

Homily011517

DIVINE FORGIVENESS, HUMAN FORGIVENESS AND SIN

NYPD Detective Steven McDonald died Tuesday, Jan. 10th, after spending more than 30 years paralyzed from the neck down. The remarks below are drawn from an interview carried out for a Knights of Columbus documentary, [The Face of Mercy](#), which aired recently on ABC affiliated stations and will be shown nationally later this month on the EWTN.

The world is in a bad way right now, and there is no government program, no division of Marines, no amount of money that is going to change the path that we are on. We need God's love and forgiveness. That's what motivates me to let people know that there is another way. Before I hit the streets as a new police officer, the first thing I did was to go to my local rectory and ask the priest to bless my badge. I think that put me in a good place for future events. One summer day in the early 1980s, I was on patrol with my supervisor. We saw three kids who fit the description of those who were doing crimes in the Central Park area. As I was saying, "I'm a police officer, I'd like to talk with you," I thought I saw a weapon in the sock of one of the boys. When I made the tactical error of taking my eyes off the boys, one of them moved towards me with a small handgun. Before I could say, "Don't shoot" the boy pulled the trigger. It was very loud, scary loud.

The first bullet entered my head. As I fell backwards, the boy stepped closer and shot me in the throat, and then as I lay on the ground he shot me a third time. As they brought me into the ER, I'm told, the surgeon said, "This kid's not going to live; you better bring his family here to say goodbye." There was a young police officer standing nearby, no rank, no high station, but when he heard that, he stepped forward into the crowd and said, "We need to give him a second chance." I believe that was the Holy Spirit speaking through Brian, who is my friend today. Just like that, they loaded me up on a special ambulance and flew me down to Bellevue. It was there they truly saved my life.

With Cardinal John O'Connor's support, we had Mass at my bedside every day from July until the following April. It was a game changer. With each passing day, the hospital room became more like a chapel. The darkness was lifted and light filled the room, and that's the way my life has been ever since. My wife Patti Ann was pregnant with our first child when I was shot. After one particularly negative meeting with the doctor, we didn't have much hope. When he left, Patti Ann collapsed on the floor and I had no way of calling for help. It was one of those dark, dark days when I didn't think I wanted to live much longer.

One day, I was looking out a dirty window, caught up in my thoughts. All of a sudden I felt this soft little face touching my skin. My wife was able to sneak up behind me with our new baby. It was like being touched by the finger of God. The message I received was, “Here’s this new life; you have to live for him.”

During a press conference after the shooting, Patti Ann told everyone that I wanted to forgive the boy who shot me. The media were taken aback; they weren’t expecting it. But if I chose not to forgive Shavod Jones, I don’t think I would be alive. All the negative emotions would have overtaken me. Once I said yes to the idea of forgiveness, it freed me and I was able to move forward with my purpose in God’s plan.

Shavod died in a motorcycle accident three days after his release from prison. I never had the chance to help him, but my wife encouraged me to reach out to kids like him so they might know life without the violence on the streets. Once I was in Northern Ireland doing peace work with my friend, Father Mychal Judge, the Franciscan friar who died in the World Trade Towers on 9/11. On a rather difficult day, he said to me, “Steven, you have to place your trust and your hope in Jesus, just like that.” I understand much better now that our world needs prayer, and that God always answers our prayers, even though the answers come in his time.

God worked in and through Steven McDonald for over thirty years. The readings for this Sunday all touch on his story without at first seeming as if there is any connection whatsoever.

In Isaiah the Prophet, “The Lord said to me, ‘You are my servant through whom I show my glory.’ ‘I will make you a light to the nations.’ Your willingness to forgive will speak everywhere this story is told.

In psalm 40, the psalmist says in the simplest of terms, “Here I am Lord, I come to do your will.” Steve McDonald could say that He put a new song into my mouth, (the song of mercy and forgiveness) and put his law in my heart.”

In Saint Paul’s first letter to the believers in the Church at Corinth which he had founded, he refers to them as “sanctified and called to be holy.” Indeed, Steve McDonald prayed, “I seek to forgive the young man who sought to kill me.” “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” In the ugliness of this world that is what holiness looks like, even in the face of dashed dreams and permanent paralysis.

In the gospel for today, John the Baptist gives his most fitting testimony about Jesus of Nazareth, about who Jesus is. The Son of God, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. We say it—at every Mass. But we must also find ways to help each other live it. Every day. Forgiveness when sinned against. Truly divine. Truly human.