

**I FORGIVE, THEREFORE I AM:
FORGIVENESS AS FULLNESS OF LIFE**

BY
VASSILIOS THERMOS

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Forgiveness has been especially praised by our Lord as the virtue that simulates man to God (Matthew 5: 43-48). One could wonder why this honor. We shall attempt to investigate this extraordinary quality by commenting on ontology prevalent in ecclesiastical life and psychotherapeutic work. Probably there is no need to explain why this emphasis we give today to forgiveness: hardly can we live a day without being involved in problematic relationships, while many suffer from the psychological complications stemming from their inability to fully forgive their parents, spouses, and significant others.

The failure in forgiving is really remarkable, even among people who strongly wish to forgive. The content of forgiveness remains difficult to be captured, given that quite often we come upon a so-thought forgiveness or an unreliable one. Many faithfuls are willing to swear that they have forgiven completely the persons who offended them, but their forgiveness proves rather fragile under problematic circumstances, or merely under growth or passage of time. Psychoanalysis has contributed in the undoing of certainties by articulating its theory on illusion-building defense mechanisms, such as repression, denial, reaction formation, rationalization.

Actually many people, religious or not, persuade themselves that they have forgiven whereas they have simply forgotten or do not hate. Is it adequate? What is forgiveness at long last? On which theoretical basis can it be

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considered as a value? Is ineffectiveness to forgive simply a matter of personal sinfulness and imperfection, or a shortcoming in which the collective ecclesiastical mentality contributes? And finally, why forgive?

There have been various answers to this last question, which could be classified in the following groups:

Conventional forgiveness: if we are pragmatic and provident we have no other choice in order to avoid our life turn into a jungle.

Forgiveness out of *empathic mutuality*: we remember our own sins and faults so we find ourselves fond of being forgiven too.

Forgiveness as a source of *inner peace*: we have to forgive as a way to find relief and serenity; if not we are those who shall pay the price.

All three types of forgiveness can be found in religious as well. A fourth one is present only in them: *submission to Lord's commandment*. We forgive because God ordered us to do so. Very often all four are enhanced by spiritual fathers. Although they are not trivial and useless, but observe developmental stages,¹ they promote forgiveness out of the motivation to more or less profit. I find it appropriate for Christian spiritual life to search for a reason more elaborated theologically than profit. *To forgive out of what ontology?*

Another way to articulate this question is: which kind of bonds among humans should be conceived so that forgiveness comes naturally out of them? The issue becomes more critical in the light of the invasion of eastern spiritualities into western psychotherapies. Especially in America therapists have amazingly surrendered to such bizarre or obscure or even dangerous religious ideas which carry their own interpersonal visions, and this trend is being exported. Under these ontologies forgiveness can be seen as a way to restore the consequences of the evil called desire, or as a path to regain unity with the universe, or as a means to increase positive energy etc.

All anthropocentric versions of forgiveness constitute a challenge to the Orthodox psychotherapists, let alone the clergy. The idea, of course, is not to make our differentiation an end in itself (because we do not form our identity negatively, as distinct from others) but to examine our theological resources and derive from them.

Before doing so I will start with Donald Winnicott and his remarkable

1. Forgiveness has been correlated to development in bibliography as Enright R.D., Santos M.J.D., Al-Mabuk R. (1989) *The Adolescent as Forgiver*. "Journal of Adolescence", 12, 95-110.—Enright R.D., Gassin E.A., Ching-Ru Wu (1992) *Forgiveness: a Development View*. "Journal of Moral Education", v. 21, 2: 99-114.

thoughts on destructiveness. Although he develops them in an analytic context, I think that they can be applied in interpersonal relationships as well, because the same laws prevail. Thus he writes that prior the destructive attack the subject has not a clear and right idea about the object and that is why he hits. It reminds us of Saint John Chrysostom who says: "During the night we are unable to discern even our friend; the same happens with hostility... Also in winter the clouds do not allow us to enjoy the beauty of the sky... This is the way hostility acts: it distorts views and voices. But if we put it aside we are able to see and listen with correct and fair thought".² These are vivid pictures to describe our *imaginary* domain.

Winnicott further proceeds with a remark of teleological significance. "It is the destruction of the object that places the object outside the area of omnipotent control",³ outside the realm of the subject's distorted imaginary perceptions; by doing so the subject is enabled to use the object in a functional and constructive way. The necessary presupposition for this outcome is that the object *survives* the attack.

It is interesting what Winnicott means by this survival. In addition to the idea that the attacked object must not be damaged- and more than this- "survive in this context means *not retaliate*".⁴ To the degree that the victim revenges he remains entrapped into the attacker's imaginary net, into the unreal world of shadows; a genuine encounter has not yet taken place. The attack serves as an offer of the opportunity to the other to change things into a real relationship, as an atypical yell "I need you".

