



# The Holy See

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APOSTOLIC JOURNEY

TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AND CANADA **HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II** *University of New Orleans*

*Saturday, 12 September 1987*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,* 1. This plea is heard twice in *the Gospel parable*. The first time it is made by the servant who owes his master ten thousand talents – an astonishingly high sum according to the value of money in New Testament times. Shortly afterwards the plea is repeated by another servant of the same master. He too is in debt, not to his master, but to his fellow servant. And his debt is only a tiny fraction of the debt that his fellow servant had been forgiven. The point of the parable is the fact that the servant with the greater debt receives understanding from the master to whom he owes much money. The Gospel tells us that "the master let the official go and wrote off the debt", yet that same servant would not listen to the plea of his fellow servant who owed him money. He had *no pity* on him, but "had him put in jail until he paid back what he owed". Jesus often used parables like this one in his teaching; they are a *special method of proclaiming the Good News*. They enable the listener to grasp more easily the "Divine Reality" which Jesus came to reveal. In today's parable, we sense almost immediately that it is a prelude to the words which Jesus commands us to use when we pray to our heavenly Father: "*forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors*". These words from the "Our Father" also have something very important to teach us. If we want God to hear us when we plead like the servant – "Have patience with me" – then we must be equally willing to listen to our neighbour when he pleads: "Give me time and I will pay you back in full". *Otherwise we cannot expect pardon from God*, but punishment instead. In the parable the servant is punished because, though a debtor himself, he is intolerant as a creditor towards his fellow servant. Christ is very clear: when we ourselves are without sympathy or mercy, when we are guided by "blind" justice alone, then we cannot count on the mercy of that "Great Creditor" who is God–God, before whom we are all debtors. 2. In the parable, we find two different standards or ways of measuring: *God's standard and man's standard*. The divine standard is one in which justice is totally permeated by *merciful love*. The human standard is inclined to stop at justice alone – justice which is without mercy, and which in a sense is "blind" with regard to man. Indeed, human justice is often governed by *hatred and revenge*, as the first reading from the Book of Sirach reminds us. It reads – and the words of the

Old Testament are strong – "Should a man nourish anger against his fellow and expect healing from the Lord? ... If he who is but flesh cherishes wrath, who will forgive his sins? ... Remember your last days, set enmity aside... Think of the commandments, hate not your neighbour... Should a man refuse mercy to his fellows, yet seek pardon for his own sins?" (*Sir.* 28, 3. 5-7. 4). The exhortations in the Book of Sirach and in the Gospel both move in the same direction. The human way of measuring – the measure of justice alone – which is often "blind" or "blinded" by hatred – must accept God's standard. Otherwise justice by itself easily becomes injustice, as we see expressed in the Latin saying: *summum ius, summa iniuria*. The rigorous application of the law can sometimes be the height of injustice. As I said in my Encyclical Letter on the Mercy of God: "In every sphere of interpersonal relationships justice, must, so to speak, be 'corrected' to a considerable extent by that love which, as Saint Paul proclaims, 'is patient and kind' or, in other words, possesses the characteristics of that merciful love which is so much of the essence of the Gospel and Christianity" (Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Dives in Misericordia*, 14). 3. Merciful love is also the basis of the Lord's answer to Peter's question: "When my brother wrongs me, how often must I forgive him? Seven times?" "No", Jesus replied, "*not seven times; I say, seventy times seven times*" (*Matth.* 18, 21-22). In the symbolic language of the Bible, this means that we must be able to forgive everyone every time. Surely this is one of the most difficult and radical commands of the Gospel. Yet how much suffering and anguish, how much futility, destruction and violence would be avoided, if only we put into practice in all our human relationships the Lord's answer to Peter. Merciful love is absolutely necessary, in particular, for people who are close to one another: for husbands and wives, parents and children, and among friends (Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Dives in Misericordia*, 14). At a time when family life is under such great stress, when a high number of divorces and broken homes are a sad fact of life, we must ask ourselves whether human relationships are being based, as they should be, on the merciful love and forgiveness revealed by God in Jesus Christ. We must examine our own heart and see how willing we are to forgive and to accept forgiveness in this world as well as in the next. No relationship as intense and close as marriage and the family can survive without forgiveness "seventy times seven times". If couples cannot forgive with the tenderness and sensitivity that mercy brings, then they will inevitably begin to see their relationship only in terms of justice, of what is mine and what is yours – emotionally, spiritually and materially – and in terms of real or perceived injustices. This can lead to estrangement and divorce, and often develops into a bitter dispute about property and, more tragically, about children. The plight of the children alone should make us realize that the refusal to forgive is not in keeping with the true nature of marriage as God established it and as he wants it to be lived. No doubt some people will object that Christ's teaching about the indissolubility of marriage, as it is upheld by the Church, is lacking in compassion. But what must be seen is the ineffectiveness of divorce, and its ready availability in modern society, to bring mercy and forgiveness and healing to so many couples and their children, in whose troubled lives there remain a brokenness and a suffering that will not go away. The words of the merciful Christ, who fully understands the human heart, remain forever: "What therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder". At the same time, merciful love and forgiveness are never meant to cancel out a person's right to justice, even in marriage. In the encyclical to which I referred a moment ago I

