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“How often must I forgive?” (Matt 18:21).

*Dan 3:25, 34-43; Matt 18:21-35*

### **Feast of St. Patrick**

Among the more inspiring stories of human courage are those about victims of violence who have transformed their suffering into compassion for their persecutors. St. Patrick was one of these courageous people. He spent six years as a slave in Ireland before escaping to Britain. After he became a priest, he returned to Ireland to convert the pagan clans there. We can only imagine the depth of commitment that moved him to take up this mission.

Today’s Gospel is one of the most powerful parables about why we are to forgive. The servant who was forgiven a huge debt forgot the mercy he received when confronting a fellow servant who owed him a fraction of his own debt. We are to be merciful with one another because God has already been extravagantly and unconditionally merciful to us.

What gives this parable a special twist is that it was addressed to Peter, who had asked Jesus how many times he was obligated to forgive a brother who offended him. Peter, among all the Apostles, received full pardon after denying Jesus on the eve of his crucifixion. Jesus turned this failure into the basis for Peter’s leadership of the Apostles sent to preach God’s mercy. He, above all, knew the depth to which God’s forgiveness had reached to rescue him and make him an evangelist for forgiveness.

Pope Francis, who now stands in the role of Peter, has often called himself a sinner and linked his emphasis on mercy to his own experience of being forgiven. His papal motto is *Miserando atque eligendo*, "Seeing him with mercy, he chose him." This theme has driven the pope's mission to transform the church from being a judge to be the face of God's mercy.

Forgiveness is less an action than a habit of being, an inner disposition made possible by grace. If we have experienced the power of mercy, we can never turn away from someone in need of our forgiveness. St. Patrick, like St. Peter, became a compassionate pastor because he himself had experienced suffering and knew the liberating power of God's love. We honor them by imitating them.

A quiet, reflective St. Patrick's Day will also honor the saint and contribute to containing and mitigating the pandemic we face together. The Irish are a convivial and close-knit people, so, as my late Irish father often said, we will have something to offer up this year for the good of all.

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