

Reflections on Forgiveness

From His Eminence Metropolitan Saba

(This article is excerpted from a lecture by Metropolitan Kallistos Ware.)

“And throughout eternity, I forgive you, and you forgive me. As our dear Savior said: ‘This is the Wine, and this is the Bread.’” —William Blake

“The fool neither forgives nor forgets; the naïve forgives and forgets; but the wise forgives and does not forget.” —Thomas Szasz

“He is free because he forgives.” In Kevin Andrews’ book *The Flight of Ikaros*, there is a story that encapsulates the essence of forgiveness. Andrews was studying medieval fortresses in Greece. In 1949, he traveled through a region devastated first by the German occupation during World War II and then by the brutal Greek civil war that followed, which was in its final stages at that time.

One evening, Andrews arrived in a village where he was hosted by the parish priest, Papastavros. His home had been burned down during the civil war, so he received his guest in the barn where he himself was living.

Andrews gradually learned the priest’s story. His two eldest sons had joined the resistance against the German occupation, but some traitors from the village informed the Germans of their whereabouts. They were captured, and no one saw them again. During that time, the priest’s wife died of starvation. After the Germans left, Papastavros lived alone with his married daughter and her young child, while she was expecting a second child in a few weeks.

One day, as he was returning home, he found his house in flames. He recounted to Andrews: “I saw them dragging my daughter outside and executing her. They emptied their bullets into her pregnant belly. Then, they killed the little boy right in front of me.”

Those who committed these atrocities were not strangers from a distant land; they were local men, people whom Papastavros knew and encountered daily. One of the village women remarked to Andrews, “I’m amazed he hasn’t lost his mind!” But the priest did not go mad. Instead, he spoke to the villagers about the need for forgiveness. He told Andrews, “I tell them to forgive and that there exists no other way” (p. 114). He added that they laughed in his face.

When Andrews later spoke to the priest's surviving son, the young man did not laugh at his father's message but instead said: "He is free because he forgives" (p. 118).

Two statements illuminate this story: "There is no other way" and "He is free because he forgives."

"There is no other way." In certain situations—ones filled with profound suffering and complexity—there is only one path forward: forgiveness. Revenge only deepens the wound. As Mahatma Gandhi once said: "An eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind." Only through forgiveness can we break the endless cycle of vengeance and self-destruction. Without forgiveness, there is no hope for a new beginning. Papastavros, who had personally endured the horrors of enemy occupation and civil war, knew this truth firsthand. His words undoubtedly apply to many other conflicts across the world.

"He is free because he forgives." The words of St. Silouan the Athonite (1866–1938) resonate here: "Where there is forgiveness... there is freedom." If we compel ourselves to forgive—or at the very least, desire to forgive—we find ourselves in what the Psalms call a "place of respite" or "a place of freedom": "We went through fire and water, but You brought us into a place of abundance" (Psalm 65:12). Only forgiveness allows us to enter what St. Paul describes as "the glorious freedom of the children of God" (Romans 8:21).

Yet how hard, how painfully hard, it is to forgive and to be forgiven! To borrow from another Orthodox Christian voice, Metropolitan Anthony (Bloom) of Sourozh (1914–2003): "Forgiveness is not a small stream marking the boundary between slavery and freedom; it is as wide and deep as the Red Sea." Similarly, Abba Evagrius Ponticus (346–399), one of the Desert Fathers, reminds us: "Do not think you have attained virtue unless you have struggled for it to the point of shedding blood." The same applies to forgiveness. Sometimes, our struggle to forgive is nothing less than an inner martyrdom, a shedding of our very being.

At the end of Forgiveness Vespers, believers bow before one another, asking for and granting forgiveness. What happens the next day, the first day of Lent, known as Clean Monday? In many places, there is a tradition of going out into the hills for an

outing. During this annual outdoor celebration, children and adults fly kites together. There is a deep, spiritual parallel here. The moment we begin to forgive, we experience an inner transformation—a transition into springtime. We emerge from darkness into sunlight, from self-imprisonment into the open air of freedom.

We ascend the hills, let the wind blow upon our faces, and release the kites of our hearts—kites of imagination, hope, and joy.

And as the priest's son said: **"He is free because he forgives."**

Blessed Lent to all!