ILLUSTRATION BY ANNA ROSE

Forgiving from the heart

Miracles can happen when you really forgive.

by Patrick Madrid

Alex was an unrepentant prodigal son who seemed hellbent on his own spiritual destruction.

He knew he was in serious trouble when he stepped into the kitchen and looked down at his shirt. Ten minutes earlier it had been white. Now blood, a lot of blood, had splashed on his shirt, his shoes, and trousers. He looked down at his hands and watched them tremble under the overwhelming weight of guilt. The butcher's knife slipped from his fingers and clattered on the floor.

Forgiving like Christ

In another room, lying in a fetal position, was the 12-year-old girl Alex had just stabbed 14 times. She had rejected his attempted seduction, so he had pulled a knife and attacked her. The following day, she died from her wounds — her body wracked with pain.

But her mind remained lucid and her heart brimmed with Christlike love that day as she forgave Alex from her heart and whispered, "For the love of Jesus I forgive him. I want him to be with me in paradise."

That girl's name was Maria Goretti. Alex, her 19-year-old murderer, is better known as Alessandro Serenelli, the would-be rapist who stabbed her to death. He was arrested, tried, and sentenced to 30 years in prison for his crime — a crime for which he showed absolutely no remorse.

But God's grace is stronger than man's sin, and His forgiveness is stronger than the hardest of hearts. Alex's rebellion was no match for God's merciful love.

Repenting from the heart

Saint Maria Goretti appeared to Alex in his cell when he was eight years into his prison term to remind him of her forgiveness. He repented on the spot, turned his heart to Christ, and lived the next 19 years of his prison term as a devout Catholic.

When he was released from prison, Alex went straight to Maria's mother to beg her forgiveness. He was also present as a witness to the power of forgiveness in St. Peter's Square where, in 1950, Maria Goretti was canonized by the pope.

What was it that penetrated his heart of iron? The grace of forgiveness — the greatest gift God our Father can give His rebellious children. Through St. Maria Goretti's heroic martyrdom and forgiveness of her murderer, God the Father reenacted for us the profound drama of the prodigal son.

The Father proved again how eager He is to forgive and reconcile all sinners to Himself. He loves us, no matter how enormous and vile our sins, and He invites us back to His house.

Recognizing our need

Alessandro Serenelli had been a prodigal son. He had left his Father's house, squandered the riches of grace that were given him in the Sacraments, and lived in the mud with the swine as he committed his many sins.

He had become defiant and unrepentant. His life was a seething cauldron of sin. Greed, lust, anger, sensuality, laziness, and murder boiled within him.

But, sadly, you and I play this role, too. We may not commit murder, as Alex did, but to greater or lesser extents, we are all prodigal children in desperate need of mercy and forgiveness.

This sad reality has a long history. But so does the happy ending for those who return to God, and through repentance accept His infinite mercy. In the aftermath of Adam and Eve committing the original sin, we see this drama played out for the first time. They hide themselves from God in fear and shame. (See Gen 3:8-9.)

When we rebel against God through sin, we're right back there in the garden — naked, cowering, and afraid of God's judgment. But God our Father wants to conquer our fear with His love. He wants to rescue us from where we're stranded in sin, afraid to come home. He wants so much to heal our self-inflicted wounds of sin and restore our supernatural health. And, just as He promised Adam and Eve He would (see Gen 3:15), He provided the way for this to happen: by Christ's sacrifice on the cross.

Coming home

The cross is the sign and seal of God the Father's mercy and forgiveness. No matter how big the sin, no matter how deep the shame we feel, He opens His arms to us and beckons, "Come home! I love you! Let Me embrace you!"

As we're told in Scripture, we should never be afraid to turn from our sins, no matter how bad they may be, and come home to our Father:

> The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. ... As far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove our sins from us (Ps 103:8, 12).

Mercy and forgiveness are gigantic themes in the Gospels. Christ constantly reminds us that the Father's mercy is not a one-way street. God's mercy must permeate *us* and be lived out daily in the way we treat our neighbor. It's crucial to remember that just as God is always ready, waiting with open arms to forgive and forget our sins, He expects us to have the exact same attitude toward others.

Forgiving again and again

When St. Peter asked Jesus, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus responded, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven" (Mt 18:21-22). In other words, "Be always ready to forgive your brother, just as your Father in heaven is always ready to forgive you."

Let's not forget Christ's cautionary story of the unforgiving servant who was brought before the king because he owed him a large sum. As he could not pay, the servant implored mercy, and the king canceled the debt. (See Mt 18:23-35.)

But then the man did not extend the same mercy toward his fellow servant who owed him a small sum. He was not forgiving, and he got into big trouble because of it.

"You worthless wretch!" the king rebuked him, "I canceled your entire debt when you pleaded with me. Should you not have dealt mercifully with your fellow servant, as I dealt with you?" Christ adds, "Then in anger the master handed him over to the torturers until he paid back all that he owed. My heavenly Father will treat you the same way unless each of you forgives his brother from his heart" (Mt 18:32-35).

Transformed by God's mercy

The call to forgive from the heart — what a powerful lesson this is! When we prodigals repent and return to our Father's house, we receive from His loving heart the infinite riches of grace and peace. Then, as we forgive others from the heart, we become instruments of the Father's mercy as it overflows from us and touches the lives of others.

Like St. Maria Goretti and Alessandro Serenelli, we discover how Divine Mercy can transform even hardened hearts through the miracle of forgiveness. ✝

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