



# RESOURCES IN SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Dedicated to Research and Reflection in Formative Spirituality

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## IN THIS ISSUE

Forgiving and being forgiven are among the more difficult and complex of human experiences. Neither giving nor receiving seems to come naturally. We cling at length to hurts received, yet are painfully slow to admit harm inflicted on others. At times, we even withhold forgiveness from ourselves, subjecting ourselves to bouts of guilt and depression rather than letting go and making amends so that our life can flow again. Forgiveness requires change—it requires the change of heart we associate with conversion. Unless and until we change our stance we cannot enter the flowing stream of forgiveness and authentic spiritual living. This issue of the Newsletter explores various facets of forgiveness and the dynamics of memory—remembering and forgetting—that come into play in establishing appropriate conditions for forgiveness and spiritual growth in our lives.

### For Givenness

With the world as it is  
And the heart in pieces  
The disjunction  
Between actor and acted upon  
Confounds responsibility  
The longed-for possibility

Of gathering the self  
and making ready  
To receive  
What is meant for giving  
And going beyond  
What can only be lived through

~ Romeo J. Bonsaint, SC

## INDEX

The Strength to Forgive (John D. Hamilton, CFX, and Romeo J. Bonsaint, SC) .....	1
Books & Films on Forgiveness.....	4
Religious Life Itself as Charism Charism Studies (3) (Reginald D. Cruz, CFX) .....	6
Facets of Forgiveness (Rev. Brenda Bennett).....	8
Forgiveness - The Command (Rev. Brenda Bennett).....	8

## THE STRENGTH TO FORGIVE

~ John D. Hamilton, CFX, and Romeo J. Bonsaint, SC

The focus of forgiveness is an essential dimension of Christian spirituality and a condition for spiritual growth. This should not be presented... so as to promote shame, fear, or scrupulosity. Forgiveness refers to the removal of obstacles that lie in the way of intimate union with God and others. It is traditionally understood as directed toward guilt for sin, which destroys or weakens the relationship with God and neighbor, and the remnants of past sin, which continue to affect those relationships and which incline the individual to repetition. Forgiveness is thus part of a broader reality of reconciliation with God, others, the world, and oneself.

*The New Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, pp. 406-407.

In a culture driven by competition and self-assertion forgiveness is often seen as an act of weakness. It is, however, precisely the opposite. Gandhi once said: “The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.” What is the nature of the strength that is required if forgiveness is to be possible? It is the strength that comes from “standing on the rock that is the Lord.” From a sense of “self” that comes from within, not without. It comes from living the truth of Psalm 27 (Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms*): “The Lord is my light and my rescue. Whom should I fear?” “One thing do I ask of the Lord, it is this that I seek – that I dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life . . . for he hides me in his shelter in the day of evil.” It is only from this stance of “interiority” and self-knowledge that forgiveness, even towards those who most deeply harm us, is possible. “Though my father and mother forsook me, the Lord would gather me in.” We are able to “forgive” and cease being controlled by hatred and resentment when we can know that our life stands on something other than the weakness and failure of even those we most need, of those closest to us. It is when we know that we are recognized, upheld and loved in our own right by a Divine love that we experience the strength to forgive in the core of our own being.

Fr. Adrian van Kaam writes that persons need to come to “the inner independent affirmation of the dignity of their unique-communal life call.” (Adrian van Kaam, *Traditional Formation*, p. 173) That is, unless we can affirm independently of others the dignity and

value of our own call (being), we shall become victims of “an insatiable hunger for external confirmation.” In this case: “The eros orientation toward others is infected by an overwhelming eros for self.” We hopelessly seek from outside of ourselves that which can only come from the inside. We have an insatiable need for confirmation because we lack a basic interior affirmation of our dignity and worth.

For all of us, there is some degree of lack of such “independent affirmation,” that is, we are all to some degree suffering from “wounded eros”. And to the degree that such affirmation is lacking we develop, as van Kaam writes, “an insatiable hunger for confirmation.” Sometimes, he says, this hunger becomes a famine. Thus, we experience being buoyed up when “the world” confirms us and being disappointed and deflated when it doesn’t. As wounded we shall always eventually experience the other, the world, even God as disappointing. No one, nothing is ever enough. Since all of us at times crave outer confirmation in order to know our dignity and value, we must always be ready to forgive the other for failing us.

The problem, however, is that in order to forgive we need enough inner strength and affirmation to be sufficiently detached from the other. If we crave the other’s confirmation to appreciate the value of our own unique call, we can’t afford to recognize the other’s limits to satisfy this need. Without the detachment that comes from an independent affirmation of the value and dignity of my call, I lack the requisite strength for forgiveness. “If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.” (Lk. 14, 26) As long as we insist on outer confirmation rather than inner affirmation, we lack the “inner integrity with which we move towards God” of which Blessed Elizabeth of the Trinity speaks. God can only give himself to us when we become wholly dependent on God and cease to rely primarily on outer confirmation – that which will always ultimately fail us.

The speaker in Isaiah 50: 4-9a is clearly aware that his call is from the Lord: “The Lord God has given me a well trained tongue.” It is for this reason that he can dare to give himself to those who may beat him and shame him. “The Lord God is my help, therefore I am not disgraced; I have set my face like flint, knowing that I shall not be put to shame.” Because forgiveness is essentially social, shame is a very important aspect of it. I feel shame when the other does not confirm me, when my “unique-communal life call” is unacceptable or rejected by another. For shame is that which protects what is most deep and personal in me. Therefore,

whenever we look to others to fill our hunger for confirmation, we inevitably expose ourselves to shame. It has been suggested that shame-based cultures are, in fact, the most violent. For, forgiveness is impossible for the truly shamed person. If one’s dignity is based only on the confirmation of others, then to be failed in that confirmation leaves one without value. And the one who experiences no value or dignity has no ground (or strength in Gandhi’s word) from which to forgive. All that is left, if one is to feel at all significant, is retribution. On the other hand, if I truly have a sense of worth that comes from an “inner independent affirmation of the dignity of my unique-communal life call,” then “I shall not be put to shame.” Then I can forgive any person, the world, and life itself for its inability to confirm my need for recognition, appreciation and value. I know my unique-communal life call and its value and dignity apart from the reactions of anyone or anything outside of me. This is the source of the strength to forgive. “He conceals me in the recess of His tent, on a rock He raises me up. And now my head rises over my enemies around me.” And thus I can forgive, not only my enemies, but even those closest to me their appropriate inability to affirm my call. For in the recesses of God’s tent, in the shelter of God’s wings, “I shall not be put to shame.”

