

# **Let us call brothers even those who hate us and forgive all by the Resurrection**

**Lecture given by Jim Forest at the meeting of the  
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"Let us call brothers even those who hate us and forgive all by the Resurrection." These are words we hear each year in the context of the most important feast on the Church calendar: the celebration of Christ's triumph over death.

Again and again we are called by Christ's Gospel, and by parallel texts in the Sacred Liturgy, to do something that, from a human point of view, seems completely impossible: to recognize familial bonds with our enemies and, drawing on the power of the Resurrection, to forgive those who hate us.

But until we meet people who give an example of translating these words into actual life, it's hard to imagine such a thing is possible.

I have been fortunate in my life to meet many people who treated their enemies as brothers or sisters and, empowered by the Resurrection, forgave all.

To give one example, I think of Fr. Michael, a priest I met in the Russian city of Novgorod in 1987. At the time I was writing a book called *Pilgrim to the Russian Church*. Novgorod was one of the many places I visited.

Fr. Michael was born in 1924 in Pskov. At age 20, in 1944, he was badly wounded in the war. After the war, he studied at the Leningrad Theological Seminary. When I met him, he had been a priest nearly 40 years, most of them in Novgorod. He was rector of one of the few living Orthodox parishes in the region in those still-Communist days, the Church of Saints Nicholas and Philip. Fr. Michael was a man with a very Russian face: pale

skin, high forehead, the bone behind his eyebrows very pronounced, slate-blue eyes, hair combed straight back, huge hands, all-in-all a man built like a bear. I liked him immediately. A man with a great passion for his faith, he radiated welcome and warmth.

First he took me to his church, part of which dates from the twelfth century. These were originally two adjacent churches, facing different streets, but like an old married couple, they had grown into each other, becoming one structure, painted white, with shingled onion domes, wide log porches with rough wood stairs leading up to them, and two icons set into the outer walls of the church, with vigil candles flickering before them. It was winter time. We trudged together through the snow toward the candle-lit icons.

In the smaller church there was a saint's body, Nikita of Novgorod. His relics were a place of prayer and veneration for many pilgrims. Fr. Michael lifted the coffin's glass lid so that I could venerate St. Nikita. I confess this is not something I would have suggested or wished for. It was a year before my chrismation -- I was not yet even in the kindergarten of Orthodoxy. I had the usual American aversion to touching the dead, but I managed to overcome my hesitations and found myself kissing the thin silk cloth covering St. Nikita's face -- and in that same moment inhaling a fragrance that seemed to come from heaven. After that I could never again regard the phrase, "the odor of sanctity," simply as a line of poetry.

Later in the day, entering Novgorod's kremlin, we went to St. Sophia's Cathedral, one of Russia's most ancient churches. It was built when Saint Vladimir was still reigning in Kiev and the Russian Church was in its infancy. Sadly, in 1987, nearly a thousand years later, it had become a museum. Even so Fr. Michael had convinced the museum's caretakers to allow the playing of recordings of Orthodox liturgical music so that visitors might have a faint idea of what it was like to be in a living church.

Fr. Michael pointed out the cathedral's massive bronze doors gave a witness to the undivided church that still existed when this building was put up. The doors were covered with relief images of biblical scenes done in a Romanesque style, with inscriptions on one side of each panel in Latin, on the other side in Slavonic.

It was intriguing to discover in the back of the church a massive stone cross

of the Celtic rather than Russian or Latin types. Connecting the four beams of the cross was a circle. Were it not for the crucifix carved in the center of the cross being six pointed, Russian style, one would guess the cross had been brought to Novgorod from the Scotland's western islands or the mainland of Ireland. It seemed to give evidence that Irish or Scottish monks had come this far east -- or perhaps Novgorodian traders had found their way to the Christianity's most western outposts? Novgorod, Fr. Michael explained, had been a great trading city for centuries, with business links that stretched from Scandinavia to Constantinople.

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Novgorod was one of the few major Russian towns spared from the Tartar invasions, but the city's good fortune ended in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In 1456, and again in 1471, war broke out between Moscow and Novgorod. In both cases, Novgorod was defeated. Up to that time, Novgorod was a remarkably cosmopolitan principality run on democratic lines. Princes were elected and often deposed, and bishops too. A parliament -- *veche* -- was assembled for town meetings by the ringing of a great bell. When Ivan III, father of Ivan the Terrible, subdued Novgorod the second time, he had the Veche Bell, symbol of the city's republican tradition, removed. However, the great bell tumbled off the cart not far from the city walls and shattered into many pieces. Local tradition is that each fragment grew into a small version of the mother bell. "Tsar Ivan could take the bell and crush Novgorod's traditions," explained Fr. Michael, "but he could not take from the people their longing to freely choose their rulers, and if necessary reject them." Small brass bells are still the city's main souvenir. Fr. Michael gave me a set of three.

