

God, don't force your mercy on me

Question: Can anyone receive God's mercy without first repenting?

– Paul VanHoudt, Erie, Colorado

Answer: It depends on the context in which we speak of mercy. In one sense, all of humanity is currently under God's mercy since he patiently awaits our repentance, and "he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust" (Mt 5:45). People need time to repent, and God grants this time to individuals, nations and cultures. God is patient and sends graces, and this is an aspect of great mercy extended to all.

However, if we speak of mercy in terms of forgiveness of sin, then repentance is necessary and the very key that unlocks mercy. If I am to experience the merciful forgiveness of my sins, I must first admit my sins and seek God's mercy. In the case of venial sin, I can and should do this daily. In the case of serious sin, I should seek the Sacrament of Confession. God, who is rich in mercy, notes our repentance, our sorrow for sins and purpose of amendment, and mercifully grants forgiveness and absolution. In this sense, repentance is required for absolution, because God will not force his mercy on us.

To understand why, consider this as an example. Suppose I came to you and said, out of the blue, "I forgive you." You may be puzzled or even offended that I offer to forgive you without any prior acknowledgment by you that you did something wrong. If you don't think you did anything wrong, my offer can seem offensive or even unjust. And this is why God first elicits our repentance, our acknowledgment of having sinned, before

bestowing forgiveness. Mercy, understood as forgiveness, only makes sense based on our prior expressed need for mercy. It is part of our dignity and freedom to personally acknowledge sin and need to amend our lives, in order to receive mercy.

Voluntarism

Question: What is “voluntarism”? I am hearing this word more today.

– **Herbert Mayline**, Peoria, Illinois

Answer: Voluntarism (not to be confused with volunteerism) is a philosophy that moves the place of moral truth from the perceiving mind to the will. It is sadly common in our time. This view says that something is true simply because I say so, rather than on the evidence drawn from reality and experience and submitted to our mind for assent.

This is what underlies things such as transgenderism, where obviously male or female persons assert the right to override the obvious physical evidence of their bodies and demand that we accept they are something other than what they plainly are. This also explains why so many moral issues find their way into the courts. A woman has a “right” to abortion simply because the government says so, or same-sex “marriage” is now a “reality” simply because the supreme court says so. This form of voluntarism (called legalism) asserts that things are moral simply because they are legal.

Voluntarism began in the 14th century as theological voluntarism. In this flawed notion, God does not command something because it is good. Rather, it is good simply because he commands it. This renders God’s law arbitrary rather than reasonable. It was an attempt to highlight God’s omnipotence, but it came at the expense of his reasonableness. As God has been moved to the periphery, human pride has taken up voluntarism as its own and claims the right to assert right

and wrong and even to define reality itself. It is a very ugly source of our current moral malaise and its strident, contentious quality.

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