There are people who hate and cause harm in order to create a kind of healthier relationship. Unconsciously they wish to get rid of their own projections into which they have been trapped and which distort the reality and the other, therefore by attacking they give their victim the possibility to free himself of their own omnipotent imaginary control. Whether it will happen or not depends on the victim's reaction. Revenge of any type will be a per-

2. *On David and Saul*, homily 3rd, 5-6. (My translation).

3. D.W. Winnicott *Playing and Reality*. Routledge, 1991, p. 90.

4. *Op.cit.*, p. 91. The author explains the same ideas in a different context, that of residential care for violent children: "Your job is to survive. In this setting the word survive means not only that you live through it and that you manage not to get damaged, but also that you are not provoked into vindictiveness. If you survive, then and then only you may find yourself used in quite a natural way by the child who is becoming a person and who is newly able to make a gesture of a rather simplified loving nature" (*Deprivation and Delinquency*. Routledge, 1994, p. 227).

fect failure. Impressive examples of sinners, torturers included, converting when they are granted a saint's forgiveness can be found in Church history.

One cannot ignore the fact that Winnicott equates revenge to *death*. At the same time one cannot help but wonder: "What does it mean? Death on which level? Psychological or ontological?" It is not the first time that Winnicott draws our attention on the convergence between psychological and ontological parameters. Obviously this is a death of psychological (more precisely: imaginary) nature: by undergoing vindictiveness the attacker gets assured of his killing power and the real world dies once more. At the same time the attacker confirms his wrong representations about his own psyche and personality, thus leaving his omnipotent fantasies intact. In his unconscious imagination he has killed the victim. In addition to the patristic context now we come upon a secular affirmation that *lack of love is death*.

But this is the point for the extension. Although resentment and revenge often are accompanied by the dark burden of psychological death, that is, by a depressive core of the psyche or depressive equivalents, nevertheless in this context the problem is what we would call the *ontological* level of death, which is the absence of *communion*. Bible and Fathers agree on this, but I will deal with it shortly.

The important issue here is that we may spiritually die, not because of the attack, but because of our resentment and revenge. He who attacks may already be ontologically dead ("Be merciful to the evil-doer because he destroys himself... This is the nature of wickedness"),⁵ but the victim's ontological death is not at the offender's hands; it depends absolutely on the victim's will and spiritual confrontation. In the light of the mentioned above *we seek a forgiveness which is neither reduced to condescension nor to extenuation*.

Theologically this forgiveness blossoms out of the notion of communion. Based on the ground of the one and common nature of humanity, the Church always saw the very essence of being in communion, which is much more than relationship, the contemporary public obsession.⁶ *Love substantializes the self because it fulfills the truth of creation*, which are the *divine logoi*, the pre-conceived will of God.

The nowadays universal shift from the ontological priority to the psychological prevalence almost deprived us of the receptors necessary to recognize the others as our own life. We no more define our lives in terms of commu-

5. Saint John Chrysostom, *Homily on the 7th Psalm*, 6. (My translation).

6. Hopko, op. cit.

nion, but in terms of individualistic criteria. This is, in my opinion, what makes forgiveness difficult today; compared to this personal narcissism (admittedly inflated in our years) contributes rather poorly. The harm is fed by factors acting in a level not familiar any more because we lost from our view the distinction between the psychological and the ontological level. The western subject faces discussions about ontological death as a foreign language; for him death and life are understood in terms of psychological experience. If I feel alive I am alive; if I feel loving I am; if I feel peaceful I am etc.

Adopting the psychological model and applying it in the Church betrays the theological truth of humanity. One may feel peaceful through various psychological mechanisms he recruited, but one simultaneously may have not forgiven and remain alienated. Another may be sure that he loves but he achieved this "love" by disdain or depreciating the poor sinner in a way similar to the Pharisee's. To help us assimilate the need for a deep unity Saint John of Sinai provided us with the following diagnostic criterion of forgiveness: "putrefaction will come not when you pray for the man who offended you, not when you give him presents, not when you invite him to share a meal with you, but only when, on hearing of some catastrophe that has afflicted him in body or soul, you suffer and you lament for him as if for yourself".⁷ In other words, when you feel him as a part of yourself.

With Incarnation Jesus Christ entered the human territory and became part of the human unity. Now our nature is bound to the Deity in Him. Starting from these two unities- the horizontal and the vertical- as a basis, Saint Maximus explains why our Lord put as a presupposition of forgiving our sins the forgiveness we offer to our offenders. At a first glance it can be a paradox that we are taught to bring ourselves to God as models. His interpretation on the Lord's prayer however sheds light to the question:

"And for God he makes himself an example of virtue, if one can say this, and invites the inimitable to imitate him by saying, "Forgive our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us",... so as not to be accused of dividing nature by his free will (γνώμη) by separating himself as man from any other man. For since free will has been thus united to the principle (λόγος) of nature, the reconciliation of God with nature comes about naturally, for otherwise it is not possible for nature in rebellion against itself by free will to receive the inexpressible divine condescension. And it is perhaps for this reason that God wants us first to be reconciled with each other, not to learn from

