Interpersonal Forgiveness

The Practice of the Church

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The author examines the place of forgiveness in the Scriptures, followed by a brief theology of forgiveness, in order to understand the motive to forgive. Then he examines forgiveness from a therapeutic perspective, in order to understand better the means to forgive. Finally, he offers some frameworks for expressing interpersonal forgiveness within the Church.

*Introduction*

Several years ago, a young woman came to me for spiritual counseling. She had been in therapy for many years to address the effects of sexual abuse at the hands of her stepfather and two stepbrothers. She wanted to forgive them for what they had done. When she concluded with the poignant question, “How do I forgive?” I had to admit that I had no clue. I asked several other priests the same question, and no one had even the germ of an answer. I was amazed to discover that, for all that the church talks about forgiveness, no one could say how to do it. The personal experience of this young woman, and many others, tells me that words alone do not make forgiveness a reality.

The concept of “forgiveness” is often confused with reconciliation (a mutual restoration of a relationship), absolution, or the sacrament of penance. Theology
texts focus on repentance, confession of sin, and God's forgiveness, but there is little about extending forgiveness to others. In this paper “forgiveness” specifically connotes an individual's actions following a serious personal injury. This paper does not address forgiveness of oneself, institutions, or groups; nor does it treat either divine or sacramental forgiveness.

Many people assume that interpersonal forgiveness flows from a spiritual or religious rationale or impulse, and even enhances the process of forgiveness. However, recent studies concludes that there is no general relationship between forgiveness and depth of religiosity. There are two significant problems: (1) although religious people talk about forgiveness, often they don’t know how to do it; and (2) although religious people talk about forgiveness, they don’t necessarily do it any more than others.

**Interpersonal Forgiveness in the Church**

1. The Scriptures

In the Old Testament there are various stages of reflection on forgiveness. In the pre-exilic period, guilt does not arise from individual acts, but from the opposition of the human and divine wills. In the law, God breaks through and forgives through rituals of atonement. After the exile, Israel sees her history as upheld by God's forgiving action.

In the New Testament forgiveness holds the central place in Christian proclamation as the restoration of the relationship with God that was destroyed by sin. It is the one essential work Jesus has come to do. The church's task is to proclaim the forgiveness accomplished by Christ. This occurs in real situations of everyday life, with the commission to forgive and “to retain” sins. It is incorrect to characterize the God of the Old Testament as a God of wrath and judgment (e.g., Exod 34:6-7) while only the New Testament portrays a God of love and forgiveness.

In the Gospels often the imperative to forgive others is linked with teaching about Christian prayer, e.g., the presentation of the Lord's Prayer (Matt 6:12; Luke 11:4). Additional passages appear to demand human forgiveness in order to receive divine forgiveness (Matt 6:14-15; Mark 11:25; see also Matt 5:23-24). But the reverse order is suggested in two other New Testament texts (Eph 4:32; Col 3:13). The response to a question of how often one must forgive emphasizes the magnitude of Christian forgiveness expected of believers (Matt 18:21-22; Luke 17:3-4).

The astonishing nature of forgiveness appears in two significant parables. The compassionate father forgave his son who had squandered his inheritance and returned to confess his sin, while his brother could not forgive or even enjoy
the celebration of his father’s mercy (Luke 15:11-32). He is like the servant who could not extend forgiveness to a fellow servant, although he himself had received his master’s compassion (Matt 18:23-35). These parables portray the fulfillment of Jesus’ command to be merciful as God is merciful (Luke 6:35-38).

The church must be a community whose worship and lifestyle are marked by forgiveness (Matt 5:23-26; 18:15-17). Jesus bestows upon its members the authority to bind and loose one another (Matt 16:19; 18:18; John 20:22-23).

2. A Brief Theology of Forgiveness

Humanity is created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:27). We are created by God and created for relationship with God. Sin destroys our relationship with God, but that relationship is restored again by an outpouring of God’s love, variously manifested and described as grace, salvation, and forgiveness.

This love is incarnated in Jesus the Christ, whose power to forgive sin is manifested through preaching (Acts 13:38), through baptism (Acts 2:38), and through the Lord’s Supper (Matt 26:28). Despite people’s objections, forgiveness of sins is the essential task he has come to accomplish (Mark 2:1-12). Human repentance and confession of sinfulness are only possible because of God’s love, which empowers change despite human frailty and flaws.

