

Commentary on the Gospel for Thu, Aug 13th 2015

St. Hippolytus, whose feast along with St. Pontian is today, formed a schismatic group after Pope Callistus was elected in 217. This action earned him the title of the first “antipope.” Hippolytus scorned Callistus for his leniency to some who were guilty of serious sexual transgressions.

Forgiveness and reunion came about when both Hippolytus and Pontian were arrested by the Emperor Maximus. In 235 they both died in captivity. Earlier Pontian had resigned as Bishop of Rome so that a new pope could be named. And with Hippolytus also in captivity, the schismatic activity ceased and the Church united once again under one pope.

Evidently Peter was not the last pope to have difficulties with forgiveness! Indeed in today’s Gospel, Peter asks Jesus the often-quoted question: “...how often must I forgive?” His answer: a limitless number! Next He tells the story of the two masters to whom much is owed. The first forgives the debt, a large one, after the servant pleads with him to do so. However when it is that servant’s turn to collect a smaller debt, he refused to be compassionate and sent that man to prison until the debt was re-paid. In addition to prison, the master added torture to the first servant’s repayment plan once he was told of this action.

What does all of this say to us? Unfortunately, far too much. On a personal level, withholding acceptance until someone has satisfactorily earned our forgiveness? Continuing to gnaw on a long-time hurt, years after we are able to recall the details? On a community level, feuds among groups that are fanned by further violence, rather than settled for good? On a national level, retaining symbols or celebrations that stoke long-held exclusive beliefs that were and are sources of harm and discrimination? Others will occur to you.

Maturity as a Christian urges us to examine our current role in the support of or resistance of those practices and attitudes that abet our inability to embrace understanding, compassion and forgiveness. A beginning place to pray about this could be the “Our Father.” The prayer is clear: we have an essential role to play. We best getting at it.

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