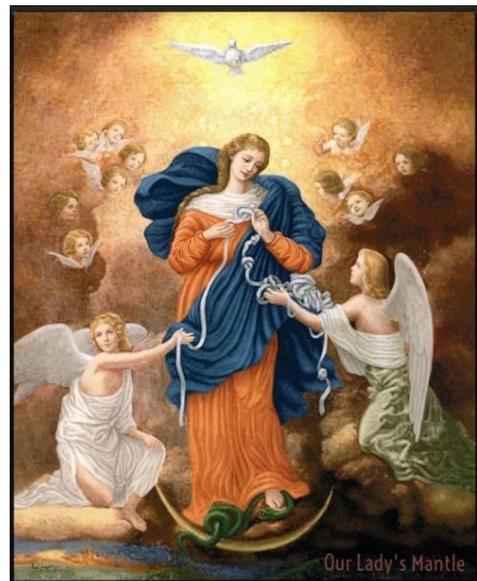


*"Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, 'Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? As often as seven times?' Jesus answered, 'I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.' Matthew 18*

Living together with a dozen men, day in and day out must have been frustrating sometimes. Each one of the 12 disciples had his own idiosyncrasies and annoying quirks. With hot weather and long days tempers would no doubt have flared. Perhaps one day, Peter had just had enough and comes straight out with it, "Lord, how often must I forgive my brother if he wrongs me?"

Jesus replies, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." Actually, this verse should not be taken too literally! Do we really think that once we have hit the magic number of seventy-seven, our forgiving obligations are over? No. Jesus means that forgiveness is an ongoing act, even a perpetual act. Maybe like cleaning our teeth, or saying, "I love you." Once just isn't enough. Neither is seven. Not even seventy-seven times.

It helps to understand forgiveness as a kind of release. The word means to release something—maybe even ourselves. And it is the strange nature of humanity that we seem always to be getting tangled up, knotted up, tied up in things. We start the day clear and fresh. But then we get tangled up. Relationships go wrong. Impatience and anger grab us. Soon, we need release. With this in mind, I have developed a huge devotion to our Lady under her title of Mary, Untier of Knots. It's a wonderful image of our Blessed Lady helping to undo those knots we all get ourselves into at times.



To forgive means to release. It is truly one of the major principles of the Christian life. To release. For, when we release others, we suddenly feel ourselves released, too. When we let go of what we believe people owe us, then it is we who feel wonderfully free. The way God sets his people free, is by using people to do it! God uses us to set his people free.

Once? Seven times? Seventy-seven times? Yes. Yes to all those numbers. And Yes to a lifetime of release. It's like cleaning our teeth, like saying "I love you." When those acts become practices and habits, they become part of who we are. And when forgiveness becomes part of who we are, we are close to the very heart and nature of God.