consults Jesus about a very specific topic that remains in the hearts of many people: he asks about the limit of forgiveness. The answer is that there is no such limit: "I say to you, not

seven times but seventy-seven times” (Mt 18:22). To explain this reality, Jesus uses a parable. The king's question centers the theme of the parable: “Should you not have had pity on your fellow servant, as I had pity on you?” (Mt 18:33).

Forgiveness is a gift, a grace that comes from the love and mercy of God. For Jesus, forgiveness has no limits, as long as the repentance is sincere and truthful. But it demands opening the heart to conversion, that is, acting towards others according to God's criteria.

Grave sin separates us from God (cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church n. 1470). The ordinary way to receive God's forgiveness for serious sin is the sacrament of Penance, and the act of the penitent that crowns it is satisfaction. The specific works that manifest this satisfaction are a sign of the personal commitment—that the Christian has made before God—to begin a new existence, repairing the harm done to one's neighbor as much as possible.

There can be no forgiveness of sin without some form of satisfaction, the purpose of which is: 1. To avoid slipping into more severe sins; 2. To reject sin (since doing penance acts as a brake with the past, and makes the penitent more cautious and vigilant moving forward); 3. To replace bad habits contracted from sinful living with virtuous actions; 4. To help the penitent become more conformed to Christ.

As Saint Thomas Aquinas explained: “Man becomes God's debtor in two ways; first, by reason of favors received, secondly, by reason of sin committed: and just as thanksgiving or worship or the like regard the debt for favors received, so satisfaction regards the debt for sin committed.” The man in the parable was not willing to do the latter, so he became incapable of receiving forgiveness.

Thoughts on Today's Gospel

- “Forgiveness demonstrates the presence in the world of the love which is more powerful than sin” (Saint John Paul II)

- “When faced with the gravity of sin, God responds with the fullness of mercy. Mercy will always be greater than any sin, and no one can place limits on the love of God who is ever ready to forgive” (Francis)

- “... It is there, in fact, "in the depths of the heart," that everything is bound and loosed. It is not in our power not to feel or to forget an offense; but the heart that offers itself to the Holy Spirit turns injury into compassion and purifies the memory in transforming the hurt into intercession” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 2843)