

THE CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO EVIL

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High in the mountains of my mission in Columbio, Sultan Kudarat, on the island of Mindanao, Philippines, is a village called Lasak. There, on November 12, 2000, armed men awoke the family of Mr. and Mrs. Geronimo Eleccion at 4:00 AM and asked for coffee. After drinking their coffee, the armed group commanded the Eleccions to go outside the house, where they were all shot. Geronimo (50 yrs. old) survived to tell the horror. Killed on the spot were his wife Luzviminda (35), his son (16) Richard, his daughter (18) Gemma, Gemma's boyfriend Allan Seroco (34), and Luzviminda's nephew Benjie Sujede (5).

Geronimo feigned death while he observed the movements of the group. He saw that there were over 30 armed men surrounding them. Some of them began looting the house of clothes and cash. The armed men also gathered and set fire to pillows and blankets in the center of the house, intending to burn down the entire structure. When Geronimo saw that the group had left, he struggled to go upstairs, even though seriously wounded in his arms and stomach (his intestines were exposed). In several trips, he managed to fetch about 4 gallons of water and stop the burning. Then he fell under a table, since he could no longer bear the pain of his wounds, which would eventually prove fatal.

The family cannot trace the motives; according to them, they do not have enemies in the community. They are all innocent civilians. As active leaders and members of their local Basic Christian Community, they performed their responsibilities well. The perpetrators were speaking a mixture of languages (Tribal, Muslim, Ilonggo and Cebuano), but Geronimo identified the accent as belonging primarily to the Tribal B'laan and Muslim languages.

Two funeral Masses were celebrated for the victims. The first was shortly after the event itself, and was presided by the Bishop of Kidapawan, Most Reverend Romulo G. Valles. I presided at the second Mass, which took place just before the burial of the victims. During the homily, I tried to address the issue of a Christian response to evil. I said to the people:

"Last week, Bishop Valles mentioned that at times like this, some people, in a search for consolation, cling to the idea that it is all to be accepted as the will of God. The Bishop asserted that in this case, we can state clearly that the massacre of these innocent victims is absolutely NOT the will of God. And Bishop Valles was correct. The death of your loved ones was an evil act, and we know that there is no room for evil in the will of God.

"But this presents each one of us with a great challenge. As Christians, how do we confront evil? What is our reaction as we stand face to face with evil actions? Just as the death of your loved ones is not in the will of God, neither can it be God's will that our reaction is one of hatred or seeking revenge. Yesterday, we celebrated the Feast of

Christ the King, and we know that the Kingdom of God, which is the expression of His will, is a Kingdom of peace, of mercy, of forgiveness and reconciliation.

"Jesus, our King, is also our model. He too was a victim of evil. As he hung upon the cross, he had the power to respond in anger and revenge upon the perpetrators of evil. Instead, he chose to pray for them: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." This is the challenge for each one of us: to face evil with a heart full of goodness and mercy.

"It's not easy. After all, we're only human beings, and we're filled with many emotions at this time. Let us seek the help and the strength of the Lord, to overcome whatever anger and bitterness we feel. Let us be sure that the Lord is with us in our trials, providing us with the grace we need to be true disciples, true witnesses to His Kingdom of love."

Evil remains an obvious reality in our world. Hate-filled people sow terror and violence against the innocent. Deranged zealots give up their own lives in order to take out as many of the "enemy" as possible, whether by suicide bombing or by turning airliners into lethal weapons of destruction. Selfishness and greed are manifested in the oppression and exploitation of the weak and defenseless, in land-grabbing, in unabashed grasping after power and influence. In our personal lives, evil often appears in a simpler but no less insidious and agonizing guise: the person who has hurt me, who has lied to me, who has lied about me, who has betrayed my trust and love, who has used me, who has gossiped about me, who has talked behind my back and stolen my good name, and on and on.

And so the question remains: how do we confront the evil that exists in our world, whether on the global scale or in the nitty-gritty of our daily lives? What does our Christianity call us to do in the face of evil? In order to discover the answer, we need to go back to the experience of Jesus, our teacher and model, the God who became just-like-us. Let's look at what Jesus said, and what he did.

Was there a time in the experience of Jesus when he was betrayed, wounded, weakened, broken? Of course we know there was: it was when he was hanging on the cross. Jesus is a victim of violence, and violence hurts. He's filled with pain; he's been falsely accused; he's been betrayed by a friend, denied by his best friend, abandoned by everyone. He's being mocked and humiliated.