It is difficult to develop the strength forgiveness requires. It may even require a new appreciation for the place of properly channeled anger in our lives. The psychotherapist Allen Wheelis tells the story of his struggle to move from fear and anxiety to strength and generosity/forgiveness by means of learning how to use anger. (Allen Wheelis, *How People Change*) He describes the development of his own deeply anxious character, born of a demanding and demeaning father. Wheelis then describes the character that this anxiety gives rise to as a form of “slavery,” a slavery that manifests itself in envy, in wishing his “illness” on others. He does not want others to be able to do what he is unable to do. He even, at some level, prefers that others die rather than enjoy what he must deny himself. Isn’t much of our own incapacity to forgive exactly this dynamic? We resent the others’ abilities to do what we can’t, and to enjoy what we won’t. Wheelis describes a recurring inner audiotope that plays a message from his father “who, having even in heaven nothing better to do, continues to send: ‘You are a lazy, low-down, no-account scoundrel’” (p. 75). These are the very words his father had used to describe his one brother who couldn’t get along with his own overbearing father and so dared to leave and set out on his own.

Then one day Wheelis, who is very tired, meets two of his former patients at the intermission of a concert.

These are two people he is very fond of, but after speaking for a couple of minutes he finds himself unable to continue to speak with them, so he goes off into a deserted corner and then experiences that he would like to have been able to speak with them but could not. In this awareness he experiences the depth of his own enslavement to those directives he had received from his father. He sees that his preference for solitude is not a chosen preference but a fear of “being caught” by others as one with nothing to offer and nothing to say. To break this enslavement will require of Wheelis a re-appropriation of the role of anger in his life, probably an anger that he has avoided due to his fear of the power of his rage at his father. (pp. 77-8)

There is a type of anger related to the appropriate sense of the dignity of our unique-communal life call, an anger that refuses to have its generous expression be deterred. There is an aggression that is the strength required to make our contribution and from this place to respect the contributions of others and thus to be able to forgive their limits, weakness, and sinfulness. Anger is not just “petty and mean, destructive of life” as Wheelis says. There is “another kind of anger, different in quality, in implication, in consequence...” (p. 78)

Must we learn the ways of this second kind of anger if we are ever to escape domination by the first; if we are ever to be able to forgive? This second kind of anger is what allows us to express and so manifest our own dignity and potency. It is in the experience of this expression that we come to know God’s affirmation of us. Until and unless our inner call is expressed, it remains unreal to us. There is an experience of potency, of “self-realization” in our generous expression of our call that transcends even how that expression is received. In this affirmation that such expression gives rise to, we come to a sense of the dignity and significance of our own life and we release the shame that makes forgiveness impossible.

Forgiveness is the way beyond resentment.

It is the most effective instrument for overcoming the hostile emotions, ...but it is not itself an emotion: it is an action or a sequence of actions.

It is not simply a state of mind – but it is, by its very nature, a reaching out to the world.

An explicit verbal act, meant sincerely and backed up with subsequent action, works wonders.

This is also true when the betrayer is not another person but life itself.

One adopts an attitude of trust and acceptance that brings an end to resentment and bitterness.

Forgiveness is a revision of one’s relationship (to the world or other people) by acceptance, getting over it so that the relationship can continue.

~ *Spirituality for the Skeptic*  
by Robert C. Solomon, pp. 55-56.

The beginning of the process of reconciliation is a simple of calling out for forgiveness. It is the expression of the desire for forgiveness and it occurs in the context of relationship: of an “I” who needs and depends upon the good graces of a “Thou.” In the cry for forgiveness, isolation gives way to relationship. The cry is at once an expression of remorse and an awareness of need. The journey of forgiveness begins in the humble acknowledgment that mind and heart must be open to receive the love that is always and already on offer. Our spiritual traditions teach us to trust that we are or will be forgiven. But of course it must be received! In Kabirs prayer of forgiveness we take special note of “the child.” The child is small, wayward, prone to error. Yet, it is all right. Why? Because the child is received. We are received. We must become — be like — the child who receives and is received.

#### *Forgiveness*

The child makes many a mistake,  
But the mother forgives them all.  
I am your child, your wayward child,  
Lord, won't you forgive my sins?

If the child throws a temper tantrum  
And pulls and pushes his mother,  
She does not move away from him  
Nor pull and push in return.  
I am your child, your wayward child,  
Lord, won't you forgive my sins?

My mind is trapped in depression;  
How can I free my mind without your name?  
I am your child, your wayward child,  
Lord, won't you forgive my sins?

Bless me with a loving heart and a peaceful mind,  
And draw me into full absorption in you.  
I am your child, your wayward child,  
Lord, won't you forgive my sins?

~ from *God Makes the Rivers to Flow*  
by Eknath Easwaran, p. 128.

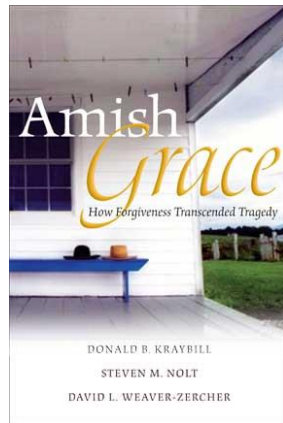


## BOOKS & FILMS ON FORGIVENESS

Along with the personal memoir and books on grieving and loss, the subject of forgiveness has received ample consideration in the publishing industry of late. One will not be surprised to discover many treatments of the topic in psychology and spirituality. Forgiving another from the heart involves the mind and the spirit, and most books proceed to help victims to overcome mental and spiritual obstacles to healthy forgiveness. The spirituality of forgiveness embodied in a communal context is exemplified in *Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy* (Jossey-Bass).

In October 2006 a cynical American population, jaundiced by years of cultural-religious wars, found itself stunned by the events surrounding the brutal murder of five Amish schoolgirls in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. The event was shocking enough. “Amish country” seemed to be one of the few places left in the United States that remained safe from the rage and violence that permeates our culture. Clearly, however, there was no longer any way, even through the amount of withdrawal and separation practiced by the Amish, to avoid the gratuitous violence that is increasingly becoming the last resort of the pained and frustrated. What followed the violence, however, proved even more incredible. “Indeed, the biggest surprise at Nickel Mines was not the intrusion of evil but the Amish response. The biggest surprise was Amish grace.” (xi) Thus write Donald B. Kraybill, Steven M. Nolt, and David L. Weaver-Zercher in their treatment of the individual and communal formation that fosters such grace.

Kraybill, Nolt, and Weaver-Zercher bring to this book years of study and research on Amish life and culture as well as access to many of the people of Nickel Mines. What emerges is a striking picture of an Amish formation tradition and way of living that persistently, over a lifetime, forms the members of this community in those dispositions of heart that make forgiveness possible. The authors point out that, in fact, there is a large cultural component to anger – to how we feel it and to the reactions it evokes. The people whom the authors interviewed did not repress their anger and did not find it easy to forgive. But they realized that it was their duty to “fight the tendency not to forgive.” They do this because from early life they have been formed by the words of the gospel. As one man puts it,



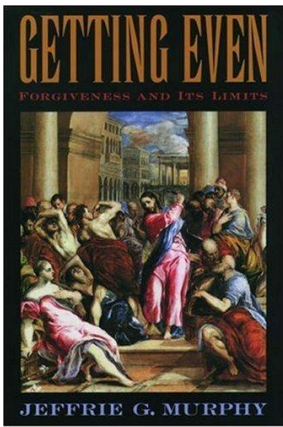
“We can’t be forgiven if we don’t forgive, you know, so we really try hard to overcome that [resentment].” At the heart of this spirituality is the attitude of *Gelassenheit*. The authors describe this attitude as “yieldedness” or “submission.” For the Amish faith means submission to God’s will, and this is manifest in submission to the Church and its leaders as well as to the path of nonresistance and the rejection of self-defense and revenge. So, from their clothing and ways of living to their relationships to each other and those outside, the Amish practice yielding to the Reality of God’s creation. The effect of these practices, and the worship, stories and songs that support yielding, results in a way of perceiving and experiencing the events of life in a context of Divine Wisdom and Providence. Everything that is part of life, even those things not readily understood let alone appreciated, comes to be seen as part of this Providence.