In 1570 Ivan the Terrible, accompanied by an army, came to visit. It was an experience from which the city never fully recovered. Many leaders as well as common people of Novgorod were tortured to death or drowned in the river. To make clear who was in charge, Ivan ordered the construction of an ornate throne to be placed inside the Cathedral of St. Sophia. It remains there to this day.

Fr. Michael was a living storehouse of local memory and legends. One story explained a curious feature of the River Volkhov -- the fact that it rarely if ever freezes, even when everything else is encased in ice. The hero of the tale was the legendary Sadko, merchant prince of Novgorod, whose

ship sank in a lake to the south. Under water, Sadko entered a watery kingdom and here he met a mermaid princess who fell deeply in love with him and wanted to become his wife. But Sadko missed his wife in Novgorod and longed for her so much that the compassionate mermaid princess allowed him to return to life in the mortal world. However the princess was so saddened after Sadko's departure that her tears made the lake overflow its borders and form the river that now divides the city of Novgorod. The river, they say, is still full of her tears, and these warm the river so much that it cannot freeze.

Certainly many tears have flowed in that river. In the last world war Novgorod was all but destroyed. Only three of the city's numerous ancient churches were left relatively intact. Now many of them have since been painstakingly rebuilt, including the Church of the Transfiguration, whose frescoes were painted by Theophanes the Greek, the teacher of St. Andrei Rublev. The reconstruction of churches was still going on during my visit. One married couple had spent their entire working life reassembling the fragments of the frescoes of a church that was blown up as the German army withdrew. By 1987, the walls had been entirely rebuilt and most of the frescoes put back in place. I hope the couple has lived to see the completion their work and to witness the church serving once again as a place of worship.

We ate our evening meal by candlelight in a small chamber, at one time a guard's room, high in Novgorod's kremlin wall where a tower has been turned into a restaurant. The narrow windows gave us a good view birch trees illumined by the sunset.

Now at last we come to the reason I connect Fr. Michael with the words, "Let us call brothers even those who hate us and forgive all by the Resurrection."

After a day of intense conversation, we had reached a point of real trust and began to discuss the major changes then occurring in Russia -- publication of books and release of films that had in the past been strictly forbidden, the creation of a social climate in which Russians could talk to foreigners without fear, and -- most important of all -- the end of state repression of the Church. All over Russia churches were being repaired and reopened, monasteries were coming back to life, more and more students were

applying to study in the seminaries. There were even first-rate programs about the Church on state television. Thousands of people who had called themselves atheists were coming into the Church.

I asked Fr. Michael if he was not amazed by all these changes, especially those that had to do with the Church.

"No," he answered, "not at all. Every believer has been praying for this every day. I always knew our prayer would someday be answered, only I am astonished that it is happening in my lifetime. I didn't dare to believe it would happen so soon."

Then I asked if he didn't want to see punished in some way all those people who had caused such suffering to so many people, sent so many to the Gulag, even tortured and killed so many faithful people. "Punishment is God's business," Fr. Michael responded, "not ours. If God wants to punish, He will punish. But we are told to forgive, not to punish. This is what the Gospel orders us to do. What we always hoped and are still hoping for is the conversion of those who hated us, not their punishment. And now we see many conversions happening. It is a miracle." He made the sign of the Cross.

Fr. Michael recalled writings of a second century theologian: "According to the Church Father Tertullian, every soul is, of its original nature, Christian. This means that if you dig deeply enough, you will always find something of the image of God in each person. It's always there. You see it where you never think you will find it. Look at Gorbachev, the head of the Communist Party! They say that his mother is a believer, and you know that babushkas have influence! The image of God is present in every person. I have seen this myself all my life. You find it in people who are certain that they are unbelievers, certain there is no God.... The longing for Christ's peace is something deep in each person's soul. It is natural for the soul to want to live in peace, to do things for peace. In our church, all my life, I have always heard it taught that we must love everyone -- believers, non-believers, Russian people, people from other countries. We are told to love people no matter what. Everyone is in your family. So it is natural for a Christian to think about how to live in peace with those around him."

In those days I had not yet encountered the words, "Let us call brothers

even those who hate us and forgive all by the Resurrection," at least not in a language I could understand, but I met them in Fr. Michael. For Fr. Michael, there was no one who is not a brother or sister. No matter how much a person seemed to hate the Church and to oppress its members, in his eyes that person was a potential convert. Forgiveness of enemies was an essential aspect of their longed-for and prayed-for conversion.

