**From the Amen Corner**

**November 12, 2017**

Nobody ‘gets’ forgiveness. Oh, I don’t mean nobody is forgiven; I don’t mean that at all. But it seems we have forgotten what forgiveness is and how it happens. Not only that, we seem to have forgotten its possibilities in our lives. Well, at least we seem to have lost the language to make the process of being forgiven lively and important. It may not be so grim in all places but it is very grim in many. Let me tell you what I mean.

Just the other day I saw a short film highlighted on a Catholic Website. It had actually won a Foreign Language Catholic Film Festival prize and was highly touted. My curiosity piqued, I opened it and watched it. It’s only about 15 minutes long and it’s called *Forgiveness*.

The plot is simple. A priest is in the confessional is hearing confessions. The priest is behind a grill and a man walks in and kneels down to confess. With some hesitation he describes himself as dying of cancer and desiring of cleansing his soul. He confesses he is a murderer; the crime he committed has been eating away at him for 25 years. Of course the priest asks him to expand on what he means. The penitent explains. He had been drinking at a friend’s house one night and was driving home when he struck a young man at a crosswalk. He stopped and got out of his car but, seeing the man was injured, he became scared and got into his car and drove home. “I was a coward,” he said. He did not see how injured the man was nor did he help him to the hospital; he did not offer him any kind of help at all. Seeing how badly the victim was injured, he fled. “I murdered him,” he confessed.

The priest listens attentively and then sits bolt upright and then begins to panic. The man who was struck by this penitent’s car all those years ago was the priest’s father! Listening to all of this, the priest becomes so upset he throws his collar off in desperation and yells at the man on the other side of the grill. “You could have at least helped my father to the hospital!” he says. When the penitent realized the priest is talking about his father, he collapses on the other side of the confessional.

The priest comes from behind the screen and helps the man to one of the pews. Panicked at the prospect of now knowing the man who struck his father, he kneels down in the center aisle and begins to pray. Slowly he repeats the Our Father and as he does the slow, dawning awareness arises in him. Even this man, this now fragile, broken, fearful man has to be offered forgiveness. The priest knows what he must do. As he calms down he goes back over and sits with his penitent in the pew.

He notes the fear and the guilt burdening this man; he is tortured because of what he did. The priest calmly says: “Ah, you are mistaken. My father recovered after a long time in the hospital and he lived a full and peaceful life.” The old man’s face brightens up and he’s overjoyed. “I’m not a murderer! Oh, thank you for telling me. I can die in peace.” And then he asks: “Can I talk to your father to tell him I’m sorry? Can I pay him some compensation? What can I do?” The priest then says: “My father died three years ago. Pay the compensation to widows and orphans.” He then prays the prayer of absolution and the man leaves, much relieved.

The young priest then goes into his room. As he closes the door and sits down he grabs the framed picture of his father and stares at it. It is the picture of a very young man. The priest says: “Father, I had to tell a little white lie today, but I think it was OK; it relieved a man of a terrible burden. I’m sure you’ll understand.” The movie ends.

Sorry to have spent such time describing the story; you can look it up and watch it for yourself. It’s worthwhile. More than anything, it is a story of the search for forgiveness; there is no denying its charm. That anyone would take the time to make such a movie with this kind of subject matter is, itself, positive and I was glad to see someone has chosen to explore the questions and difficulty of reconciliation in this context. All of that being said, however, the movie completely misses the point. The man left the church feeling better, but he wasn’t truly forgiven. That’s the confusion we’re dealing with here; the priest bargained away the gift of the sacrament for the more attractive option of helping him be contented. It was an all together bad deal.

In our time we put the greatest premium on the therapeutic ideal of relieving people of guilt. We seem to be unable to think of anything else as valuable or important compared to making the pain of shame and regret go away. In the case of this movie, the priest chooses not to name the sin the man committed and to offer God’s promise of mercy to him. Not only that, the priest refuses even to name the sin the man has come to confess; he takes away the possibility of repentance since he lies about the truth of what happened. It was a clear case of clerical malpractice. (The sin was not murder; he had committed manslaughter-but his negligence had taken a life unjustly and it was sinful, without question.)