In fact, this context of *Gelassenheit* in some ways allows the believers to experience the reality of life in its good and evil dimensions even more deeply than most of us do. The Amish are well aware of the presence of evil, but unlike most of our culture they recognize it as present everywhere and in everyone and do not project it on to isolated others. As one elder said in speaking of the gunman, “It would be better to say he was overcome by evil. He was overcome by Satan, by evil, but he was not an evil man.” (130) It is precisely the fact that evil is not “foreign” to the Amish’s sense of life that enables them to avoid resentment and demonizing of “the other,” even the other who has harmed them. According to the authors, there are very different views of the acceptability of angry feelings among the Amish. All recognize anger as a “dangerous emotion,” although they differ in terms of whether or not it is “OK to be angry.” But where they do not differ is in their belief that resentment, nursing grudges, and harboring bitterness in ones’ heart is wrong. “We say, ‘it’s OK to get angry, but don’t hit the horse or kick the dog or punch your brother. . . . If I hold a grudge for one day, it is bad. If I hold it for two days, it’s worse. If I hold a grudge for a year, then that man [Roberts, the killer] is controlling my life. Why not just let go of the grudge now?’” (132)

*Amish Grace* helps us to see that forgiveness is not a matter of isolated acts of the will but rather the fruit of a life-long formation in one’s understanding and experience of the world as God’s and in the daily practices that lead to an ever greater “yieldedness” or abandonment to the Way and the ways of the Creator.

Two other works from a religious perspective include *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* by L. Gregory Jones (Wm. Eerdmans Publishing Company,

1995) and *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* by Miroslav Volf (Zondervan, 2006).



What is more surprising is the proliferation of literature on forgiveness in other fields, such as philosophy, politics and cultural criticism. Jeffrie G. Murphy's *Getting Even: Forgiveness and Its Limits* (Oxford University Press, 2003) challenges our ordinary notions of forgiveness, proposing that vindictive emotions (anger, resentment, and the desire for revenge) deserve a legitimate

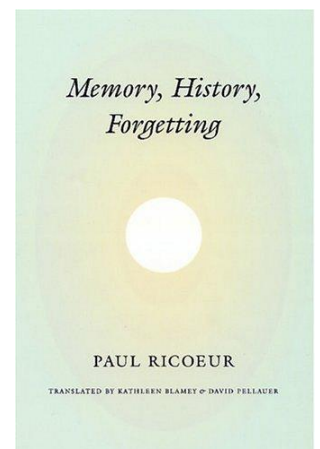
place in our emotional, social and legal lives, while forgiveness – though a great virtue – deserves to be more selectively granted. The chapters of Murphy's book examine the nature and virtue of forgiveness; the place of vindictiveness in human affairs; and repentance, punishment, mercy and self-forgiveness. In a chapter on forgiveness and psychotherapy, Martin Buber is recalled as having once cautioned therapists that "in their desire to help clients overcome their neurotic guilt, they should not do anything that might prevent their clients from dealing properly with their authentic or existential guilt." (76) Boston University Professor of Philosophy Charles L. Griswold also undertakes a philosophical approach to the topic in *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration* (Cambridge University Press, 2007). This very fine book makes necessary distinctions among related terms, such as apology, pardon, excuse, forgiveness. Forgiveness, according to Griswold, has several siblings: political apology, economic forgiveness, political pardon, judicial pardon, and metaphysical forgiveness. Griswold maintains that there are conditions that must be met if forgiveness is to succeed. An authentic act of forgiveness is one of the hardest things to achieve. It is a life-changing act: "To move beyond, to forgive, is to no longer see oneself in the same way."

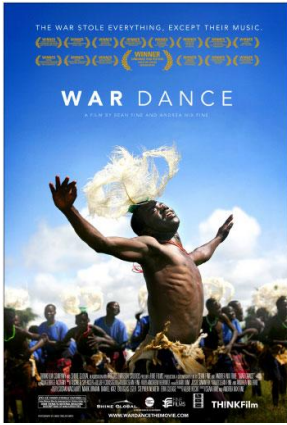
"Forgiving and forgetting go together," writes Harald Weinrich in *Lethe: The Art and Critique of Forgetting* (Cornell University Press, 2004); "they are two aspects of the same thing." Recalling the prayer of the prophet Jeremiah—"O Lord, the hope of Israel, all who forsake you shall be put to shame; those who turn away from you shall be written in the earth . . ." – Weinrich muses that Jesus may have been consigning those who threatened to stone the adulteress woman to forgetting by writing their names in the sand. The more conventional interpretation of the act is also credited as an

aspect of forgiveness itself, i.e. that forgetting is implied by the act of "writing guilt in the sand," provided of course that the adulterous woman observe the condition of returning to the Lord, "the fountain of living water" spoken of in the Jeremiah passage. (168) Forgiving and forgetting are also discussed in the context of amnesty and pardoning debts. *Reasons of the Heart*, as Dunne's many other works, is not easy reading. Yet to enter into the highly meditative mode of his thinking and writing is deeply rewarding. The author's circular writing style draws the reader into a meditative mode of thinking and into the "spiritual adventure" that he describes so well. It is a discipline against hurried, informational reading; an invitation to personal reflection and interformative dialogue with the text.

"One must know how to forget in order to taste the full flavor of the present, of the moment, and of expectation, but memory itself needs forgetfulness: one must forget the recent past in order to find the ancient past." We hear frequently, following the horrors of the twentieth century, that we have a "duty to remember." In *Oblivion* (University of Minnesota Press 2004, translated by Marjolijn de Jager) Marc Augé argues that survivors of atrocities must also be able to do their share of forgetting "in order to find faith in the everyday again and mastery over their time." Both – memory and forgetting – are needed. We remember in order to forget; we forget: to remember. Augé demonstrates in his essay that "oblivion brings us back to the present," that indeed we must forget in order to remain present." (3, 88-89)

Paul Ricoeur (*Memory, History, Forgetting*, University of Chicago Press, 2004) observes that kinship is found in many languages between forgiving and forgetting. The last fifty pages of the book focus on forgiveness in relationship to the three main themes of the book's title, with special emphasis on forgetting. We learn that just as memory can be understood in two ways (as passive remembering and as an active search to remember/retrieve a memory) so too does the character of forgetting divide into two distinct operations: forgetting through effacement (oblivion) and forgetting kept in reserve (which vides the true sense of forgetting as "there-for-the-getting"). Carefree memory allows us to forget; concerned memory assures that memories held in reserve will not be entirely forgotten.