It was in meeting people like Fr. Michael -- I found there were many others like him -- that I realized it is possible for ordinary people to love their enemies, to regard them as brothers, to forgive them, and to play a role in helping them find their way to Christ.

If we were to remove from the Gospel all that Christ says about forgiveness, and all his actions of forgiveness, there would not be much of the Gospel left. Again and again we are called by Christ's Gospel to do something that, from a fallen human point of view, seems impractical: to recognize our bonds with our enemies and, drawing on the power of the Resurrection, to forgive them.

Consider the word "brother." This is a word normally associated with deeply positive, loving feelings. It is a word with emotional currents flowing through it, which in the end make the word problematic to use when we think about enemies. Part of our problem about recognizing the other as brother lies in the emotions. We think of love and brotherhood in emotional terms. As the Church Fathers remind us so often, the emotions are like quicksand. Love that depends on the emotions will fail in hard times, not only in relations with enemies but even in relations with friends, and even in family life.

If we think about the human race biblically, clearly we are all brothers and sisters. Each of us is a descendent of Adam and Eve. It's impossible not to be related as each and every family tree has the same parents at the source.

If we think of it scientifically, we find the same thing. All superficial differences are of little account when weighed against the bonds that unite us. DNA itself bears witness to the unity of the human race. The blood of a Moslem from Arabia can save the life of a Christian from Alaska. The marriage of a Belgian to a Pacific islander can produce healthy children. Our regional genetic distinctions are extremely minor.

The reality is that we are brothers even if we are as divided from each other as Cain was from his brother Abel. It is because we are brothers and sisters that Christ taught us to say the words "Our Father."

In fact, as the story of Cain and Abel makes clear, all conflicts are between brothers. There is no other kind of warfare than fratricidal warfare.

Think about the word "love," another word flooded with emotional content. But, understood biblically, love is not a matter of fleeting emotions but of unshakeable commitment to the life and well-being of the other, whether you like him or not. It can happen that this commitment is made easier by emotions, but it can just as easily happen that the emotions are an obstacle to love. The love that Christ speaks of and bears witness to is, he says, like sunlight falling equally on the just and on the unjust -- or like rain falling equally on good grain and weeds. These are not just pleasant metaphors. Time and again we see in the Gospel Christ's readiness to receive and care for anyone who opens the door even in the smallest way: an officer of Rome's occupying army, tax collectors, prostitutes, people with contagious diseases, people possessed by demons, women no less than men, a temple guard who is one of those arresting him in the Garden of Gethsemani, etc.

In the same short text we have been considering, we are called on to "forgive all by the Resurrection."

Consider forgiveness. Like so many things of ultimate importance, forgiveness is beyond our capacity to understand or explain, yet we know it is one of the principle themes of the Gospel. Forgiveness is what Christ offers again and again to people seeking his mercy. In what may be the most surprising prayer in the New Testament, Christ appeals while on the Cross for his Father to forgive those responsible for his crucifixion.

Forgiveness is an act of freeing the other from debt or from punishment. We offer forgiveness to others and seek it for ourselves. It is what each of us is hoping for whenever we confess our sins in the week-by-week struggle to clear away any obstacles between ourselves and the chalice. Forgiveness doesn't mean we forget what we have done or what others have done, but it's the letting go of obligations associated with those events. If I forgive you the debt you owe me, what was a loan is converted into a gift.

In people like Fr. Michael, one witnesses a more difficult forgiveness: not simply the excusing of a debt, but pardoning people who crucified believers, destroyed churches, and were missionaries of atheism, poisoning many people's souls.

We see forgiveness at work in countless stories that come down to us from the saints. For example there was the desert abbot whose only valuable treasure was stolen: his Gospel book. In those days, long before printing presses, such a book was worth a fortune. The thief takes the stolen Gospel to Alexandria and offers it for sale. The merchant asks if he might have a few days to decide what price to offer for so rare an object. The thief agrees. The merchant then goes out to the desert to see the abbot, carrying the Gospel book with him. The abbot looks at it, never mentioning it is in fact his own property, and suggests a price -- a certain number of gold coins. The merchant goes back to Alexandria, meets the thief and offers the suggested payment. It is more than the thief expects. "How did you decide on such a price?" he asks the merchant. "I took the book to abbot so-and-so and he told me what it was worth." The thief is struck in the heart by these words. He apologizes to the merchant for all the troubles he had caused but says he can no longer sell the Gospel. The thief then rushes back to the abbot he had robbed, returns the precious book, begs forgiveness, and asks to join the brotherhood. In fact the abbot had forgiven the thief even before forgiveness was sought. He happily welcomes the repentant thief into the community.