We should look at it from the side of the penitent. What will he say when he faces the truth of his life as he opens his eyes on the world to come? He will see the fullness of the life he has lived (and just in case we imagine this to be a kind of fairy-tale we should note: one of the things the reports of near death experiences have in common is that people say they really did see their whole lives pass before their eyes). And in seeing it, he will see the truth of what he did. And in seeing this truth, he did indeed kill someone through his negligence, irresponsibility and neglect, he will have to come to terms with it in his life. God will offer forgiveness; as Pope Francis says: the name of God (the essence and purpose of God) is mercy. But in the dynamic of the life to come, he has to put his arms around the thorny truth of this moment; God’s love includes the searing, burning love of forgiving a murder. How much more complete and certain it would have been to begin this process as he sought to become ready for death as he came into the confessional. But he was unable to; the priest did not allow him to experience God’s mercy, only the fainter kind: the forgiveness the priest offered. Having the son’s forgiveness was a gift to the son but not to them man whose irresponsibility resulted in another’s death. I think the penitent got short-changed.

In Rod Dreher’s now famous book called, *The Benedict Option*, he describes the popular view of faith we in Western World now have about God (Korea is part of the Western World). He called it MTD: Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. It has 5 basic tenets. They are:

\*A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.

\*God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.

\*The central goal in life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.

\*God does not need to be particularly involved in one’s life except when he is needed to resolve a problem.

\*Good people go to heaven when they die.

And Dreher is quick to point out: all of these points are at odds with basic Christian / Catholic teaching, although most people in most churches believe them. In fact, it seems almost impossible to keep people from believing they are not official Church teaching. Certainly these tenets are on display in this short movie. Everything the Church teaches about the need for repentance and the price of forgiveness, everything offered in the sacrament of confession, is subsumed into the energy to make sure this poor man feels relieved. According to the MTD, all guilt is bad and should be made to go away. There is only problem, of course: the old man has a reason to feel guilty: he is guilty. Pretending there is no harm when there is harm; escaping the charge of irresponsibility when responsibility is required; keeping him away from the truth; all of these send the Christian message and the Catholic sacrament down the drain.

I am most upset with this short film’s depiction because it hollows out the truth we all know, even if we can’t describe it. It is: to reconcile and to be reconciled exacts a price from us. The young priest’s anguish and the monumental crisis he faces, these are part of what he has to pay in order to forgive. But there is a higher price paid in order to bring the human race into the possibility of reconciliation with one another and with God; it was paid by Christ himself. Or do we think reconciliation is so easy and so facile nothing much is required except good intentions? Did Jesus die on the cross only because of, as John Shea put it, “that recent misunderstanding at Golgotha”? The Church has taught what she has always known: reconciliation costs a lot. In the history of humanity it has always cost the price of blood. And yet we have come to a time in which no one seems able to say what they know to be true; even in a film about the sacrament of reconciliation.

Oddly enough, there is another movie that does a very good job exploring the dynamics of reconciliation. It won’t win any prizes at a Catholic Film Festival, or any prizes at all, but it is a decent way to think about forgiveness, and the price we pay to achieve it. It is the recently opened movie *Flatliners*. Go and see it if you want a brief primer on the theology of coming to terms with sin.

In this remake of the older movie of the same name, a group of young medical students want to see what happens when a person dies. The principal instigator is a young woman who had been responsible for the death of her baby sister in a car accident. She has a fascination with what happens after death and she wants to explore the brain chemistry and function at the moment of death. At least this is what she tells her fellow students. In truth, she wants to see if she can’t, somehow, have some contact with her dead sister.

The young student enlists her friends to stop her heart in a controlled way so that she ‘flatlines’ on the heart monitor and, after a time ‘being dead’ she is brought back by her friends. One by one each of the students do this, each one having an experience of transcending themselves on a journey into post-life moments. And one by one they each bring back stories of exhilaration and potential. And one by one, following their journeys, each one of them begins to ‘click’ in life; they seem to be more focused, more intuitive, more in touch with themselves because of what they have seen after their heart has stopped.