“War Dance” (Sean Fine and Andrea Nix, Directors 2007) tells the story of those children whose families have been torn apart in war-ravaged Northern Uganda. The children reside in Patongo, a displaced person’s camp, where they are invited to compete in an annual music and dance festival in Kampala. The journey provides the youths with an opportunity

to regain part of their childhood and to taste victory for the first time in their lives, a victory that goes a long way in helping them to regard themselves as more than the shame they feel as displaced persons from a part of the country that is under-appreciated.

“Forgiveness” (Ian Gabriel, Dir. 2004) is the story of an ex-policeman’s journey to make reparation for the torture and murder he committed during South Africa’s apartheid years. Haunted by these events, the Dutchman undertakes a long journey to the small fishing town of Paternoster to beg forgiveness of the family of his victim, an innocent 21 year old freedom fighter. This harrowing tale demonstrates the cycle of violence begetting violence.

“The Lookout” (Scott Frank, Dir. 2007), a taut crime drama, involves a once-promising high-school athlete whose life is turned upside down following a tragic car accident. While striving to maintain a normal life against staggering odds and to overcome guilt feelings about his responsibility for the accident, the youth is subtly preyed upon by local criminals who entrap him in a scheme to rob the bank he works in. In the end he is absolved of guilt in the heist, but is left with a personal challenge and the stirrings of hope: if he can learn to forgive himself perhaps others, too, will grow in forgiveness of him.

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**RELIGIOUS LIFE ITSELF AS CHARISM**  
**PART 1: RE-IMAGINING THE LIFE BEYOND ITS**  
**META-NARRATIVES**  
**[Charism Studies (3)]**

~Reginald D. Cruz, CFX

**I**n the previous installment of this essay, I offered the following definition for charism in Religious Life: *a particularity of the pulsing of the Spirit’s goodwill toward creation which an individual or group of individuals powerfully intuited within a crucial his-*

*torical moment and embodied in a Religious Life form, and subsequently appropriated and deepened by the goodwill of those who later relate with the Spirit’s pulsing in the life form begotten by these founders and are formally incorporated into their communities.* What this definition suggests is that charisms have three dimensions: (1) Spiritual roots (pneumatic); (2) socio-historical actualization (incarnation of the charism); and (3) memorial dynamism (anamnesic). Before I parse these facets of the phenomenon, let me emphasize that Religious Life *itself* is a charism of the Spirit to the Church. This assertion puts in question the understanding of Religious Life in late modern Catholicism and lends greater credence to the definition of charism I am proposing.

As stated in the previous essay, the Spirit’s uninterrupted and active interaction with humanity flows out of His/Her (com)passion for the universe. The Spirit communicates this (com)passion through the agency of women and men keenly attentive to His/Her quiet bidding in the events unfolding in their world and within the depth of their being. Although the institutional Church has the power to legitimize the Religious Life forms borne out of this dynamic communication, it could (and should) never claim that it is the primary origin of the inspiration. “Whatever role the institution might play in authenticating the call of Christians to Religious Life, the institution did not invent that life, cannot impose it (on all the believers), and must not impede it. To do so is to interfere with the free action of the Holy Spirit in the Church.” (Sandra Schneiders, *Finding the Treasure*, 285) *Religious Life, then, is not a gift of the Church to the world but, rather, it is a gift [Gk., charis] of the Spirit to the Church in its mission to image Christ to the world.*

In order to incarnate properly their being charism to the Church, religious must actively re-consider how they relate its power center and its non-vowed members. In spite of the renewal of ecclesiology since Vatican II, the leadership and laity of the Church continue to see *religious as agents of the institution* itself. In his apostolic exhortation to religious, the late Pope John Paul II asserted that “the consecrated life is at the very heart of the Church as a decisive element for her mission.” (*Vita Consecrata*, 3) Read uncritically, these words could be used to legitimize the aforementioned view of ecclesiastical agency. Worse, these words can be improperly interpreted as a justification of the notion that religious are *a special segment of the Church* because they originate from its center. This arises from long-held narratives that dictate what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu referred to as our collective *habitus* (i.e., durable and embodied yet unconscious life disposi-

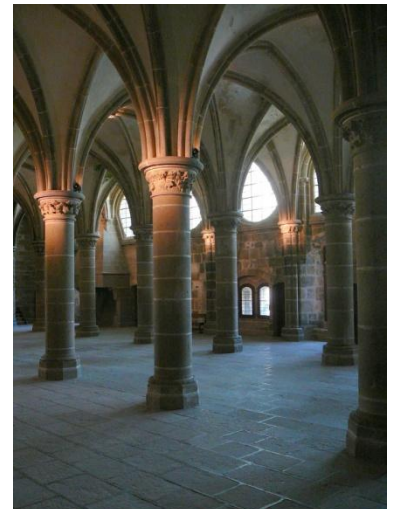
tions arising from a lack of a serious self- and social-appraisal). To effectively bring about a re-location of Religious Life with the Church's clerical leadership and its non-vowed majority, we have to assess critically the subtle narratives of the specialness in the life form.

For nearly fifty years practitioners in the fields of literature, history, and the social sciences have been grappling with once unchallenged societal ideas related to their disciplines. These *meta-narratives* are constituted by discourses – the “great stories” which historian Robert Berkhofer referred to in his later writings – that form the collective consciousness of the population for centuries. They are then passed on from one generation to the next and uncritically assimilated into the group's fibers where they become incorporated into its collective self-identification. Intangible, the meta-narratives significantly mold the group's imagination (whether about themselves or the world around them) and consequently determine the symbolic margins that delineate the acceptable and the liminal in their societies. While some meta-narratives should be repudiated outright as toxic (e.g., the belief in Aryan superiority among Nazis and neo-Nazis), many (if not most) of the rest are hardly insidious, despite their potential for generating alterity in societies. Since the mid-60s, however, the academic world has formed students to view society at large differently and to read its texts with far more critical lenses. With this so-called *linguistic turn* influencing the way the past and present are understood, it is inevitable that even the kindlier of the meta-narratives in our Religious Life would be scrutinized, disempowered, and even rejected.

Religious communities, past and present, subsist on meta-narratives – some clearly more than others. Collectively, though, religious have become willing and unwilling captives to “the stories we tell to ourselves.” These discourses become so embedded in the life form that we hardly question them until challenged by those around us. For example, we religious (and diocesan priests as well) have been appropriating for ourselves two Gospel passages much to the chagrin of the laity. When Jesus's observation that “many are called, but few are chosen” (Mt 22:14) is proclaimed in our worship spaces, most of us religious believe that the Lord was specifically referring to us as “the chosen”. Likewise, when the verses “the harvest is great, but the laborers are few” (Mt 9:37) are read, most of us are convinced that we are the laborers of the harvest whom Jesus had in mind. Every serious Biblical scholar asserts that these passages challenge every Christian to authentic discipleship. Too many times, unfortunately, we religious have been conditioned to believe (and are convinced) that Jesus is signifying through these words

our being “set apart” from the rest of the world. As much as we shy away from the very idea, we believe we are *that* special. The problem is that being “set apart” in the Christian ascetic tradition eschews such self-importance. Sadly, these meta-narratives can feed on our all-too-human egotistic impulse.