On the other hand, the refusal to forgive poisons one's own heart. As St John Chrysostom taught:

As it is not to be imagined that the fornicator and the blasphemer can partake of the sacred Table, so it is impossible that he who has an enemy, and bears malice, can enjoy the holy Communion.Ö I forewarn, and testify, and proclaim this with a voice that all may hear! 'Let no one who has an enemy draw near the sacred Table, or receive the Lord's Body! Let no one who draws near have an enemy! Do you have an enemy? Do not approach! Do you wish to draw near? Be reconciled, and then draw near, and only then touch the Holy Gifts!'(Homily 20)

One could easily spend the whole weekend simply reading aloud passages



about duty of forgiveness from the Bible, the Liturgy and the Fathers of the Church.

What is it finally that gives is the strength, the freedom, the love to forgive? Surely it is Christ himself, risen from the dead.

It is these last few words that are the core of the text we've been looking at: "... and forgive all by the power of the Resurrection."

One must be slightly crazy to imagine saying anything new about Pascha to an Orthodox Christian. We know from experience that this is not simply the great feast of all feasts but the axis on which the Church calendar turns and the revelation of the greatest of all mysteries: that the grave does not have the last word.

The first Orthodox Pascha I participated in was in Kiev in 1986. I think it was only that night that I realized that Christ's resurrection was a fact, and even more than a fact. Facts you can find in history books and newspapers. Here was an encounter with something far truer and more basic than the table of elements or the rules of geometry.

The next day, Bright Monday, I heard a remarkable Paschal sermon that, with my translator's help, I managed to write down. Here it is:

"Today we celebrate the Resurrection of Jesus Christ and we rejoice in it. And we see in it not only his resurrection but our resurrection. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is the same as our resurrection. We believe that. We believe that in Christ each one of us will stand up.

"Many people do not believe in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ or in the Resurrection of anyone. I don't want to give them proof or argue with them. The main thing about their conviction, the thing their unbelief is founded on, is that it's impossible for a dead person to come back to life. How can it happen? How can something that is just dust and bones live again? And what about bodies that are now only ashes? Or were cut into many pieces? Or were eaten by beasts or fish? How can such people's bodies be made whole and come back to life? Our brain can't overcome this dilemma. How is it possible?

"But then we can ask another question: What about everything that exists? All this beauty? There are so many things we don't understand and can't explain. Most things we can't explain. What do you think? Isn't this huge miracle we live in as big a miracle as the resurrection? Do you think creation is easier than resurrection? If God is strong enough to create everything from nothing, to create the whole world and the whole universe, do you think it is difficult to resurrect what he has already created?

"So don't be discouraged by anyone who says it's impossible. God has the power to create everything.

"So, brothers and sisters, we believe in eternal life. But it isn't an easy belief. It is a belief that gives us responsibilities. We have to realize that each person, whether or not he wants God, must answer to God for his life -- what he did, what didn't do. He must stand judgment.

"It is a weakness not to believe in eternal life. Even if you don't believe, it is no justification when you stand before God with sins and horrible deeds. Don't imagine that you will not be judged.

"Our people have lived by great ideals. The big ideal that has been living in our people for a thousand years is to live in God's truth. Not human truth. God's truth. Our ancestors mostly wanted to live according to God's truth. They suffered greatly. Many terrible things happened. There were dreadful persons. But somehow, no matter what sorrows there were, they were still trying to live according to God's truth.

"We need this too. God's truth has to lead us. We have to have a spiritual life even if we are surrounded by an unspiritual life. We need to have Christian families even if we are surrounded by families that are breaking down. We need to work hard and sincerely, not for praise or money, but for the heart and soul of our neighbors. We have to work for our people.

"Let us not think about bread for ourselves. Bread is something we need, yes, but the person who thinks about bread for himself has lost the spiritual dimension of life. But if he thinks of bread for his neighbors, then he is leading a spiritual life -- a life of love, a life of caring

for others. This is the spiritual life.

"The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is not only a joy for us, it is a great responsibility and a great task. It leads us to prepare for the Last Judgment. Let the Resurrection fill our hearts with belief in eternal life so that truth can take root in our hearts. Let us not only think about it in our minds but feel it in our hearts."

What I would stress from this sermon is its recognition that belief in eternal life gives us major responsibilities in this life -- the responsibility of discerning the brother where before we saw only an enemy, the responsibility to forgive, the responsibility not to harm our brother, the responsibility to do all in our power to relieve the suffering of our brother, the responsibility to reveal the risen Christ to our brother by the witness of our lives.

**"Let us call brothers even those who hate us and forgive all by the Resurrection."**

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