



Preaching the Devil's Homily: Unilateral Reconciliation

by Neal J. Conway

Imagine God's World in which people can do whatever they want, killing, contraception, whatever inflictions of pain on each other their pride and selfish desires lead them to commit. There is no law, moral or civil, no education, no family, no nurturing activities, no religion.

This inferno of gratification and misery is perfectly OK with God. It's the way he wants it. In the long run nothing matters—All will be happy after they're dead—because God is going to forgive everybody no matter what they do. There is no reason for God to come among people or even reveal himself to people. Why bother? He's going to make it all right in the end anyway

To people who believe that God sent his son among us to establish a church, such a world sounds crazy. Our existence as it is makes it even hard to imagine, but such a world is where we go if we apply logic to the teachings of the Unilateral Reconciliationists.

Unilateral Reconciliationism (UR) is the belief that the burden of reconciliation rests solely on the victim. It is up to the victim to forgive an offense even if the offender is unrepentant. The theological basis for this is that God is merciful to everybody except perhaps when they don't show like mercy.

UR tends to be a pillar of Smile-Button Christianity. It appeals to those who want to avoid negativity in faith and those who are drawn to teachings that sound nice and engender good feelings even if they have little basis in the deposit of faith.

There are pop-psych-type books about one-sided healing, even a Christian Rock group pushing it, but UR is not an organized school of thought. In fact, it's the result of shoddy thinking and preaching, taking Scripture out of context and failing to relate reconciliation to the full body of Catholic faith. UR is an oversimplification and underqualification.

The seepage of Psychiatry into Catholic thought is also a factor. UR has the same aim as therapy. That aim is to change the victims' minds so they don't care about the offenses any more. It's no wonder that UR should have such appeal when therapy is seen, even by religious people, as the best solution to injury.

However as Josef Cardinal Ratzinger observes quite correctly, therapy only distances people from taking responsibility for their actions. With secular humanism and science doing their best to undermine conviction in free will and moral responsibility, and encouraging the separation of religious belief from public life, we don't need people in the church helping them.

UR may "heal" victims, but it does nothing about the offender or the offense and therefore nothing to transform the world in Christ. In fact it hinders the transformation of the World in Christ because it doesn't demand charity and repentance from offenders. At bottom, it encourages people to be indifferent to sin and evil. This is why I call it the Devil's Homily.

Before proceeding, some clarifications about our subject.

There are offenses and there are offenses. There are offenses that don't impact our lives much. In Jesus' time, these minor injuries included being ordered by a Roman conqueror to carry something or being slapped by the Roman if one dropped it. These atrocities as they seem to us were the same as some jerk taking the parking space we see first. Jesus warns us not to brood over such things. Indeed to brood over them for more than a few hours or let them wreck our lives is a sign of genuine disturbance.

However, there are also offenses which can impact lives greatly. What hurts a person varies from person to person, but such offenses cost one livelihood, health, companionship, property, dignity, things one needs. They dredge up painful memories. They are direct assaults upon a person's God-given dignity. They bespeak utter contempt and lack of charity on the offender's part. These are the types of offenses I mean in this work. They cry out for contrition, confession and satisfaction.

And when people do admit their guilt and ask for mercy, we are obligated to forgive them. Some may have difficulty and need to pray for God's help in doing so. However, I do believe that most human beings, even those who've never heard of Jesus or a gospel, would forgive a trespasser if they got a proper apology. Getting that always seems to be the impossible part.

Only half the story: Scripture and Forgiveness

Let us take a look at a couple of Scripture passages that seem to advocate Unilateral Reconciliation. Citations are from the *New American Bible* (NAB).

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus says as he is being crucified, "Father forgive them; they do not know what they are doing (23:34)." Notice he doesn't say "I forgive them!" It's easy to interpret this as an act of unconditional forgiveness. "They" don't even have to realize what they've done, yet Jesus wants them to be forgiven!

The problem with that interpretation is: Luke's Gospel is not the

whole story. It is in fact, only half of the work ascribed to Luke, the other half having been separated into *The Acts of The Apostles*. In Acts 2, Peter tells “them” who the Jesus they crucified was. In Acts 2:37, “They” are deeply shaken. The guilt, sorrow and fear hit. They beg Peter, “What are we to do?” Peter answers “You must reform...that your sins may be forgiven.” According to *Luke-Acts*, Jesus asks his father to forgive them, but Peter later in the story makes them aware of their fault and tells them that they must reform. Their forgiveness, even though it is desired and requested by the Son of God, is still conditional!