Forgiveness of others is not something humans offer to God, but a response of acceptance of God’s verdict and an openness to receive God’s deliverance. It is not a spontaneous, instinctive, nor obviously rational, but rather a natural and characteristic response in gratitude for what has been received from God. Human forgiveness of others, or even a readiness to do so, is not a prerequisite to the reception of God’s grace, but instead a response in imitation of the Christ which flows from the new life in grace already bestowed by God (Col 3:13; Eph 4:32). Therefore, disciples of Christ ought to consider not what must be done as a duty, but what they will offer as a gift and how far they will go in response to God’s gift.

The task of proclaiming Christ’s forgiveness is given to the church, and fulfilled in its preaching, in personal declarations to individual sinners, and in its rites of baptism and Eucharist. That gift of divine forgiveness is not merely a repetition of the past, but a new act of Christ in the present. Forgiveness must be proclaimed continually, because invariably it is necessary (Matt 16:19; 18:18; John 20:23).

3. Problems Related to the Scriptures and Interpersonal Forgiveness

Faulty interpretation and misuse of the Scriptures have adverse effects. False assumptions create problems. Christianity does not teach that persons should never suffer the consequences of their behavior. Nor does it preach that all criminals
must be forgiven and therefore released from prison; they have an obligation to repair or restore the harm done.

Second, misusing Scripture may lead to inappropriate forgiveness, e.g., those harmed may believe that they must “turn the other cheek” (Matt 5:39). Jesus himself did not always turn his cheek—recall his dialogue with the Pharisees (Matt 12:34-37), and his encounter with the money changers (John 2:14-17). There is no Christian duty to tolerate sinful, harmful, or dysfunctional behavior.

Third, an overemphasis on making a decision to forgive can short-circuit the actual process of forgiveness. “Pseudo-forgiveness” may result when one forgives prematurely, e.g., “Don’t let the sun go down on your anger” (Eph 4:26). A less literal reading is more appropriate, i.e., one ought to be expedient in taking care of one’s issues and the injuries one has caused others. Forgiveness is a process, not a momentary event (Hos 11:8-9). Forgiveness takes time!

Finally, the Scriptures raise a theological issue. The Lord’s Prayer speaks about forgiving others (Matt 6:12; Luke 11:4). Other texts speak of divine forgiveness as a response to human forgiveness (Matt 6:14-15; Mark 11:25; see also Matt 5:23-26). Do these texts mean that one cannot pray if one is unwilling to forgive others? Is God’s forgiveness contingent upon our forgiveness of others?

4. Conclusion

In the Scriptures interpersonal forgiveness is obviously related to divine forgiveness, although the nature of that relationship is equivocal. The church, which possesses an authority to bind and to loose, must be a “forgiving community.” Difficulties arise, first, when its members fail to live out the divine mandate to forgive individually and as a corporate entity; second, when they do not acknowledge the role of God’s grace in the forgiveness process; and finally, when pastors, catechists, and others engaged in ministry do not take proper account of the scholarship about forgiveness.

**Interpersonal Forgiveness as a Therapeutic Tool**

1. Forgiveness Is . . .

Various descriptions proposed by social scientists *de facto* establish the elements necessary to constitute forgiveness, which includes a variety of cognitive, affective, and behavioral elements. Forgiveness presumes that someone has committed a serious offense, and that another person has been wronged or injured unfairly. The injured party possesses a sense of entitlement, believing that the wrong-doer has incurred a debt or obligation.

The result of the offense includes negative feelings such as anger, resentment, hatred, and a desire for revenge. To forgive means to give up the right or desire to hurt the person who has caused one harm, or to pardon without demanding restitution. Forgiveness thus requires an act of the will, a conscious personal conversion.
2. Forgiveness Is Not . . .

Earlier, forgiveness was defined to exclude reconciliation. Other exclusionary descriptions can help to apprehend the meaning of forgiveness. Forgiveness is not a passive response or a restraint from retaliation, but an active pursuit of healing. Forgiveness is not the diminishment of memory or emotions over time, because it requires a clear memory of the offense.

Forgiveness does not mean that an injured person condones what happened, or tolerates it. Nor does it mean an extension of leniency or pardon for a crime. It is an active conscious choice of how to respond to the person who caused the injury. To forgive does not first require an apology or restitution. True forgiveness can occur regardless of the offender’s sense of remorse or desire for pardon.

