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Kevin Egan

Understanding Forgiveness

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My intention in writing this article is not to suggest that forgiveness is easy nor is it to put pressure on people who are struggling to forgive. My goal is to open up a space where the subject can be explored in some depth leading to an increased understanding of what is involved in forgiveness as a human enactment. Forgiveness, like grief, is a process. I am convinced that a greater understanding of what is involved in this process can enrich the ministry of those who preach about forgiveness and who extend pastoral care to others.

WHAT IS FORGIVENESS?

I posed this question at a recent workshop and the answer I got back was that forgiveness is 'letting-go.' My follow-up question was 'letting go of what?' and the answer I got back was 'letting-go of resentment or hurt.' Most people have an intuitive understanding of what forgiveness is. Misunderstandings arise when it comes to describing how the letting-go process works. Some expect it to be instantaneous; some imagine it should involve forgetting the hurt caused and some think it is necessary to communicate with others if forgiveness is to take place. They can't all be right. I hope to address the misunderstanding that exists surrounding forgiveness. C. S. Lewis once humorously remarked: 'Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea until they have something to forgive.'

Forgiveness is also a subject about which theologians, philosophers and psychologists tend to differ. Theologians and preachers urge the faithful to practise the virtue of forgiveness. Psychologists who pay attention to the human condition show an appreciation of the struggle involved in forgiveness and question whether it is appropriate in every relationship. I read with interest Pope Francis's letter *Misericordiae Vultus* announcing the Jubilee Year of Mercy. As one would expect from such a document, he lauds the virtues of mercy and forgiveness but only once does he

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make reference to how hard it is to forgive.[1] I should give him credit for at least acknowledging the struggle side of forgiveness as it is most often overlooked. I would have liked him to devote a whole chapter to the topic. The theological view of forgiveness will be more credible and cause less harm if it gives due attention to the reality of the human condition and how difficult it can be for humans to forgive. Forgiveness is not a problem for God but it is for us. Whoever has been harmed or betrayed knows that forgiveness is not going to be simple or easy.

I hope the theologians reading this article will bear with me if I take as my starting point a psychological definition of forgiveness. Robert Enright is a psychologist at the University of Wisconsin. He gave a lecture at the Eucharistic Congress in Dublin: 'Learning Forgiveness: A Pathway to Thrive'. Drawing on the work of the philosopher Joanna North he defines forgiveness as:

> A willingness to abandon one's right to resentment, negative judgment and indifferent behaviour toward one who unjustly injured us, while fostering the undeserved qualities of compassion, generosity and even love toward him/her.[2]

When I present this definition at workshops participants react positively to the acknowledgment that they have a right to resentment. I find I am more likely to acknowledge my resentments once I accept that I have a right to them. Enright's definition of forgiveness differs from the one offered in much of the self-help literature. He includes a positive dimension along with the negative one of 'letting-go' of resentments. He refers to replacing resentment with the 'undeserved qualities of compassion, generosity and even love.' This positive dimension of forgiveness is often overlooked. It fits well with the Christian understanding. His use of the word *undeserved* highlights the gift element in forgiveness. The term *for-give-ness* 'hides within itself the word and idea of gift.'[3] It is a gift which the transgressor does not deserve to receive.

James K Voiss in his excellent book, *Rethinking Christian Forgiveness* notes that a 'definitional drift' has crept into our understanding of forgiveness.[4] Psychologists must take some of the responsibility for this. Philosophers limit their use of the term to situations involving moral agency where someone can be held accountable for *harm* caused. Psychologists on the other

1 Pope Francis. *Misericordiae Vultus.* Dublin: Veritas 2015, n 8.
2 Enright, Robert D & Joanna North (eds). *Exploring Forgiveness*. Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press 1998, 47.
3 Stephen Cherry op.cit. 2012, 68.
4 James K. Voiss. *Rethinking Christian Forgiveness: Theological, Philosophical and Theological Explorations*. Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press 2015, 19).

hand extend the definitional boundaries to include experiences of *hurt* in situations where there is no obvious moral fault. Such situations might include the death of a baby in the absence of medical negligence, where parents may feel life has dealt them a harsh blow. Pastorally, the caring response may be to acknowledge their feelings of anger and resentment and address the question of forgiveness if that is what they want to do. In this and similar contexts the question is often posed as to whether God needs our forgiveness. Theologians rightly point to the absence of moral fault, in that God is all good and can't be held responsible for intentionally causing harm. However I may have a need to forgive God in the sense that my anger could be blocking my relationship with God and leading me to distance myself.