If our life form is to be re-rooted into the counsels of Jesus, we religious should be mindful of the spiritual egotism injected in it by past worldviews and practices. Such mindfulness entails a willingness to embrace our pains and to re-imagine our life form undergoing what Paul Ricoeur called a *second naïveté*, i.e. a fresh encounter with the transcendent roots of our Religious Life. As we courageously examine our collective calling into this life, we may likely behold not only our fear of being ordinary but also our uneasiness with being a minority in the Church. Women and men religious have always been a numerical minority in the over-all Catholic population. It is true that formation houses once brimmed with young and eager candidates. But while there is nothing inherently wrong with our narratives of the “good old days of Religious Life”, we might forget that we were then – as now – one of the Church's minorities. An embrace of our minority status requires a conscientious awareness of the tricky relational dynamics it brings about between us and other members of the faith. Minorities tend to be exoticized by the majority, viewed by the wider population as either the threatening or the mesmerizing Other. In the former case, the numerically powerful impose their perceived superiority – racial, economic, religious, etc. – even to the point of legitimizing their bigoted narratives. In the latter case, the majority (usually uncritical in this situation) condescend to the perceived superiority of a minority, who perpetuate this illusion to veil their anxiety and protect their interests. In both cases, meta-narratives play a significant role in perpetuating a society's unhealthy power dynamics, since these are used to justify the claims of ascendancy of the wielders of power. Tyranny is thus exercised by both a powerful majority and a powerful minority. Religious should be keenly conscious and disturbed that because of their influence on its members and their close association with its leadership *they are a privileged minority in the Church.*



## **FACETS OF FORGIVENESS: SCRIPTURAL IMAGES AND UNDERSTANDINGS OF FORGIVENESS AND BEING FORGIVEN**

~ Rev. Brenda Bennett

**F**orgiveness is a topic I'm passionate about! As a nurse, I have seen the damage that guilt, unrelied by a sense of forgiveness, can do a person's health. As a minister, I frequently observe that forgiving and forgiveness are matters Christians get wrong. We misunderstand what it means to forgive one another and we misinterpret what Divine forgiveness means and how it is accomplished.

The following is a brief overview of forgiveness within the Judaeo-Christian tradition. It examines the nature and meaning of Divine forgiveness as revealed in Scripture and explores how we can live out the Divine command to forgive one another.

### **Forgiveness**

The Lord has taken away your punishment,  
he has turned back your enemy.  
The Lord, the King of Israel, is with you;  
never again will you fear harm.  
(Zephaniah 3: 14-17, NIV)

Thus the prophet Zephaniah proclaims the promise of God's forgiveness. It is a promise found throughout the Scriptures and traditions of the Jewish and Christian faiths.

In the Hebrew Bible, stories, psalms and prophetic utterances describe rather than define Divine forgiveness. Historical narratives and prophetic commentaries relate the same pattern of events:

- ❖ human beings mess up
- ❖ God gets angry
- ❖ God punishes
- ❖ the people repent & plead for mercy
- ❖ God relents & blesses the people once more

That is the synopsis of the First Testament!

Like its New Testament counterpart, the subject of sin and forgiveness are central to the Hebrew Canon. In fact, the Bible could be viewed as a chronicle of God's different attempts to prevent or correct human wrongdoing and to ameliorate its consequences.

### **The Pre-Historical Narratives**

The Canonical record of human sin and God's response begins in the pre-historical narratives of Genesis 1-12. In these foundational myths and stories, forgiveness is not named as a Divine disposition but it is

revealed in God's attitudes and actions towards humankind.

Thus, protological man and woman – Adam and Eve – are punished for disobeying God's law but they are not destroyed. Just the opposite! God graciously provides his rebellious children with the protection they will need to live apart from his direct guidance and care. Adam & Eve are given clothing (Genesis 3:21); their fratricidal son, a special mark which will prevent him from being killed by others (4:15).

These early theological stories stand in stark contrast to tales about pagan gods from the same time period. Only Yahweh seems saddened by the results of human wrongdoing. Only Yahweh tries to help human beings who violate Divine law.

By the time we come to the story of Noah, we find that God has accepted that men and women are fallible and morally frail. God promises never to destroy life on Earth again (Genesis 9:11-15) but a life expectancy of 120 years is imposed upon humankind (Genesis 6:3). Rather than a punishment for sin, this was a form of Divine damage limitation. Just imagine what the world would be like if Hitler or Stalin had lived for ever...

The pre-historical myths and narratives of our faith declare that God thought it best if no one got to live for too long a time. Death was given to prevent sin rather than to punish it.

Yahweh, the Bible tells us, is a God who seeks to remedy both the consequences of sin and sin itself.

### **Sin and Its Consequences**

Before we look, then, at forgiveness in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, we must first understand what the Bible means by "sin". What do we do that must be pardoned or corrected by God? Is it major moral lapses such as breaking one of the Ten Commandments or minor breaches of the conduct codes of church and society? Or, are human beings as Calvin described them, "totally depraved"? Does our whole existence need forgiving?

The most common Biblical expression for sin is a word that means "missing the mark." The Hebrew *chata* and the Greek *hamartano*, which are used to describe human error, are also technical terms for "failure to hit an intended target" (See Judges 20:16). Just as an archer can miss his target, so human beings can "miss the mark" of God's will. Missing the mark can be either accidental or willful. It is the inadvertent or deliberate failure to do or be what God intended.

Other Biblical terms that denote sin include moral failure, law-breaking, injustice and lack of reverence for God or rebellion against God. All of these attitudes and actions fail to measure up to God's perfect plan for creation. They result in hurt and harm to individuals, to communities and to the natural world. Men and women are alienated from one another, from the Earth and from their own authentic selves.

Above all, sin separates humankind from God. It does so exactly as Genesis 3 describes: we want to do things our own way so we don't listen to God. Then, when we mess everything up, we hide from God. We hope he won't notice what we've done; we hope he won't notice us at all.

Sin separates us from God.

Sin also separates us from our authentic selves. Jesus tells us that when the Prodigal Son "came to himself" he chose to return to his father's house (Luke 15:17). Dissolute living in a foreign land or scrabbling for an existence among the pigs were not this young man's authentic lifestyle. He had been created to do and be something better. As a ne'er-do-well playboy, this man was less than himself.

Jeremiah likened the life of sin to a cracked water reservoir (2:13). Not only is it broken, it is not fit for purpose. Sin, then, is the failure to be the person that God intended. Sinful men and women are estranged both from their authentic selves and from God who is the Creator and Sustainer of life. Jesus described it as "being lost" (Lk 15:1-32).