Finally, forgiveness does not demand that an injured person come face to face with a perpetrator. The offender may live far away or even be dead; safety may demand that distance be preserved. But forgiveness can still be extended toward the offender.

3. A Process of Forgiveness

Robert Enright and his colleagues at the University of Wisconsin have studied forgiveness for more than ten years, identifying a model of how people forgive. They started with a moral development model that has evolved into the process described below.

**Uncovering Phase**

During this phase the individual becomes aware of the emotional pain that has resulted from a deep, unjust injury. Characteristic feelings of anger or even hatred may be present. Sometimes, as people harbor this anger for long periods of time, they become fatigued. As the negative emotions are confronted and the injury is honestly understood, individuals may experience considerable emotional distress. As the anger and other negative emotions are brought into the open, however, healing can begin to occur.

**Decision Phase**

The individual now realizes that to continue to focus on the injury and the injurer may cause more unnecessary suffering. The individual begins to understand that a change must occur to go ahead in the healing process. The individual may then experience a “heart conversion” or, in other words, a life change in a positive direction. The individual entertains the idea of forgiveness as a healing strategy. The individual, then, commits to forgiving the injurer who has caused him/her such pain. Complete forgiveness is not yet realized but the injured individual has decided to explore forgiveness and to take initial steps in the direction of full forgiveness. An important first step at this point is to forego any thoughts, feelings, or intentions of revenge toward the injurer.
Work Phase
Here the forgiving individual begins the active work of forgiving the injurer. This phase may include new ways of thinking about the injurer. The injured individual may strive to understand the injurer's childhood or put the injurious event in context by understanding the pressures the injurer was under at the time of the offense. This new way of thinking is undertaken not to excuse the injurer of his/her responsibility for the offense, but rather to better understand him/her and to see the injurer as a member of the human community. Often, this new understanding may be accompanied by a willingness to experience empathy and compassion toward the offender. The work phase also includes the heart of forgiveness which is the acceptance of the pain that resulted from the injuries of the injurer. This must not be confused with any sense of deserving the pain but rather a bearing of pain that has been unjustly given. As the individual bears the pain, he/she chooses not to pass it on to others, including the injurer. This is often where the challenge of a “quest for the good” is most evident. Indeed, the individual may now become ready to begin to offer goodwill toward the injurer in the form of merciful restraint, generosity, and moral love. This may or may not include a reconciliation. The goodwill may be offered while at the same time taking into consideration current issues of trust and safety in the relationship between the individual and the injurer.

Outcome/Deepening Phase
In this phase the forgiving individual begins to realize that he/she is gaining emotional relief from the process of forgiving his/her injurer. The forgiving individual may find meaning in the suffering that he/she has faced. The emotional relief and new found meaning may lead to increased compassion for self and others. The individual may discover a new purpose in life and active concern for his/her community. Thus, the forgiver discovers the paradox of forgiveness: as we give to others the gifts of mercy, generosity, and moral love, we ourselves are healed (Enright, 10–12).

The Ecclesial Expression of Interpersonal Forgiveness
How might one express forgiveness in a ritual fashion, acknowledging the divine action of grace? It is important to consider how Christians in their worship can express their intention to forgive one another, so that it not remain solely a psychological or “intrapsychic” process.

There is a tremendous interest in spirituality today, often up to the point that it becomes institutional in expression. Such reflection includes ways in which we think about myth and belief, how we define these terms and how they interpene-
Ritual and religious life become important as ways of patterning understanding. Community functions as the place in which understanding is reinforced through a social construction of reality that includes the possibility of forgiveness (Petersen, 21).

Therefore, below are two proposals that congregations or individuals might develop and use. It is important that a ritual of forgiveness express a genuine desire to forgive. Its focus should be in the present and toward the future, not a concentration on what occurred in the past.

1. Ritual for Congregational Use

Prior to inviting parishioners to participate in a Service of Forgiveness, there should be educational efforts to explain what forgiveness is and is not, in order to avoid an act of pseudo-forgiveness. Participants should have made a prior commitment to undertake a process of forgiveness. They also should have addressed the initial steps of the “uncovering phase,” because this ritual is an expression of the active “work phase” in the forgiveness process.

