

"Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" (Mt. 18:21)

Chapter 18 of Matthew's Gospel is a very rich text in which Jesus gives instructions to the disciples regarding how to live out relationships within their new-born community. Peter's question refers back to what Jesus had said a little earlier: "If your brother or sister sins against you...". As Jesus is speaking, Peter interrupts him as if he realises that he has not fully understood what his Master has just said. He asks Jesus one of the most relevant questions about the path that a disciple of his must walk. How many times must you forgive?

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Questioning is part of the journey of faith. Those who believe do not have all the answers but remain faithful despite the questions. Peter is not asking about sin against God, but rather about what to do when a member of the community commits a sin against another. He thinks he is a good disciple who can go so far as to forgive up to seven times. He is taken aback by Jesus' immediate response which challenges his certainties. "I do not say to you up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven" (Mt.18: 22). The disciples were familiar with the words of Lamech, the bloodthirsty son of Cain, who sings of the repetition of vengeance seventy times seven. Alluding to this very statement, Jesus contrasts unlimited vengeance with infinite forgiveness.

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It is not a question of forgiving a person who continually offends, but rather of always having an attitude of forgiveness in our hearts. True forgiveness, the kind that makes us feel free, usually comes in stages. It is not a feeling, it is not forgetting: it is the choice that the believer should make, not only when the offence is repeated, but also every time it comes back to mind. This is why it is necessary to forgive seventy times seven.

Chiara Lubich writes: *"Jesus ... above all, was thinking about the relationships among Christians, among members of the same community. Therefore, first of all, we are called to behave in this way with our brothers and sisters in faith - in the family, at work, at school or if we are part of one, in our community. You know how often we want to react to or 'pay back' an offence with a negative action or remark. You know how failures of love are common among people who live together, because of differences in character, or irritability, or other causes. Well, remember that only a constant attitude of forgiveness, renewed each day, can maintain peace and unity*

among neighbours. We will always have a tendency to think about the faults of our brothers and sisters, to remember their past and want them to be different from the way they are... We need to acquire the habit of seeing them with new eyes and as new people, accepting them always and immediately and to the end, even if they do not repent."

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sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?**

All of us are part of a community of 'forgiven' people because forgiveness, which we always need, is a gift from God. We should always be amazed at the immensity of the mercy of the Father who forgives us if we also forgive our brothers and sisters.

There are situations in which it is not easy to forgive, events that arise from political, social and economic conditions in which forgiveness can take on a community dimension. There are many examples of women and men who have managed to forgive even in the most difficult contexts, helped by the community that has supported them.

Osvaldo is Colombian. He received death threats and saw his own brother being killed. Today he is the head of a farmers' association, where he works to rehabilitate people who were directly involved in his country's armed conflict.

"It would have been easy to respond to a vendetta with still more violence, but I said no," explains Osvaldo. "Learning the art of forgiveness is very, very difficult, but weapons and war are never an option to transform life. The road to transformation is another. It is being able to touch the human soul of the other person, and to do this you don't need pride or power: you need humility, which is the most difficult virtue to acquire."

Letizia Magri