Now here's something interesting. All during his ministry, Jesus preached and taught forgiveness. "You have to forgive," he told people. "If you want to be forgiven, you have to forgive others." Did you notice that when Jesus was hanging on the cross, he never said, "I forgive you" to anyone? Instead, he said, "Father, forgive them..." In the midst of his agony, he didn't rely on upon his own power to forgive the ones who put him there. He was weakened, he was in pain. The hand that he wanted to reach out in forgiveness was nailed down! So he called upon God to forgive them – all of them: not just the ones who nailed them, but the ones who accused him, the one who betrayed him, the ones who denied him, abandoned him, mocked him, spat upon him. He said, "Father, forgive them. I'm not in a position to forgive them myself, so you have to do it."

It's important to recognize here that Jesus made a *choice* to pray for the ones who hurt him. He was weakened, yes, but he wasn't completely without strength. There was still some breath left in him, and there are a lot of things he could have chosen to do with that breath. He could have cursed the high priests who started all this. He might have looked down and seen one of the soldiers who had spat upon him, and spat back at him. He could have blamed his disciples for running away. But he didn't do any of that. He *chose* to remain in communion with God (even though he *felt* abandoned by God), and to call upon God to offer the forgiveness that he could not.

On the cross, Jesus did exactly what he had been preaching in his ministry: *But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.* (Lk 6:27-28) We know that it's difficult to forgive one who has hurt us, for a very simple reason: when someone has hurt me...I'm hurt! Sin is violence of one kind or another, and violence causes pain. Often, even if we want to forgive, we don't have the strength, we don't have the energy. Here, Jesus gives a kind of prescription for what to do in the meantime. How do we treat the one who has hurt us, even when we don't yet feel capable of forgiving him or her?

"Love your enemies," Jesus says. That means, do good to them, speak well of them, pray for them. Now we're no longer on the level of feeling, but rather on the level of behavior, the level of choices. Even if I don't *feel* forgiveness toward that person, I can still choose to do good, to speak well, to pray for him or her. I can resist the urge to seek revenge, to wish evil upon that person, to talk badly about him or her.

And I can pray. I can pray that God will forgive that person even though I can't...at this moment. I can pray that the person will change if necessary, so that others will not be hurt. And I can pray for healing. The goal of my prayer isn't really the resolution of some problem. The effectiveness of my prayer is really that it opens *me* up to the gratuitous, indiscriminate, lavish love of my Father, my *abba*. Sometimes I might be praying in tears, because I'm still hurting. I might be praying in rage, because I'm still angry. I might be praying in fear, because I still have some lingering doubts about how a loving God could have allowed this to happen in the first place. But through it all, I'm praying, and that's a choice I make.

Let's stay with Jesus on the cross a while longer, because there's something else very important for us to see here. Jesus says, "Father, forgive them." And what was the response of the crowd? The soldiers divided his garments, rolling dice for them. The people began to jeer at him: "He saved others, let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, the chosen one." They gave him sour wine to drink, and continued to mock him: "If you're the King of the Jews, save yourself!"

This was the crowd's response to Jesus' prayer that God forgive them. They either ignored him, or they laughed at him, and took away the last vestiges of his dignity – his clothes. And they invited him to enter into the cycle of violence by "saving himself."

Seeing this reaction, Jesus could have said, "OK, I tried. Father, you know that prayer I just made about forgiving these people? Well, cancel it. They don't care." But

of course, Jesus did not do that. Instead, he said, "Father, into your hands, I commend my spirit."

You see, the choice of Jesus for forgiveness is not based upon the response of the ones forgiven. It's based upon the overwhelming love of his abba. That's what has formed the foundation of his life; that's what he's forged throughout his life by seeking communion with the Father. That's why, even at his weakest, most wounded moment, even at the moment he feels abandoned by God, he refuses to enter into the cycle of violence. He prays for the forgiveness of his persecutors and continues to seek that forgiveness even when there's no positive response from the ones forgiven.

What do we do when, after we've forgiven someone, there's no repentance, no change, no positive response. We know very well what we normally do. We say, "Hey, I tried. I really tried. I put aside my anger and hurt feelings. I tried to speak well of you, and do good for you, even to pray for you. And you're just as rotten as you've ever been. Well, now it's my turn." So, the question that comes before us is: what's the reasonable limit to my forgiveness?

It's rather like the question that Peter asked Jesus one time: "Lord, when my brother or sister wrongs me, how often must I forgive? Seven times?" Now, Peter is being pretty generous here. Seven times is a lot. Most of us might make it to forgiving someone two times, maybe three on a good day. But of course, the real question that Peter is asking is: when can I stop? When is it OK for me to quit forgiving?

I don't think this question came out of the blue sky for Peter, and I don't think it was theoretical at all. I think Peter was having a bad day. I think John was getting on his nerves, or Andrew was talking about him behind his back, or Matthew was looking down him because he was a simple fisherman, or...well, we know he had a mother-in-law. I think Peter was at the end of his patience. So, what he wanted to know is: "When can I stop forgiving? Just give me the word, and then, watch out!"