## Remedies for Sin

Scripture tells us that God is displeased by human wrongdoing. At times, the behavior of individuals and groups provokes God's anger (Amos 5:21-24); at other times, sadness and dismay (Jeremiah 31:31-32). Our heavenly mother and father loves us and longs to be in relationship with us. Alienation from our Divine parent hurts God as well harming humankind.

That is the essential message of Jesus' parables concerning the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son. The shepherd and the housewife frantically search for the lost objects that are precious to them. The abandoned Dad spends his time scanning the horizon, hoping to see his wayward son returning.

Forgiveness, for God, is not merely an act of pardon; it is an act of reconciliation. It is relational rather than juridical.

Divine forgiveness is also an act of renewal. Its grace heals the self-inflicted wounds of sin; and strengthens

the penitent in his or her own battle against wrongdoing.

## The Law

The covenant Yahweh made with Abraham was a pact designed to bind a people closely to God. Its solemnization and codification in the Mosaic Law provided mechanisms by which breaches in the relationship between God and people could be repaired and renewed.

The Law of Moses was formulated to help men and women understand and obey the Divine will. Many of its stipulations were designed to foster close ties between the children of Israel and Yahweh. Thus a Tabernacle was commissioned so that God's presence could be recognized and received on Earth. Rituals were established to formalize human repentance and Divine forgiveness.

All those animal sacrifices that seem so primitive and barbaric to us had, as their ultimate goal, the sharing of a meal between God and humanity. In an act of absolution and reconciliation, God partook of the same elements as his people. Just as Jesus' own table fellowship would offer forgiveness, healing and affirmation to all and sundry, so animal sacrifices provided the opportunity for humankind to participate in table fellowship with Yahweh.

Under Divine inspiration, forgiveness and reconciliation were built into the legal code of our Jewish ancestors in the faith.

## The Prophets

The prophets of ancient Israel were God's covenant enforcers. Their role was to remind the people of the Law and of their duty to Yahweh. As such they spoke out against sin and warned of impending punishment. But they also promised that, if the people turned away from sin, God would forgive them. Repentance would be rewarded by Divine pardon, reconciliation with God and renewal of the nation.

In one of my favorite prophetic passages, Hosea likens Yahweh's love for humankind to that of a mother of a toddler. In [Hosea] chapter 11, God laments that her people constantly turn from her despite all the care and concern she has poured over them. In anger and frustration, God threatens the children of Israel with the might of Egypt and Assyrian. But then God repents her own wrath and recants the proposed punishment.

Divine forgiveness comes not from the people's actions but from God's own love and mercy. The same message is repeated by the prophet Joel. At a time when Israel was being threatened by plagues of locusts, we read the following words:

Yet even now, says the Lord,  
return to me with all your heart,  
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;  
rend your hearts and not your clothing.  
Return to the Lord, your God,  
for he is gracious and merciful,  
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,  
and relents from punishing.  
(Joel 2: 12,13 NRSV)

God, in love and mercy, constantly offers humankind Divine three-fold forgiveness: pardon, reconciliation and renewal. Throughout the historical books and the prophetic writings of the Hebrew Bible, God calls the people back to a faithful relationship with Yahweh, back to a life lived according to Divine law. Only a faithful remnant ever takes God up on the offer.

### **Jesus: The Way of Forgiveness**

God, it seems, at a certain point realizes that previous plans to keep humankind from sin have not worked. Neither legal requirements, nor cultic practices, nor prophetic pleadings have succeeded in binding people to God or to the Divine will.

The prophet Jeremiah, in a famous and much beloved passage, reveals that God is going to go about things a different way.

*I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel ... I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they will be my people. ... I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more. (Jeremiah 31:31-34, NRSV)*

The prophet Jeremiah tells the children of Israel that, in the future, God is going to do things differently. Instead of telling the people what to do and hoping they'll do it, God will put the knowledge of the Divine self and the understanding of the Divine will within their hearts. God will no longer lead using an external set of laws that have to be memorized and observed; the Divine principles of right living will become an internal guide and compass. Men and women will know deep in their hearts who God is and what God is all about. Then they will obey him. Then they will love him.

The Christian faith teaches that Jesus was the way God put that plan into action. Jesus says that himself in John 14:6 - "I am the Way" he tells his disciples.

*Do the things I do and you will enjoy the same loving parent-child relationship with God as I have?*

Jesus was the way God fulfilled the plan he revealed to Jeremiah. His mission was two-fold:

1. to demonstrate to people how to live out the Divine commandments to love God and neighbor
2. to reflect and reveal God's love for all people and all creation

Through Jesus' ministry and message, God would draw closer to all people and they, in turn, would grow closer to God. Men and women would do what was right not because it was the Law but because they loved God and knew that God's will was always good and kind and right for everyone.

Peter Abelard (1079 -1142) advanced this theory in response to Anselm's harsh doctrine of substitutionary atonement. He based his teachings on texts such as Luke 15, Luke 19:10, John 10 and 2 Corinthians 5:19. However, it is hard to control people with a doctrine of love; fear and guilt are much easier emotions to manipulate and so Abelard's moral influence theory remained largely unpreached and untaught until liberation theology visited once more the meaning of Jesus' life and death.

Liberation theology is theology from below. That is, it doesn't look at God and God's actions in history from the point of view of the powerful. Rather, it interprets the Divine nature and Divine work through the lens of the poor and oppressed.

Doctrines such as redemptive suffering and eternal punishment for sin are teachings that are usually held against the poor by the rich, the powerless by the powerful. For the poor and the marginalized in our societies, linking Divine forgiveness with Jesus' death on the Cross all too often becomes a justification for their own suffering and abuse.

The concept of redemptive suffering was used by slave owners to control their slaves. It is utilized to this day by abusive husbands, corrupt political regimes and exploitative bosses. Anselm's medieval teaching has remained a tool for keeping the poor and the marginalized subjugated and suppressed.

Theologians and church workers called to minister to the poor and disenfranchised, to those oppressed by race or gender or sexual orientation, have reminded the Christian world that Jesus' life was more important than his death. They have shown us that what was salvific about Jesus' ministry and mission was his love not his pain.

Jesus proclaimed God's love for humankind and demonstrated it by his own acts of loving service and through his table fellowship with all sorts of people from all walks of life (Luke 14:1; 15:1). Jesus revealed through both words and actions, that Divine forgiveness is a freely given gift of God; not something that has to be earned through spiritual labors or physical suffering. In his stories and in his personal encounters, Jesus made it clear that pardon for sin and reconciliation with God's own self is available to all who genuinely seek it.

When he met that most unscrupulous and unpleasant of tax collectors, Jesus' only request of Zaccheus was that he visit with him in his home (Luke 19:1-10). Sunday School children in England sing,

*When the Master came that way he looked into the tree and said, "Zaccheus won't you come down for I'm coming to your house for tea."*

Jesus didn't condemn this Roman collaborator, nor did he exact any form of punishment; Jesus simply invited Zaccheus into a personal relationship with him. It was this act of love that prompted Zaccheus to change his life around - to repent - and make amends.

