

## **Christ's Challenge of Reconciliation**

*A Missionary Commentary on the Sunday Readings*

### **Sunday Readings**

Ezekiel 33:7-9

Psalm 95:1-2, 6-7b, 7c-9

Romans 13:8-10

Matthew 18:15-20

[USCCB link to the Sunday Readings](#)

Today's Gospel emphasizes the centrality of forgiveness and reconciliation for all of Jesus' disciples. A similar message is proclaimed in the second reading drawn from Saint Paul's letter to the Romans which notes that authentic love is the fulfillment of all the commandments.

Note that the Gospel also asserts that the initiative for reconciliation begins with the person who was wronged, not with the one who committed the offense. As Bonhoeffer would assert, the "cost of discipleship" is great and very demanding; there is no "cheap grace." Several concrete examples of heartfelt reconciliation spring to mind.

► Saint John Paul II, along with Saint John XXIII, was canonized on Divine Mercy Sunday on April 27, 2014. Reflecting on the life of John Paul II, one can recall some photographs that seem "essential" to capture key moments of his life. For this author, one such picture is the December 1983 photograph of the pope in his white cassock meeting and shaking hands with a young man clad in a blue sweatshirt. John Paul II met and forgave Mehmet Ali Agca, the Turkish gunman who attempted to assassinate him on May 13, 1981.

► From my fifty-two years of mission work in the Philippines, I recall hearing Bishop Prudencio Andaya, CICM, bishop of Tabuk, Kalinga, Philippines, narrate a unique experience. One Sunday the bishop found an envelope on the altar as he was about to begin Mass. It contained an offering, along with this intention for the Mass: "For the spiritual renewal of the murderer of my son." A mother, in a land where blood feuds and tribal vendettas sometimes still occur, was able to forgive—and even offer a Mass—for the killer of her own son!

► In his book, *The Gift of Peace*, Cardinal Joseph Bernadin of Chicago narrates his experience of reconciliation with Steven Cook on December 30, 1994. Cook, a

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former seminarian, had publicly accused Bernadin of sexual abuse. Bernadin consistently asserted: “I have always led a chaste and celibate life.” Bernadin initiated the meeting with Cook; genuine forgiveness and reconciliation resulted. After the sincere encounter, Bernadin wrote: “Never in my entire priesthood have I witnessed a more profound reconciliation.... It was a manifestation of God’s love, forgiveness, and healing that I will never forget.”

Friends, I narrate these three concrete experiences to encourage all of us to seek reconciliation in the events of our lives—big and small. Struggling to achieve harmonious relationships through authentic forgiveness is not only a vague ideal; mission demands that we take concrete steps to foster genuine reconciliation. As Mother Teresa has noted: “If we really want to love, we must learn how to forgive.”

As narrated in the three true life stories above, John Paul II, the Kalinga mother, and Cardinal Bernadin understood a central tenet of Christian faith. We also must act on our faith convictions; we strive daily to initiate the healing process of reconciliation. We, too, must hear God’s voice and not harden our hearts!

## **Notes on the Sunday Readings**

### **First Reading**

The prophet Ezekiel describes the role of the watchman who was to stand on the border and alert people of any foreign enemy invader. Anyone who provides religious teaching or guidance is likewise such a watchman.

### **Psalm 95**

This psalm encourages us to always have open and generous hearts, not “hard hearts.”

### **Second Reading**

In his letter to the Romans, Saint Paul explains how the virtue of Christian love fulfills the entire law; we only have one debt to pay: the debt of love.

### **Gospel**

Here Saint Matthew elaborates the words of Jesus about the centrality of mutual love and forgiveness among his missionary-disciples.

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