BLOCKS

When I meet people struggling with forgiveness I try to get a sense of what may be blocking them. Often it has got to do with some misunderstanding around what forgiveness involves. People readily accept the need for forgiveness in a relationship context but will question the validity of forgiveness in situations where the person is dead or there is no possibility of communicating directly with the offender. I must confess that the instances where I have told someone directly 'I forgive you' are seldom and few. On the other hand, I can recall frequent occasions when I have engaged in what is called *silent forgiveness*. These are occasions when one forgives in the silence of one's heart. This form of forgiveness is just as real and effective as interpersonal forgiveness or reconciliation. Many people fail to acknowledge this and limit the use of the term forgiveness to situations involving the restoration of a relationship. The term *reconciliation* is best used to describe such a situation. People often confuse the two terms. Whereas forgiveness can be an *intrapersonal* or silent process, reconciliation is an *interpersonal* or overt process. Reconciliation is best reserved for situations where forgiveness is directly communicated and a new relationship is entered into. Many people who silently forgive, mistakenly believe that they have failed to forgive because their relationship with the wrongdoer has not been fully restored in this way. They need to be reminded that silent forgiveness covers the criteria mentioned in our definition, namely the letting go of resentment and the extension of positive regard.

A distinction is often made between self-forgiveness and forgiveness of others. James K Voiss defines it as 'the process of stabilizing our sense of self in the face of self-reproach.'[5] Recognition of harm caused on the part of the offender will often

5 James K. Voiss op. cit. 2015, 391.

lead to self-reproach. Forgiveness will involve the letting go of anger or resentment towards the self, and extending to the self the gift of generosity and compassion mentioned in our definition. Pastorally it is frequently the case that offenders find they can more readily accept the forgiveness of God than the forgiveness of self. In many cases an experience of the forgiveness of God precedes the forgiveness of self and over time may facilitate the latter. On occasion an instance of interpersonal forgiveness may involve the need to address also the forgiveness of self. Desmond Tutu gives a memorable example of this in *The Book of Forgiving,* co-authored with his daughter Mpho. He describes how as a young boy there were many occasions where he had to watch helplessly as his father abused his mother: 'Cowering in fear as a young boy, I had not been able to stand up to my father or protect my mother. So many years later, I realise that I not only have to forgive my father, I have to forgive myself.'[6] I find it interesting that the need for self-forgiveness only dawned on him 'many years later.' This is often the case, we may only partially deal with a major incident in our lives and find that we need to revisit it many years later.

FORGIVENESS TAKES TIME

The experience of Desmond Tutu illustrates a frequently overlooked aspect of forgiveness. It is a process and so it takes time; it may take months and possibly years or a lifetime to achieve. Robert Enright describes it as a complex step-by-step process involving four phases: uncovering phase; decision phase; work phase and deepening phase.[7] Understanding what is involved in forgiveness comes down to understanding what is happening at each of these phases. The first step in the forgiveness journey is to acknowledge to oneself that harm or injustice has been caused. Often it is the presence of angry feelings that alerts one to the fact that a wrong has been done or a value infringed. When I notice that I am angry with someone, especially if it's anger I have been carrying for some time, I ask myself have I considered forgiving them? Forgiveness is one of the recommended treatments for anger.

The second stage in the forgiveness process is the decision stage. For many people the forgiveness process gets blocked at this stage because they mistakenly think that once they have decided to forgive, the matter is done and dusted. In situations of domestic abuse the offender often encourages such a belief. The fact that one makes a decision to forgive does not imply that the process is complete. For this reason I have reservations about using the

6 Desmond Tutu & Mpho Tutu. *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World*. London: HarperCollins 2014, 194.

7 Robert D. Enright op. cit. 1998, 53.ed

phrase, *I forgive you*. I am more comfortable acknowledging my limitations and saying: *In so far as I am able, I forgive you*. At the decision stage forgiveness is very much a work in progress. I would go so far as to say that we can never be certain that we have forgiven because the process needs time to become embedded in our soul / psyche. If we are to be true to our human condition we should be prepared to acknowledge that there is no such thing as *perfect forgiveness*. 'Forgiveness of one person by another is always partial and vulnerable, even when it seems complete.'[8] We need to remind ourselves that it is unrealistic to expect that when we forgive someone the relationship can return to where it was prior to the offence. This does not reflect the human condition. Forgiveness is for imperfect people. It is unrealistic and unhelpful to expect perfect forgiveness. This does not mean that it doesn't happen. Sadly the faithful are frequently being instructed to expect perfect forgiveness. After all God our Father forgives perfectly and so should we! If ever there was an admonition that needed to be deleted, that is it.

IS THERE AN OBLIGATION ON CHRISTIANS TO FORGIVE?

