

Homily for the 24th Sunday of the Year - Cycle C
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
September 11, 2022

† Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois

Reverend Fathers and Deacons, consecrated religious, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

On May 13, 1981, a young Turkish man by the name of Mehmet Ali Ağca sat calmly writing postcards in Saint Peter's Square in Rome. He had killed before and, having escaped from prison, he was ready to kill again. As the white "popemobile" slowly made its way through the crowd, Ağca aimed his semi-automatic pistol and discharged it. Two bullets hit Pope St. John Paul II in the hand and arm. Two more tore through his body, narrowly missing his heart. That he survived was a miracle.

Yet there was something even more miraculous. Pope St. John Paul forgave Ağca, and, as soon as he recovered, went to the prison to meet him face to face. He held his hand, the very hand that had held the gun, and talked to him for more than twenty minutes. When, nineteen years later, Ağca was pardoned by the Italian authorities, it was at St John Paul's request. Because Ağca was a professional assassin, St. John Paul recognized

that the real culprits were those who had ordered the shooting. Ağca was deported to Turkey to serve out his earlier sentence. Yet the experience of forgiveness had a profound effect on him, and many years after the attempted assassination – twenty-six years to the day – Ağca was received into the Catholic Church. As soon as he was released from his Turkish jail, he returned to Italy to lay flowers on the tomb of St John Paul II.

In this controversial act of forgiveness, Saint John Paul was living out today's Gospel, the parable of the prodigal son, where a father forgives his headstrong son and reinstates him within the family. Parables were Jesus' preferred teaching method. They captivated his listeners, though to some this lesson on forgiveness might have sounded extreme. After all, the prodigal son came back only because he was feeling sorry for himself. No doubt it offended people's sense of justice that, having rejected his family, the young man should be welcomed home.

Who was this soft-hearted father Jesus was talking about? Our heavenly Father, of course. Jesus was trying to convey what God was like to people who imagined God to be exacting and vengeful. God is not like that, Jesus was saying. Our heavenly Father is like any parent who believes in the essential goodness of their wayward child. Divine justice is satisfied, not

when sinners come to a bad end, but when they turn their lives around. More than patient, Jesus was suggesting that God actually goes searching to bring sinners home. And to be sure people heard this correctly, Jesus related the same message three times over. First, it was a story about a shepherd going after a strayed sheep; then, about a woman searching frantically for a lost coin; finally, about a father who runs to embrace his lost son. Each parable ends, not in reprimand, but in rejoicing. The message is clear: God longs for the wayward to return to the right path.

What is not stated is whether the prodigal son ever did return to the right path. The point of the parable is telling us about grace - God's grace - given without condition, a generosity we are meant to imitate. By including the resentful older brother in this parable, Jesus clearly means for us to try to let go of our grudges, even if it means a struggle. After all, forgiveness can transform people - as it did Mehmet Ali Ağca - even if there are no guarantees that they will be changed for the better. All we can be sure of is that, in the struggle to forgive, at least we will be changed for the better

Some people may identify with the prodigal son, especially if they feel in need of forgiveness themselves. Others sympathize with the older brother, whose outrage mirrors what they may be feeling when they see

innocent people suffer and guilty people let off lightly. This parable challenges us all. In challenging us, Jesus is not asking us to abandon our sense of right and wrong, but to allow mercy to play its part. He may be asking us to take an empathetic leap, to try to understand what it may be like for wrongdoers to endure the consequences of their own poor choices and to own up to them. We may be asked to sense something of their inner struggle, for many people long to “come home” to who they really are. They may be looking for someone like us, someone gracious enough to help them take that first step.

Here at the Cathedral, we have times scheduled for the Sacrament of Penance every day. Many people avail themselves of these opportunities to experience God’s healing forgiveness imparted through the ministry of the priest who is the minister of God’s justice and mercy. You do not need to wait for Advent or Lent to confess your sins and receive sacramental absolution. If you have not been to confession in a while, today’s Gospel message is an invitation to come back to this bounteous font of God’s grace.

May God give us this grace. Amen.