said that "properly understood, justice constitutes... the goal of forgiveness. In no passage of the Gospel message does forgiveness or mercy... mean indulgence towards evil, scandals, injury or insult... Reparation for evil and scandal, compensation for injury, and satisfaction for insult are conditions for forgiveness " (Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Dives in Misericordia*, 14). This also applies in the wider context of *social, political, cultural and economic life* within and among nations and peoples. May we not hope for what Pope Paul VI described as the " civilization of love" instead of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth", the attitude which ravages the face of the earth and scars the family of mankind? As I have said, this love, based on the forgiveness which Jesus described to Peter, does not mean that the objective demands of justice, which people legitimately seek, are thereby cancelled out. Sometimes those demands, however, are very complex. A case with special urgency today is the international debt question. As you know, many developing countries are heavily in debt to industrialized nations, and for a variety of reasons are finding it harder and harder to repay their loans. "Blind" justice alone cannot solve this problem in an ethical way that promotes the human good of all parties. Merciful love calls for mutual understanding and a recognition of human priorities and needs, above and beyond the "blind" justice of financial mechanisms. We must arrive at solutions that truly reflect both complete justice and mercy (Cfr. Pont. Comm. "Iustitia et pax" *At the Service of the Human Community: An Ethical Approach to the international Debt Question*, 1986). The nature of the Church's concern in these matters is reflected in the pastoral message on the American economy issued by the bishops of the United States. They say: "We write... as heirs of the biblical prophets who summon us 'to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God' (*Mic.* 6, 8). We speak as moral teachers, not economic technicians. We seek... to lift up the human and ethical dimensions of economic life..." (Episc. Foederatarum Civitatum Americae Septemtrionalis *Economic Justice for All; Catholic Social Teaching and the US Economy*, 4. 7.). To do justice, yes—but also to love. This is at the heart of Christ's message. It is the only way to reach that " civilization of love " that ensures peace for ourselves and if or the world. 4. "Forgive us... as we forgive". The Eucharist which we are celebrating and in which we are taking part is linked to the deepest truth of these words. Each time we participate in the Eucharist, we must translate, as it were, the parable of today's Gospel into the reality of that sacrament which is the "great mystery of faith". When we gather together, we must be aware of how much we are debtors to God the Creator, God the Redeemer. Debtors – first for our Creation, and then for our Redemption. The Psalmist exclaims: "Bless the Lord, o my soul;

and all my being, bless his holy name.

Bless... and forget not all his benefits" (*Ps.* 103 (102), 1-2). This exhortation is directed to each one of us, and at the same time to the whole community of believers. Forget not... the gift of God. Forget not... that you have received his bounty: in Creation –that is to say, in your existence and in all that is in and around you; in Redemption – in that grace of adoption as sons and daughters of God in Christ, at the price of his Cross. When we receive a gift we are a debtor. Indeed we are more than a debtor because it is not possible to repay a gift adequately. And yet we must try. *We must give a gift in return for a gift.* God's generous gift must be repaid by our gift. And our gift, reflecting as it does our great limitations, must aim at imitating the divine generosity, the divine

standard of giving. In Christ our gift must be transformed, so as to unite us with God. The Eucharist is the sacrament of such a *transformation*. Christ himself makes us "an everlasting gift to the Father". Truly this is the great mystery of faith and love. 5. "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors". With these words from the prayer taught to us by the Son of God, I address all those gathered here in New Orleans in the spirit of the Gospel – all those who make up the Eucharistic assemblies of the local Churches of this region. I greet you as the proud heirs of a rich and diverse cultural history, as people who can therefore appreciate the need for merciful love among individuals and groups. Here we have represented the cultures of France and other European nations, of black people, Hispanics and more recently Vietnamese. Today this region continues to be the home of various races and cultures now united in one nation, the United States. Toutes ces races et ces cultures ont enrichi la vie de votre Eglise locale dans le cadre de l'héritage typiquement français que des hommes comme Robert Cavelier, Sieur de la Salle, et Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville, ont apporté sur ce coin de terre il y a plusieurs siècles. Il vous suffit de regarder autour de vous pour comprendre que vous êtes un peuple ayant reçu des dons merveilleux du puissant Mississippi et de son delta fertile, ainsi que des richesses de la mer. Tout cela est pour vous un don de Dieu. Par une sage administration et un usage responsable de ces biens, vous pouvez éprouver de la fierté dans votre travail quand vous gagnez votre subsistance et celle de vos familles. Puissiez-vous continuer à travailler en harmonie pour le bien de la société à laquelle vous appartenez, gardant toujours en mémoire les paroles de la prière du Seigneur: "Pardonne-nous nos offenses, comme nous pardonnons à ceux qui nous ont offensés"! L'homme d'aujourd'hui oublie facilement la mesure, ou plutôt la disproportion, entre ce qu'il a reçu et ce qu'il doit donner. Il s'est tellement grandi à ses propres yeux, il est tellement sûr que tout est l'œuvre de son propre génie et de son propre travail, qu'il ne voit plus Celui qui est l'Alpha et l'Omega, le Commencement et la Fin, Celui qui est la Source première de tout ce qui existe, comme aussi sa Fin dernière, Celui en qui tout ce qui est trouve son sens véritable. Modern man easily forgets that he has received a great gift. Yet, at the base of all that he is and of all that the world is, there is the gift—the free gift of Love. As man loses this awareness, he also forgets the debt and the fact that he is a debtor. He loses his consciousness of sin. Many people today, especially those caught up in a civilization of affluence and pleasure, live as though sin did not exist and as if God did not exist. For this reason we need to listen with special attention to the Letter to the Romans: "None of us lives as his own master and none of us dies as his own master. While we live we are responsible to the Lord, and when we die we die as his servants. Both in life and in death we are the Lord's. That is why Christ died and came to life again, that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living". We must listen carefully to these words of Saint Paul and remember them well. "My Lord, *be patient with me* and I will pay you back in full" "Love is patient; love is kind... Love does not rejoice in what is wrong but rejoices with the truth... Love never fails" (1 Cor. 13, 4. 6. 8). Yes, love is supreme! Amen.

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