And Jesus answers, "Peter, you can never stop. Not seven times, but seventy times seven times. You can never stop forgiving, regardless of the response you get, because as soon as you stop, you become...you become like this man who owed his master a lot of money and...

...as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made.

So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And moved with pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.

But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.'

Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt.

When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place.

Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. (Mt. 18: 24-34)

Jesus says, you can never stop forgiving or else you become like this man. You can never stop, because if you do, then *you* enter into the cycle of violence (he seized him and throttled him) and you get trapped there, imprisoned by the very cycle of violence you chose to enter. You can never stop forgiving because that's the way your Father – your abba – loves you. You can never stop forgiving because the salvation of the world depends upon it!

This is what Jesus preached, and this is what Jesus did. Let's go back to the cross again. Jesus is hanging there, too weak to forgive, but with enough strength to remain in communion with God, and he calls upon his abba to forgive. The crowd doesn't accept the forgiveness. Instead, they try to entice Jesus into the cycle of violence: "He saved others, let him save himself, if he is the Messiah, the chosen of God. ...If you're the King of the Jews, save yourself."

There's something very familiar about these words. Do you remember, right after Jesus was baptized, he was filled with the Holy Spirit, and he was led by the Spirit into desert, where he was tempted by the devil?

He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please.

If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him to await another opportunity. (Lk. 4:2-13)

We know that Jesus resisted this temptation of the devil, the temptation to test his abba's love, the temptation to try to prove that he was worthy to be called God's

son. But at the end of this passage, there's a very interesting phrase: "When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him, *to await another opportunity.*"

Here it is. Here's the devil's chance: while Jesus is hanging on the cross. You see, the first time was right after Jesus' baptism in the Jordan. He was filled with the Holy Spirit; he had just heard a voice from heaven say, "You are my Beloved Son. On you my favor rests." Jesus might have been hungry, but he was strong, sure, confident of his abba's love for him.

But now Jesus is weak; he's beaten, broken, a physical and emotional wreck. That voice calling him the Beloved Son is just a memory; it's distant, far off, hard to hear. What better time for Satan, the Father of Lies, the Great Confuser, to find an opportunity? What better time to tempt Jesus once again to forget his sonship, to forget what it means to be the son of his abba, to enter into the cycle of violence?

"If you are the Son of God, come down from that cross. Show your power. Overcome your enemies. You've made your point. You've been pushed far enough. It's your turn now. Show them what happens when they mess with God's Son. You have justice on your side, after all. You're innocent, they're guilty. You're right, they're wrong! At least curse them. Do *something* to strike back." That's what the devil wanted, that's the victory he was after; and that's what Jesus wouldn't give him.

"He saved others, let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, the chosen one." If only they knew that it was precisely *because* Jesus would *not* save himself, would not enter into the cycle of violence, that he saved others. If only they knew that it was precisely *because* he would *not* come down, would not seek revenge, would not strike back, that he showed himself to be the Messiah of God, the chosen one, the son of his abba.

The first temptation of the devil (in the desert) was for Jesus to believe that he had to earn his abba's love. The last temptation (on the cross) was for him to believe that other people had to earn his.

When we think of the temptations of Jesus in this way, we can realize that they are not really so different from our own. How often are we tempted to forget God's love for us? In moments of trial and suffering, how often are we tempted to think that maybe God doesn't really care about us? How often are we tempted to forget that God's love for us is an unconditional free gift? How often are we tempted to believe that we have to earn God's love, or that others have to earn ours? How often are we tempted to forget that God alone is the center of the lives, the meaning of our existence? How often are we tempted to look for that meaning in other things: in wealth, in power, in prestige or honor?

Those are the temptations that the Father of Lies, the Great Confuser, presents to each of us. Often, it's when we're at our weakest, our most wounded, our most vulnerable, that he finds his opportunity to entice us into the cycle of violence. Under the guise of righteousness, the victim of sin becomes sinner. That's the victory he seeks. But if we're able to resist; if we're able to refuse to enter the cycle of violence, resist the urge for revenge, the urge to strike back; if, in the midst of our pain, we're able to hear the distant voice from heaven that says, "You are my beloved child"; we

not only keep ourselves from being imprisoned in the cycle of violence, we begin to participate in the salvation of the world.

Note: The following sources provided ideas and inspiration for this reflection:

Robert J. Schreiter, *Reconciliation, Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992)

Joan Mueller, *Why Can't I Forgive You?* (Allen, Texas: Thomas More Publishing, 1996)

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