Music:

Select a hymn or reflective music which expresses the intention or motive to forgive, such as the traditional “Prayer of St. Francis.”

Opening Prayer:

All-powerful God, you have revealed your might to us in your splendid works of creation, and in your merciful forgiveness. Although we have ignored your decrees and offended you, you have granted us your divine forgiveness. In accord with your law, and with the assistance of your grace, we desire to forgive those who have harmed us. Help us to feel more than our personal pain, and to acquire a heart of compassion and understanding. Help us to act with integrity of body, mind, and spirit. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Word of God:

Genesis 45:1-15 is the account of Joseph’s forgiving of his brothers.
Ezekiel 36:25-28 asks God to soften hard hearts.
Psalm 95 invites people not to harden their hearts to God’s word.
Matthew 5:23-26 tells us that forgiveness is a vital part of worshipping God.
Matthew 18:15-17 says Christian community life ought to be marked by forgiveness.
Matthew 18:21-22 reminds Christians how often they must forgive.
Mark 11:25 demands human forgiveness in order to receive divine forgiveness.

Homily:

The preacher reminds the congregation that forgiveness is their desire and action to set aside their sense of entitlement and desire for revenge; to let go of
their feelings of anger, sadness, resentment and hatred; and finally, to wish their offenders well, in whatever life may bring to them in the future. It should be their intention to do this as well as they can at this moment.

Recollection:
Invite the congregants to call to mind the incident or events that caused the harm and to write the name of the offender(s) on a small piece of paper.

*The Lord’s Prayer (together)*

Ritual Action:
Each person comes forward and places the paper in a container suitable for a fire. Each person may pray aloud the following prayer, or the presider may offer the prayer after all have come forward.

*Prayer of Forgiveness:*
Loving God, in your presence I (we) place these people in your care. I forgive him (her/them) for the pain I have suffered. I ask for your help to let go of my ungodly emotions, desires, and actions, and to be healed in my body, mind, and spirit. May this act be pleasing to you (and rise to you like incense).

*Ritual or Gesture of Forgiveness:*
Set the pieces of paper alight. (Consider using incense to make a fragrant offering; Psalm 141.) Let the congregants remain in quiet prayer until the fire burns down.

Resolution:
Lord, we thank you for your grace which has brought us to this moment, and we ask for your help to persevere in this holy endeavor. We ask that you will bless our intentions and our actions, so that there may be healing and peace. Now, may God who began this good work, bring it to completion (1 Phil 1:6).

*Blessing*

*MUSIC:*
Use another hymn to emphasize the resolution of forgiveness.

2. Ritual for Personal Use
A personal or private ritual for forgiveness requires forethought and planning, so that its elements are appropriate. Before starting a ritual, forgivers ought to know what they intend to say and do in prayer and ritual. Executing a ritual is not a matter of “one size fits all”; it may include the elements above. In addition, the following deserve some attention:

*Environment:*
When and where will the ritual take place? What will be helpful in creating a healthy, safe, and comfortable environment? What religious symbols or personal
artifacts might set an appropriate atmosphere? Will it help to have a photo or object representing the offender?

Participants:
Who will take part in the ritual? Are there other people who were injured who also are ready to extend forgiveness?

Music:
Select music which supports the intention or motive to forgive during the ritual, or the gesture or resolution of forgiveness at the end of the ritual.

Ritual or Gesture of Forgiveness:
Hold or embrace object that represents the offender with reverence for a few moments.
Mark the photo or the representative object with the Sign of the Cross.
Imagine the offender sitting across from you, and extend a word or gesture of forgiveness.
Send a note of forgiveness to the offender.
Make the Sign of the Cross on yourself slowly, while praying that God who began this good work in you will bring it to completion.

Concluding Remarks
Religious faith ought to be marked by a deep integrity—that what one professes to believe manifests itself in thought and deed. So it ought to be for interpersonal forgiveness. Christians must not just talk about forgiveness, not just want to forgive, but really forgive. Wainwright says that

where forgiveness is granted, we have a sure sign of the salvific presence and action of God—at the deepest level—among the forgiving. People who forgive thereby manifest their conformation to the character of God himself, who forgives undeserving sinners. To be forgiving is to grow in grace (430–31).

May it be so, amen.

References