Seeing that forgiveness is such a struggle for us we should hesitate to impose any additional burdens on Christians by claiming that they have a duty to forgive, come what may. As Christians we are fortunate to have such a rich source of wisdom in the Old and New Testament with regard to forgiveness. This teaching is clothed in the garb of the culture and historical circumstances surrounding a group of people who lived at a particular time and place. *Misericordiae Vultus* is a wonderful compendium of texts that speak of God's mercy and forgiveness. I don't doubt that these texts are a source of inspiration for us struggling human beings but there is also a danger that they can be used to suggest that we must forgive in the same way as God forgives. 'Forgive each other, just as the Lord has forgiven, you must forgive.'[9] The good news is that forgiveness is no problem for God and we celebrate this. However, for us limited human beings forgiveness is a problem. God forgives instantly. For us it is a process that takes time. From a psychological and spiritual point of view I have no problem in proclaiming the benefits of forgiveness. However, making forgiveness a moral obligation does not reflect the wisdom of our tradition. It imposes on the victims of harm and injustice another burden where they become victims of the myth of forgiveness.

In the past Christian preachers have alluded to the example of Jesus on the Cross forgiving his executioners. A close reading of the

8 Stephen Cherry op. cit. 2012, 187.
9 Col 3:15.

text (Lk 23:34) shows that while Jesus prayed for his executioners, he never addressed them and said 'I forgive you.' If Christians are to follow the example of Jesus they should call in prayer to God the Father who alone is able to forgive rather than rely on their own power to forgive.[10] Ministers of the word would more truthfully reflect the wisdom of the tradition by urging Christians to pray for the grace of forgiveness rather than telling them they have a moral obligation to forgive. We need to admit to ourselves and God that we are powerless to forgive our enemies and then ask God in trust to help us.

PASTORAL IMPLICATIONS

We need to acknowledge that there is a gap in pastoral theology and practice between how Christians are instructed to live out the ethics of forgiveness and their experience of forgiveness as part of the human condition. Forgiveness is a grace. For this reason we should not make it a moral obligation. The grace dimension of forgiveness is reflected in the experience of Christians who frequently describe it as something that surprises them, emerging into consciousness long after the event. They would seem to be its recipients rather than its instigators. There is much wisdom in the words of the pastoral theologian John Patton who advises that we should forgive 'by not trying to.'[11]

In working with people who struggle to forgive I adopt an approach which can best be described as 'lowering the bar as low as possible.' I take this approach in response to feelings of frustration and helplessness on the part of the forgiver. It consists in lowering the bar to the level of letting go of resentment or the urge for revenge and asking if they can commit to doing or wishing no harm to the person who wronged them. More often than not they will report that they have arrived at that place. I then point out that they have already taken their first step on the road of forgiveness without knowing it. They often express surprise and relief to discover that this is so. If the person wronged is a believer I will ask if they are willing to pray for the person who wronged them. This is a clear sign that they have moved away from unforgiveness or wishing revenge or harm. Another helpful question to ask those struggling to forgive is to estimate how much they've forgiven the wrongdoer at this point. If the answer is: 'I have partially forgiven them,' it indicates that the work of forgiveness has already begun.

A question often asked in relation to forgiveness is *How do you know if you've forgiven*? According to Desmond Tutu you'll know

10 Joan Muller. 'Is Forgiveness Possible?' Collegevillle, Minn.: Liturgical Press 1998, 39.

11 John Patton. 'Is Human Forgiveness Possible?' Nashville: Abingdon Press 2003, 174.

you have forgiven when you have begun to wish the other person well. He also mentions a growing sense of inner freedom, as if a weight has been lifted and a feeling of inner peace.[12] Drawing on my own experience I know I have forgiven when I have started to change the way I tell the story of how I've been wronged. A point is reached when I can say that I am choosing to tell the story in a different way. How does this come about? Consulting my own experience, I would say it has something to do with a breakthrough in understanding of what was going on in the life of the wrongdoer at the time of the offence. This new understanding leads to empathy which in turn changes the way we tell the story of what happened.

The question is often raised as to whether forgiveness is possible in the absence of repentance? Philosophers will respond negatively, pointing out that repentance on the part of the offender is a prerequisite for granting forgiveness. This view that forgiveness can only follow repentance would seem to be integral to the way most Protestants think about it in Northern Ireland.