But there is another aspect to what they have done. Each one has a moment during their flatline experience in which they encounter something negative, something empty about themselves. They don’t always know what it is and they can’t always identify it but it is upsetting. Because the experiments are so exciting they don’t share with each other the dark side of what they see, keeping it to themselves. But slowly they begin to find their post ‘flatline’ lives disturbed by what they saw during their post-life experience. All of them are bothered by the presence of people they have hurt in the past. Eventually these people begin to haunt them; they become ghostly presences chasing them down to do them harm. In the movie each manifestation of these characters is terrifying.

No one knows what to do. As they finally confess the dark, negative experiences they have had, they discover they all have something in common: these dark moments are the sins or evil or mistakes they have made. They keep hallucinating scenes of gruesome moments involving these terrifying individuals, as if the wrong they have done now sticks to them and won’t let them go.

The first character, who has always felt guilt at the death of her younger sister, is haunted by the angry presence of this little girl. Like a pale ghost, the dead girl faces the young medical student over and over again; she looks like a cruel demon masquerading as her little sister. One night the little girl appears in the young woman’s apartment. Unsurprisingly, the woman is terrified and begins to run away. She can’t bear to face her although no matter where she goes this haunting figure is right there. Eventually she runs out onto the fire escape, falls and is killed. It is as if her guilt has pushed her.

Just after this takes place one of the other students decides she has to face her haunting. She hunts down the girl she had hurt in high school and she asks for forgiveness. The girl, now grown into a woman, doesn’t want to talk with her but the medical student insists. Finally, the woman turns around and says: “I forgive you.” The spell, the terror and hallucinations she experiences, all stop. She has stumbled onto the key. Each of the students is haunted by their sins. They have to find a way to reconciliation, they have to make a journey in forgiveness and reparation in order to make up for what they have done. Each in his / her own way finds a way to do this. The terror they experience goes away and they return to their lives, chastened but whole.

In one of the final scenes, one of the medical students is so consumed by her guilt over the death of a patient she is convinced she will die and be condemned to terror forever. The young woman who was killed on her fire escape because she could not face her own sin, appears to her and counsels her to let go of her conviction, to forgive herself. When she does her haunting is over too; she is given her life back. In the movie it took the death of one person to give life to another. Funny how it works, it seems written into the script of life: reconciliation comes only with a price, and that exacted in blood.

One by one the students meet up with the ones they have harmed. The rest of the movie is their discovery of what it will take to pay back what they have done wrong, to the best of their ability.

This move, produced and presented in the horror genre, does a much better job than the Catholic award-winning movie does, of describing and imagining what forgiveness is and is for. It has a much deeper understanding of what sin does to us and how it affects us in our lives. The intuition that sin clings to us and won’t let us go until we are reconciled is perhaps the most important insight of the movie. It is the telling of a human truth in Hollywood style, and it’s all the more powerful for it. Each of the characters in this movie knows she / he has to seek forgiveness for what she / he has done. Not only that, each one has to bear the burden of knowledge (each has to admit what was done was, itself, wrong and it damaged another) as well as the burden of reparation (each has to repair the damage done-always imperfectly but in the best way available to each). There are no shortcuts. In order to keep their sin from clinging to them, they have to be reconciled. There is no other way for them to go on in life.

Forgiveness is part of human experience. Everyone in every society and in every part of history has sought how to keep sinfulness from clinging and haunting. It is not a mere Christian preoccupation but part of the human condition. The essence of the sacrament of confession is to step into the process so our sins do not cripple us, so we can be free of them and their power in our lives. Jesus died so that we might enjoy the forgiveness of all of our sins, as the price to be paid for what we can receive, so the promises made to us can be ours. Jesus died to set us free from the clinging horrors of sin in our lives.

It is good to know the authors of *Flatliners* understand: forgiveness begins with the truth of our lives. It can never be pushed away by good intentions or brushed off by the prospect of bad feelings. When the ghosts of our past are put to rest we can get busy living. Until they are, we’re going to be haunted. It makes confession look like a pretty good deal. It is, of course. It always has been; I’m glad even Hollywood knows it.

Fr. Don Wolf