

On Forgiveness, Contrition, and Reconciliation Between Individuals and In the Church

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Forgiveness is an interior action. It is a decision or intention on the part of the aggrieved person toward the offender. Forgiveness is the victim's interior act of opening himself to the offender, in which the victim offers the offender reconciliation and an on-going relationship or interaction conducted with respect for the offender's human dignity, whether or not the offender is behaving in a manner worthy of his human dignity. Forgiveness may or may not be articulated in words. Regardless, forgiveness is an offer of brotherhood.

Forgiveness is always expensive. It always costs the aggrieved person a price to forgive the offender. This cost may be the loss of what the offender has taken from the victim or deprived him of. Or it may be the victim's relinquishing his own indulgence in hatred or anger or self-pity.

Forgiveness is the way to freedom for the aggrieved person. The offense or the loss which the victim suffers always entangles the victim in emotions of hatred, anger, self-pity, etc., and possibly in litigation or arguments or estrangement, as well. Thus, the victim may continue to be enmeshed in recrimination or blame or defeat long after the perpetration of the offense. The only way to be free of this tangle—and the on-going power it gives the offender over the victim—is for the victim to forgive the offender. In doing so, the victim frees himself from the offense and its aftermath.

The offender, as well, may go through a process leading to freedom from the burden of his offense. This burden may be self-condemnation or arrogance or self-pity or defensiveness—the whole emotional range of avoidance mechanisms. To free himself from this burden, the offender must reflect on the harm he has caused the victim, as well as the disintegration of social peace and harmony he has brought about. This reflection may lead to a realization within the offender of the humanity of the victim—the humanity shared by the victim and the offender. This realization may stimulate feelings in the offender of sorrow, regret, remorse, self-degradation, self-hatred, etc. These feelings are contrition. They may move the offender to seek restoration of peaceful relations with the victim. This restoration of peace frees the offender from the burden of the offense.

The foundation of contrition is humility on the offender's part. Humility arises in the recognition of social interdependence—that the offender is bound by ties of shared human dignity to others, including to the victim.

Without forgiveness on the victim's part, and without contrition on the offender's part, genuine reconciliation and lasting peace between the parties is not possible. There may be a superficial healing without contrition and forgiveness, a "burying of the hatchet," but this healing will not last because the underlying relations between the two parties have not been addressed. — True reconciliation, on the other hand, is the result of a process—a process of passing through, identifying, and transcending the negative emotions—on the part of victim and offender

alike—which stimulate disharmony and social disintegration. The wound must heal “from the inside out.”

This is so because the plan and purpose of creation itself is that harmony and peace might exist among all human beings—in Christ. (See Eph. 1:10, Jn. 17, etc.) Thus, for genuine reconciliation to occur, both the victim and the offender must be individually healed and therefore, predisposed to establishing a relationship of respect for the human dignity of the other.

As a result, in private relationships, it will not do in cases of offense or betrayal for the victim simply to “forgive and forget,” because in that case there is no evident change of heart in the offender. Reconciliation, then, would be superficial, and one could expect no more than continued offense or betrayal.

Likewise, in the case of the priest sex abuse scandal, it will not do to heed the call of Catholic conservatives that the Church simply “move on.” The faithful have been victimized and scandalized not only by the perversity of the guilty priests, but also by the apparent deceptiveness of those bishops—including allegedly the former Archbishop of Munich—over whom a pall of suspicion and mistrust has fallen for their betrayal of their flocks by their willingness to protect the errant priests or to impede investigation by appropriate governmental agencies. To “move on” is tantamount to accepting the bishops’ alleged behavior and opening the door to similar behavior in the future. In such a case, the wound would be only superficially healed and the deeper necrosis would still be present. Without forthright and contrite admissions to the faithful by these bishops, the wound to the Body of Christ cannot genuinely heal.

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