Everyone who came to Jesus in openness or emptiness or need freely received of this love, this forgiveness, this healing of brokenness.

## Conclusion

The covenant Yahweh made with Abraham was a pact designed to bind a people closely to God. Its solemnization and codification in the Mosaic Law provided mechanisms by which breaches in the relationship between God and people could be repaired and renewed.

The Law of Moses was formulated to help men and women understand and obey the Divine will. Many of its stipulations were designed to foster close ties between the children of Israel and Yahweh. Thus a Tabernacle was commissioned so that God's presence could be recognized and received on Earth. Rituals were established to formalize human repentance and Divine forgiveness.

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tunity for humankind to participate in table fellowship with Yahweh.

Under Divine inspiration, forgiveness and reconciliation were built into the legal code of our Jewish ancestors in the faith.

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## FORGIVENESS - THE COMMAND

~ Rev. Brenda Bennett

**T**he Bible is a history of how God has constantly striven to pardon sin, repair its consequences and reconcile alienated humanity with their authentic selves and with the Divine.

Forgiveness is how God restores order to our world; it is how God renews the relationship between the human and the Divine. And because God knows that it works, we too are commanded to forgive one another. In fact, the Lord's Prayer suggests that it is through our own acts of forgiving that Divine forgiveness is accessed.

### The Dominical Command

Jesus spent his ministry preaching Divine forgiveness and actualizing it through his own relationships and acts of restoration and reconciliation. Jesus also stressed the importance of forgiving one another.

In the Sermon on the Mount and in conversation with Peter, Jesus emphasized that the rule of love must supersede legally and culturally sanctioned limits to forgiveness (Matthew 5:38-48, 18: 21-22). The parable of the unmerciful servant (Matthew 18:23-35) is almost a *midrash* on his prayer petition "*forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.*" (Matthew 6:12). It should not be interpreted, however, as promulgating Divine *quid pro quo*. Instead, Jesus' prayer and parable recognize that a person who is consumed with hatred or bitterness will be unable to request or receive forgiveness from God. Jesus, in his wisdom, was revealing a psychological truth about humankind, not a theological truth about God.

If the ability to forgive is a necessary condition for being forgiven; if a forgiving disposition is a prerequisite for a right relationship with God, how can this be accomplished? Forgiving and forgetting are not easy when the hurt and pain refuse to go away. Repeatedly turning the other cheek is more likely to result in a mutilated face than in a moving spiritual moment.

Understanding the meaning of the word “forgiveness” and recognizing the process it involves, helps us comprehend how we can forgive one another and why it is so important to our emotional, spiritual and physical well-being.

## The Definition of Forgiveness

The New Testament and Septuagint (Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) word that is used for “forgive” and its cognates is *aphiamai*. It means:

- to let loose
- give up or hand over
- set free
- release
- put away / get rid of

The word that we translate as “forgive” means to let go of something, to release it or set it free. What we have to let go of is our anger and our desire for revenge; what we have to release is our bitterness and brokenness.

Forgiveness does not mean forgetting about our pain or pretending that we were never hurt. To forgive someone does not require us to say that the other person did nothing wrong; nor that we were not wounded by their wrongdoing. Above all, forgiveness does not mean saying that we were to blame.

Whether it is a minor slight or more serious injury, Christians all too often respond by denying that any hurt or harm occurred. We say we weren’t hurt; we say “it was probably all my fault.”

In the name of Christian forgiveness, wives put up with unfaithful husbands, employees tolerate discrimination in the workplace, and adult survivors of childhood abuse blame themselves for the actions of the abusive elder. All these are parodies of Christian forgiveness. They make a mockery of both mercy and justice. Forgiveness can never, ever be based upon deception, denial or pretense.

Forgiveness is the willingness to face the offender with the enormity of his or her offense and then to work with that person to develop a new and healthy relationship.[1]

Forgiveness is not saying, that’s OK – think nothing of it – I probably deserved it, anyway. Rather, the act of forgiveness confronts a person with his or her offense and then offers to help that person find a healthier way of relating to oneself.

How can we forgive people who have hurt us? How can we create healthier relationships with people who have wounded us or even abused us?

How can we begin over with a spouse? a parent? a boss or a pastor?

## The 3 R’s of Forgiveness: Repentance, Refusal, Restoration

*Repentance:* The foundation of forgiveness is repentance. Pardoning a person or group for harm they have caused you is based upon the wrongdoers’ genuine regret at what they have done and a genuine desire not to repeat the offense.

*Refusal:* Forgiveness must also be accompanied by a refusal to accept further harm. To forgive somebody does not mean that you allow them to continue to hurt or harm you. Forgiveness has nothing to do with being a doormat.

Charles Griswold, a professor of philosophy at Boston University, states that continuing to tolerate behavior that is hurtful or harmful is not forgiveness. It is merely “putting up with” - controlling one’s anger enough to continue to exist in the situation.[2]

It is neither loving nor forgiving to allow your boss or your superior to take advantage of you; to permit your partner or spouse to physically or verbally abuse you; or to deny parents who were abusive the opportunity for repentance and reconciliation. Genuine forgiveness is predicated upon the refusal of the forgiver to be subjected to more harm.[3]

“Wait a minute”, you’re thinking, didn’t Jesus talk about “turning the other cheek”? Aren’t Christians supposed to tolerate mistreatment? The simple answer is “no”!

The passage from the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:38-42) where Jesus addresses the subject of accepting maltreatment is not a text that can be applied to any and all situations. Jesus’ three illustrations related to specific legal and cultural practices; practices that Jesus felt could be transformed by love.

To hit someone on the right side of their face means, generally, that one hits with the back of one’s hand - that was a gross insult in the ancient world and entitled the offended person to retaliate. Jesus was not telling his followers to tolerate physical violence, he was simply saying that they shouldn’t respond in kind when they were insulted.

His second example referred to law suits for recovering debt. The Mosaic Law declared that one’s cloak

was an inalienable right of possession and could not be confiscated. (Exodus 22:25-27). Jesus taught that, if we are in debt to another person, we should be willing to do whatever is necessary to make good on the debt.

Jesus' last illustration related to Roman law: civilians could be commandeered to carry the luggage of military personnel for one mile. Impressment, like an insulting slap or a predatory loan, provokes outrage. Jesus was telling his followers not to be spiteful or vengeful but to be helpful and "go the extra mile."

Jesus' recommendation was that, under forced conditions, his followers should respond as lovingly and gracefully as possible. He never stated that people should voluntarily accept treatment that hurts and harms. Jesus never advocated being a doormat!

*Restoration of Right Relationship:* The primary purpose of forgiveness is to pave the way for a right relationship to be restored between the offender and the person they offended: between husband & wife, parent & adult child, victim & oppressor.