> In the Northern Ireland Protestant mindset, justice (and therefore forgiveness) is seen more in legalistic and punitive terms than, perhaps, in the Catholic scheme of things. Thereby many Protestants have real difficulty in offering anything that might be construed as letting the criminal off scot-free.[13]

In this context it is worth noting that contrary to popular opinion the Prodigal Son did not repent before he decided to return to his father's home. The text simply states that he 'came to his senses' (Lk 15: 17). In the words of James K. Voiss, he 'has not repented of anything except his hunger.'[14] From God's perspective we can safely say that forgiveness does not depend on repentance. It may turn out to be a different matter when it comes to us human beings.

MOTIVATION TO FORGIVE

In this reflection I have endeavoured to approach forgiveness as a human enactment. From this perspective forgiveness is valued because it can help to heal us of our resentments. In *Misericordiae Vultus* Pope Francis outlines the theological motivation for forgiveness. 'We are called to show mercy because mercy has first been shown to us.'[15] For Christians the experience of God's mercy is a powerful motivating factor in their lives. However, this does

12 Desmond Tute & Mpho Tutu 2014, 128.

13 Kinahan, T. in Spencer G. (ed) *Forgiving and Remembering in Northern Ireland*. London: *Continuum* 2011, 80 quoted in Stephen Cherry op.cit. 2012, 99.

14 James K. Voiss op. cit. 2015, 355.

15 Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*. Dublin: Veritas 2015, n 9.

not mean that it has to be the sole or even the primary motivating factor. Due acknowledgement is made of the broad range of possible motivations that come into play and where God's prior forgiveness does not always have to hold priority of place.[16] The principle attributed to Saint Thomas Aquinas that grace builds on nature would seem to support this approach. The desire to be free of the burden of resentments might be 'the human experience that God uses to draw us into relationship and thereby to help us grow in forgiving others.'[17] The Christian narrative and one's personal experience of being a loved sinner can be powerful motivating factors in leading to forgiveness but this does not have to be, nor is it, the experience of all Christians. One should not assume that a Christian's motivation for forgiveness is always theological. Asking the recipient of pastoral care, 'What motivates you to forgive?' is a wise practice.

A FORGIVING COMMUNITY

Recently I discussed pastoral issues concerning forgiveness with a group of priests. They described how pressured they feel when presiding at a funeral of someone who has had more than one family and where the first spouse bears ill will to the second spouse. Do they collude with the wishes of the first and make no reference to the second spouse? What place has Christian forgiveness in such a situation? We agreed that this is not the time for preaching about forgiveness to either spouse. The task of the presider is not to take sides but to stay faithful to his role of leadership in a community aspiring to forgiveness. We agreed that he should invite the community to pray for all those grieving the deceased and if he is going to mention names that should include both spouses. I have met with 'second' spouses where this did not happen and further hurt was caused.

While the funeral Mass may not be the place to preach about forgiveness we know that no family can stay together without forgiveness. In families forgiveness is intergenerational. For example the forgiveness of parents by children and of children by parents. Forgiveness can be said to bring healing to families across the generations. It helps to prevent the passing on of resentments from one generation to the next. I have come to regard forgiveness as key to the resolution of grief. It arises towards the end of the grieving process rather than the beginning. Grief leaves us with regrets and forgiveness is the way we deal with our regrets and our resentments.

16 James K. Voiss 2015, 292.
17 James K. Voiss 2015, 293.

FORGIVENESS AND THE JUBILEE YEAR OF MERCY

Since this is *The Jubilee Year of Mercy*, let us not confuse the words mercy with forgiveness, they don't mean the same thing. I see mercy as much broader in scope than forgiveness. It extends to all God's creatures whereas forgiveness is narrower in scope and applies to situations where there is moral fault and harm has been caused. Forgiveness can be considered 'a specialized form of mercy, which is a more general concept reflecting kindness, compassion and leniency.'[18] Both have cognitive, affective and behavioural dimensions. The stance of mercy can contribute to the process of forgiveness in that it encourages an attitude of graciousness or generosity towards the offender. On the other hand, forgiveness is a complex process and takes a much longer time scale to take root. We struggle more with forgiveness. Words encouraging people to be forgiving should take cognizance of this fact. Finally, both mercy and forgiveness are highly personal and yet have a community dimension. This dimension is reflected in the closing words of the Our Father: Forgive *us* our trespasses as *we* forgive those who trespass against us.

I have endeavoured to show that an acceptable theology of forgiveness needs to take as its starting point the careful study of forgiveness as a human enactment. We need first to have an understanding of forgiveness 'from below' and then move to bring it into conversation with forgiveness 'from above.' It is my hope that the resulting dialogue will enhance both pastoral practice and the credibility of the Christian message.

18 Christopher Peterson & Martin E. P. Seligman. *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*. Washington D.C.: American Psychological Association 2004, 446.