NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

Forgiveness is the only way to begin

Michael Leach | Apr. 9, 2013 Soul Seeing

Dear Father Francis,

If I may, I address you as Father rather than Your Holiness because when you were cardinal you asked your flock to call you Father rather than Your Eminence. What a beautiful symbol that word can be! I was blessed with a father who loved me unconditionally and taught me by his example what it means to pray to God as "Our Father."

You also rode a bus throughout Buenos Aires, Argentina, to visit the sick, feed the hungry, and go to work. You must have received words of gratitude, plenty of requests, and lots of suggestions from your traveling companions. This letter from a fellow traveler on the way is in gratitude for the example of your simplicity and also a suggestion. Please consider it.

Begin your new vocation as leader of the church with a worldwide Forgiveness Mass. Forgiveness is the only way to begin anew, and you have proven how much you appreciate its healing value. I loved reading how after you became pope you urged confessors in the basilica to "be merciful -- the souls of the faithful need your mercy." It's clear you are a pastor who treasures the words of Jesus to his disciples: "I desire mercy and not sacrifice" (Matthew 12:7). In your first sermon you shared the story of a very old woman who taught you, "The Lord forgives everything." As archbishop, you scolded those priests who refused to baptize the babies of unwed mothers. You also knelt at the deathbed of a bishop who had left the church in scandal to marry, who had become poor and alone, and you comforted him. You even joked with the cardinals who had elected you pope, "May God forgive you for what you have done!" You know the power of forgiveness.

I suggest that you propose a Forgiveness Sunday, as soon as possible in every church in the world where each of us can ask for forgiveness and give forgiveness and receive forgiveness through a general absolution. A month after your announcement, it can happen something like this:

Every church has set up television screens at the sides of the altar, or radio speakers. You are presiding at the same Forgiveness Mass in St. Peter's Basilica that is televised to the churches and the world.

You and the ministers lead the people in prayer: "I confess to Almighty God ... "

At the end of the Confiteor those of us in the pews observe your face on TV as you ask forgiveness on behalf of the church for all those it has hurt, living and dead. You acknowledge the church's sins against children, and beg forgiveness from them and their families, in the heart of Jesus. You also ask for and give forgiveness to all the women and men who did not have the means to get annulments and so divorced and remarried, and encourage them to receive Communion again, no strings attached. This is something you have dreamed of doing for a long time, and it is clear: "Now is the acceptable time!" (2 Corinthians 6:2)

You ask each of us to recognize and regret our own sins, and redirect ourselves to God who is unconditional

love. We bow our heads and recognize our wasted angers, our sad lusts, our worthless greed, and become aware that we still hold others, living or dead, in bondage to resentments. We confess our darkness to God and lay our sins on the altar of Love where they immediately become "as white as snow" (Isaiah 1:18).

"Lord, have mercy ... Christ, have mercy ... Lord, have mercy ..."

The lectors read: "Neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord!" (Romans 8:38-39).

The deacons read the Gospel of the adulteress whom Jesus saved from stoning.

Then, Father Francis, you speak and remind us as you did in your first Sunday sermon as pope, of the breathtaking truth that we can never hear enough: When Jesus gave the adulteress new life, he didn't say, "Sin no more and I will not condemn you." He said, "I do not condemn you. Now go and sin no more." We first experience God's love, and then our life changes forever. "Mercy," you said, "is the Lord's most powerful message." Love begins with forgiveness, unearned and freely given. It is the meaning of Christ's life, death and resurrection.

At the Lord's Prayer, everyone looks at their neighbor and says, "Forgive me." Forgiveness received, they say in kind, "I forgive you." They embrace. The world embraces.

Before Communion you grant a general absolution to all of God's children in all the churches in all the world. Forgiveness becomes an almighty force that opens hearts, cleanses minds and inspires action. Just like Mary Magdalene, we are free to go and sin no more! Everybody starts from scratch. This is the only way the church ? or anyone ? can be born again.

In Eucharist we then share with gratitude the one body of Christ of which we are inseparable members (1 Corinthians 12:12-14).

At the end of the Mass you tell us all, "Go and give what God has given you!"

Forgiveness becomes a theme of our lives. The church can now ask forgiveness of those it has marginalized, judged and condemned with verbal stones. It announces God's love and forgiveness of every woman, living or dead, who has made the gut-wrenching, life-shattering decision to have an abortion. Catholics everywhere tire of blaming those who disagree or dissent or are different, and set them free by no longer holding them hostage in their consciousness. Free again. Free to be loved and love again. By practicing what it preaches, the church not only draws more people to a loving God but is now able to reach out to other religions without wanting anything in return.

Little miracles begin to happen. Liberal reform groups invite members of conservative groups to engage in dialogue at conferences. They eat together. Forgiveness is an energy, and energy transforms itself into other forms of energy: words, behaviors, healings. People treat each other with respect. Peace extinguishes anger, love overcomes fear. The consciousness of forgiveness becomes a collective consciousness, and someday, who knows, the Cosmic Consciousness it always is but we didn't recognize because we failed to accept and affirm the forgiveness that has always been ours. And someday, who knows, the words of Teilhard de Chardin, will come to life:

"Someday, after mastering the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity, we shall harness for God the energies of

love, and then, for a second time in the history of the world, man will have discovered fire!"

With love in Christ,
Michael Leach

[Michael Leach is shepherd of the Soul Seeing column for *NCR* and author of *Why Stay Catholic?: Unexpected Answers to a Life-Changing Question*, voted the best Popular Presentation of the Catholic Faith in 2012 by the Catholic Press Association.]

Source URL (retrieved on *12/05/2016 - 10:33*): https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/soul-seeing/forgiveness-only-way-begin?splash=