Forgiveness is the act of Christian love which offers a person who has harmed us the chance to repent and the opportunity to start a new, healthy relationship with us. Ultimately, the act of forgiveness prepares the ground for the offender to be restored to a right relationship with God.[4]

## **The Process of Forgiveness**

Forgiving someone whose has hurt or wounded us is not a single act either of the will or the emotions. It is, instead, an "ongoing work of the Spirit of God." [5]

That ongoing work has three components:

- 1) it is an act of the will
- 2) it can only be done with God's help
- 3) it must be repeated as necessary

### *It Is an Act of Will:*

Forgiveness is an act of the will; it is not an emotion or a feeling. Forgiveness has nothing to do with not feeling angry or hurt anymore. It doesn't even mean that you want to be close to that person again.

To forgive someone is to make a conscious decision to let go of the anger and bitterness and the desire for some sort of revenge. We release the chains, the bonds of anger and resentment, that have kept us closely tied to the offender & his or her offense. We let go of all desire to get even or to pay back.

All of us are men and women who to try to live out the teachings of Jesus and other spiritual leaders; we're

not the sort of people who seek revenge - or so we think.

Getting even is not necessarily a matter of "doing to them what they did to me"; or the more modern version of *lex talionis*: "what goes around comes around." Frequently, we find ourselves wishing and hoping that the person who offended us might be "found out" in some sort of way (Please note, I am not referring here to someone who has committed a criminal act and who might well do so again. In such cases, public safety, at the very least, requires us to notify law enforcement agencies.).

But people who have harmed us in ways that are not remedial under law are often totally different in other walks of life. The husband and father who is a bully in his own home might be a much loved leader in his church; the woman who works tirelessly in the community might be someone who never bothers to visit her own ailing mother.

Forgiveness means letting go of the desire for everyone to know what the person who hurt us is really like; it is the giving up of resentment that he or she is "getting away with it." When we forgive someone we ask God to take care of that person's discipline and correction; we trust that God will set things right.

### *It Can only Be Done With God's Help:*

Letting go of our anger and resentment, giving up all desire for revenge or for getting even, is very difficult. It can only be done with God's help & in his strength.

Forgiveness is not only an act of will, it is also an act of prayer. Only in the presence of God and in conversation with God's healing and comforting Spirit, can we muster the courage and grace to forgive.

In her book *A Heart Like His*, Rebecca Manley Pipert recounts the story of Corrie ten Boom meeting one of her former guards from the Ravensbruck concentration camp. This gentleman, who had caused her and her sister so much pain and shame, extends his hand to Corrie and asks for her forgiveness.

Feeling nothing but icy hatred, Corrie feels God nudging her to shake her former captor's hand. Reluctantly but obediently, Corrie puts out her hand.

The following is her account of what happened next:

It was only after my simple act of obedience that I felt something like warm oil was being poured over me. And with it the unmistakable message: "Well done, Corrie. That's how my children behave." [6]

When it comes to forgiveness, we need only supply the trust and obedience; God will supply the rest.

*It Must Be Repeated As Necessary:*

You can earnestly and honestly decide to forgive a person in the morning and within a few hours all the hostile and negative feelings have rushed back once more. Forgiveness is like a painkiller for the soul - you have to keep using it until the wound is completely healed.

Even then, there are times when closed wounds burst open once more. Old memories arise or new information comes to light which must be processed before healing can begin once more - before forgiveness can be renewed.

When pain and anger resurface, all we can do is release the feelings into God's loving care yet again - and again. Jesus said we should forgive "seventy times seven"; that might mean 490 times a month or even 490 times a day!

### **When Repentance and Reconciliation Don't Occur**

The goal of forgiveness is the transformation of the person who wounded us and the transformation of our relationship with that person. Forgiveness offered in God's strength is a balm that not only heals the wounds from past injury, it also repairs the damaged relationship that gave rise to the offending treatment.

Forgiveness is a Divine gift that remedies hurt and prevents further harm.

But not always: sometimes a person can be so stubborn, so hard of heart, so wicked even, that nothing will change their behavior.

When this occurs; when all efforts to build a new and healthy relationship fail, then, sadly, the only solution we have left is to withdraw from the relationship.

Sometimes, tragically, the only course open to us is to excommunicate the person who deeply wounds us. To allow a person to persist in abusive, aggressive or harmful behavior is not an act of forgiveness nor is it an act of love.

The author of the 2 Thessalonians wrestled with what do with believers who persisted in sin; his answer was that they should be left alone. "Have nothing to do with them," he wrote but "do not regard them as enemies." (2 Thessalonians 3:14, 15)

Sometimes, that is the only Christian option available.

### **Conclusion**

Forgiveness is one of the primary means by which God expresses love and mercy. We are called to share in spreading these Divine gifts to kindred humankind.

When we forgive, we affirm and celebrate the imago Dei within our own lives. We experience the healing touch of she who is called the "Comforter". And we participate in Jesus' own ministry of reconciliation and renewal.

When we forgive, we hear God proudly saying, "Well done, that's how my children behave."

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### **Notes**

[1] Dan Allender & Tremper Longman III, *Bold Love* (Colorado Springs, Co.: Navpress, 1992), 157-165.

[2] Natalie Jacobson McCracken, "The Hardest Thing You'll Ever Do", *Bostonia* (Winter 2007) 8: 44.

[3] Allender & Longman, 245-7

[4] *ibid.*, 163

[5] *ibid.*, 158

[6] Rebecca Manley Pippert, *A Heart Like His* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1996), 95.



## NEWSLETTER STAFF/CONTRIBUTORS

*Resources in Spiritual Formation* is co-directed by Romeo J. Bonsaint, SC and John D. Hamilton, CFX. **Romeo J. Bonsaint, SC, PhD**, is a member of the New England Province of the Brothers of the Sacred Heart. He holds a masters degree and a doctorate in Formative Spirituality from the Institute of Formative Spirituality of Duquesne University. He has taught in spirituality programs in Rome, at Duquesne and Creighton Universities, and at various sites throughout New England. Along with John D. Hamilton, he develops courses in Formative Spirituality and is available for formative spiritual direction at Xavier Center, where *Resources in Spiritual Formation* is located. **John D. Hamilton, CFX, MA**, is a member of the Xaverian Brothers. He holds graduate degrees in English from Wesleyan University and in Formative Spirituality from Duquesne University. In addition to his work at *Resources in Spiritual Formation*, he is also General Councilor for Formation for the Xaverian Brothers. **Reginald D. Cruz, CFX, PhD (cand.)** is also a member of the Xaverian Brothers. He is currently completing his Doctorate in History at the University of the Philippines. He has served on the faculty of Maryhill School of Theology and the Institute for Consecrated Life in Asia, both in Manila. He is general coordinator of the *Hagiography Circle*, an online research center on Contemporary Hagiography.

### **Resources in Spiritual Formation**

21 Spring St.  
Danvers, Massachusetts 01923  
USA

email: [webmaster@resourcesf.com](mailto:webmaster@resourcesf.com)  
website: [www.resourcesf.com](http://www.resourcesf.com)