Let’s now take the 70x7 passage (Matthew 18:21-22) in which Peter asks Jesus how many times he must forgive his brother. One of the other apostles—perhaps Judas—must have been getting on Peter’s nerves. Jesus answers “70x7 times,” taken to mean that there is no limit. It could also mean that one must be so eager to forgive that one hyperbolically *could* do it 70x7 times as in “I’m so thrilled I *could* walk on air!”

If we look at the context of this exchange, we see that it is sandwiched between Jesus’ preaching on fraternal correction and the absolution of sins (Mt. 18:15-18) and his parable of the merciless official (Mt. 18:23-35). The parable illustrates the 70x7 statement. In the former passage, Jesus says that a person who won’t accept fraternal correction should be treated like “a Gentile or a tax collector.” In other words, no “That’s OK.” In fact, a person who is to be treated like a tax collector is in for some sniffiness at the least!

In the parable ensuing the “70x7” statement, the officials plead for mercy that is, they make an effort to obtain forgiveness and pay back their debts. The one servant is not a baddy because he doesn’t forgive; he is a baddy because he doesn’t forgive after he has been “pleaded with.”

That forgiveness requires confession and repentance is not directly stated in Scripture. We have to work at connecting them as above. It’s easy to see how people can take words of Jesus out of context and build a half-true teaching on forgiveness out of them.

Let’s suppose, however, that we could find no written qualifications or conditions of mercy in Scripture. They would still be present in the rest of Jesus’ teaching and in the *New Testament*. Jesus doesn’t preach a world where everybody is allowed to get away with everything. He preaches repentance and threatens Gehenna for those who don’t repent. In his chapter “Hell” in *The Problem of Pain*, CS Lewis writes, “...forgiveness needs to be accepted as well as offered and a man who admits no guilt can accept no forgiveness.”

Jesus preaches change of heart and beatitude. He lays down rules of conduct. He tasks his followers with preaching his Kingdom to everybody. He starts a church to transform the world. His apostles write about the necessity of charity.

Jesus also institutes the Sacrament of Confession. Why do this if the God of love and mercy, a God whom we must imitate in forgiving trespasses, is a God who forgives unconditionally? God’s mercy, as *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1450-1460 tell us requires contrition, confession and satisfaction.

What Are We To Do?

In spite of papal efforts to restore the authentic teaching and scholarship of the church that were lost due to misconceptions about the last council, there are still many homilists and other “teachers” preaching partial truths about the faith. Catholics of many stripes take one aspect of the faith and inflate it into the whole faith. With Catholics getting more intellectually involved in their faith through classes, media, small communities, half-truths spread rapidly and become entrenched. Yes, God loves us and is merciful, but there are many buts. If people are going to ask “What Would Jesus Do?” people should know and understand what Jesus did.

Catholics need to read a Catholic bible, preferably the NAB, a good Catholic commentary*, the *Catechism* and the doctors. They also need to use their God-given heads. Any teaching which logically leads to a God who pardons everybody unconditionally also negates the existential realities of church, moral responsibility and free will.

Most Catholics need to get beyond their primitive moral thinking of “No killing, no stealing, no contraception, everything else is OK.” Morality is not only a matter of acts but also a matter of beatitude, human dignity and charity. God put us here to know him, love him and serve him. (Bearing that in mind is a good way to maintain a balanced faith.) We do so by building His Kingdom here so that souls can be saved. We must be smart enough about morality to judge every human act and situation as either a help or a hindrance to that task.

Most Catholics also need to get beyond their narrow understanding of charity and love. Just as neither merely mean writing checks or collecting canned goods, neither mean indulgence and making people feel good. Both involve concern for the health of souls and desire for all to be saved. They sometimes necessitate unpleasant things such as punishment and two things that need to be discovered and developed, fraternal correction and peacemaking.

As we are all sinners, all of us need to pray regularly that God will enable us to recognize our sinful and hurtful acts and give us the grace to hasten to apologize and make up for them. Meditating on the first Sorrowful Mystery of the Rosary, the Agony in the Garden suffered by Christ because of our sins, is a good way to ask for the help and intercession of the Blessed Mother in doing this.

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*The very thick with small print, *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture* published by Thomas B. Nelson in the early-mid 1950s is a great pre-conciliar resource. It contains none of the omissions or erroneous or politically correct interpretations so common in the decades after the Second Vatican Council. I got my copy on Ebay.

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