Response to Moshe Halbertal's "At the Threshold of forgiveness"

I deeply regret that I am unable to be present for the annual Bernardin Lecture, given this year by Moshe Halbertal. I offer my apologies and ask forgiveness!

I am most grateful for the lecture and would have enjoyed being part of the conversation it invites. Let me make some contribution with the following remarks, which will be shared through the good offices of Fr. Thomas Baima.

The fine legal analysis that makes exemplary in public discourse the personal and spiritual dynamics of those involved in the act of forgiving should be familiar to Catholics who have incorporated casuistry in judging the moral import of particular actions. I found myself nodding appreciatively at the distinctions that uncovered what the situations described really involved and that led to several aporia that had, finally, to be existentially resolved. Catholic moral theology incorporates parallel exercises in order to guide consciences in judging particular actions once general moral principles have been clearly set out. Reading Moshe Halbertal's text, I found myself smiling, perhaps not an appropriate response, as I recalled conversations in the classroom and, more importantly, in the confessional. The exercise shows how the law is used to unite us to one another and to God.

Perhaps it would be helpful to complement the lecture with two considerations for the sake of discussion: the first on mercy and the second on satisfaction.

The section of the Gospel according to St. Luke that is read at Mass on this Monday of the Second Week of Lent has Jesus declaring to his disciples: "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Stop judging and you will not be judged. Stop condemning and you will not be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven. Give and gifts will be given to you; a good measure, packed together, shaken down, and overflowing, will be poured into your lap. For the measure with which you measure will in turn be measured out to you."

There are many ways to unpack these lapidary phrases, but they certainly do not mean that we are not to make moral distinctions. God is not stupid and neither should we be unable to make the distinctions between good and evil that frame a morally serious life. Usually, these sayings are interpreted in the light of another: "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." God is perfect in his mercy, and mercy, as Pope John Paul II describes it in his letter *Dives in Misericordia,* is love that is eager to forgive. In the Pope's words, "love is transformed into mercy when it is necessary to go beyond the precise norm of justice" (5.6). This correction or tempering of justice by love enables the recipient of another's mercy to be confirmed in his dignity, to return to the truth about himself. Mercy has the power to transform human situations and hearts. "Mercy is manifested in its true and proper aspect," writes John Paul, ":when it restores to value, promotes and draws good from all the forms of evil existing in the world and in man" (6.5). This first consideration serves to bring the nature of God more explicitly into the examples analyzed for us tonight.

The second consideration I would like to make brings us back to casuistry on the other side of the act of forgiveness. Even forgiven sin has consequences. Catholic moral theology examines these consequences in its analysis of appropriate penance as satisfaction for sin, so that the justice that might have been submerged in the act of forgiving is nevertheless satisfied. Genuine reconciliation calls for expiation through care of the poor, the exercise and defense of justice and right, the admission of faults and their confession, revision of life, acceptance of suffering, and endurance of persecution for the sake of righteousness. Reconciliation restores broken relationships when those who have offended God or neighbor "make up," if one may speak in that manner, for what they have done. Perfect satisfaction is impossible, but God shows himself merciful not only in forgiving but also in accepting our poor efforts to set right the wrong we have done in sinning. In the confessional, priests are to exercise moral and legal judgment in apportioning penances appropriate to the offense confessed. This has become something of a lost subject in discussion about reconciliation in the Catholic Church today, but Pope John Paul II tried to make the point in confessing historical sins committed by Churchmen at the time of the Great Jubilee of the year 2000 and in making acts of public atonement for them. Both personally and socially, satisfaction is necessary to complete the picture of what forgiving demands.

Again, I thank Moshe Halbertal and all those whose presence makes these Bernardin Lectures a significant event in strengthening relations between Jews and Catholics. They are themselves an exercise in reconciliation.

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March 21, 2011