7. *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. Paulist Press, 1982, p. 153.

us how to be reconciled with sinners and to agree to wipe away the penalty of their numerous and ugly crimes, but to purify us from the passions and to show that the disposition of those who are forgiven accords with the state of grace. He has made it very clear that when the intention (γνώμη) has been united to the principle of nature, the free choice (προαίρεσις) of those who have kept it so will not be in conflict with God since nothing is considered unreasonable in the principle of nature, which is as well a natural and a divine law, when the movement of free will is made in conformity with it... In these words scripture makes us see how the one who does not perfectly forgive those who offend him and who does not present to God a heart purified of rancor and shining with the light of reconciliation with one's neighbor will lose the grace of the blessing for which he prays. Moreover, by a just judgment, he will be delivered over to temptation and to evil in order to learn how to cleanse himself of his faults by canceling his complaints against another".⁸

This excerpt explains why petition for forgiveness precedes the one for redemption from temptation. But above all it interprets Lord's command: "First be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5: 24). Obviously resentment disrupts the unity of human nature, so it is impossible to be united to God either, no matter how many prayers one recites, or how many good works one presents, unless one forgives. Unity with God takes place only in Christ, Who undertook human nature, so by resentment or hostility and the like we are separated by Him as well. We would be right by saying that a genuine forgiveness can sweep all sins and lead to salvation, not by virtue of a moral superiority but because of its ontological potential. Furthermore, Jesus asked for reconciliation in order to offer the gifts to the Liturgy and to participate in the Holy Communion. That is why it is called Communion.

Some people find it enough for resentment the fact that the other is simply different. They cannot tolerate difference although very often this difference was the basic motivation for closeness, as in marriage. Saint Maximus here speaks about a "relational logos" or "logos of unity" of opposite entities to describe their implanted tension to unite; thus difference is secondary and serves unity.⁹

By the writings of Saint John of Sinai and Saint Maximus that I have quoted it is implied that the necessity for forgiveness is founded on the need for

8. *Commentary on the "Our Father..."*, Maximus Confessor "Selected Writings", translation and notes by George C. Berthold. Paulist Press, 1985, p. 115-116.

9. *Various chapters*, 2, 64, P.G. 90, 1244C.

unity of our common human nature and on its reception by Jesus Christ Who has now become our archetype. By loving us as members of His own flesh He indicates a quite new way of being which does not tolerate disruption. He introduces a mentality that has forgiveness as its natural consequence. It is the same way of being that leads someone to pray for the other as if he was himself, or to repent for the others' sins as if they were his own. Archimandrite Sophrony has commented on Lord's prayer at the night He was arrested and makes the important remark that everybody can imitate Christ in His prayer to the degree that he prays for the entire world and for forgiveness, viewing and feeling them as members of his own flesh. Father Sophrony adds that this is exactly the laity's priesthood, the fulfillment of human destination, the fullness of life.¹⁰

A strong temptation for all of us now is to ask how these constitutional ideas apply in today ecclesiastical practice. By my own experience I can see among clergy and laity various subjective scales of virtues-corresponding to each one's private theology-amazingly coinciding in rating forgiveness very low in significance. People are not guided to love enemies and to accept opponents, to eagerly pray for others' salvation and to humbly examine themselves in the light of their opponents' blames; instead they enjoy easy access to Holy Communion if they meet various rather trivial tasks, regardless of their masked indifference and disguised bitterness. Couples, families, friendships, kinship, teams, collaborations, the Church herself, all suffer from the feeling that the other is a threat, not a blessing; our hell, not our heaven.

What I find as a major reason for this failure is the pervading popularity of a kind of *psychological spirituality*, quite in concordance with the age of psychologism we are witnessing. In this distortion of spirituality what counts is feeling, not depth; the spiritual is defined as the pious experience, not as the structural truth. By this distinction I focus on the difference between the affect and the existential attitude; one can find either without the other. One peak of this discrepancy dwells in morbidly affective personalities who focus on an idolatry of feelings and thus get deceived by them. This is a peculiar kind of narcissism although the subject may be devoted to religious works. Reversely it can be found in the phenomenon that Winnicott called *false self*, namely of the self who is alienated from his body, feelings, desires, by inflating his intellect (ratio). Usually they are religious types but in the deep ontological level they are almost atheists; they denounce the core of the very religiosity, which is communion, by their own self-sufficiency. A false self does

10. *We Shall See Him as He Is*, (Greek edition, p. 377-389).

not need to forgive because he thinks he has no complaints or he has easily overcome them. I am afraid that spiritual fathers are ill-prepared to identify a false self; rather they tend to get fascinated by it and to surrender to those really assiduous and cooperative Church members.¹¹

Psychological spirituality is actually a secular spirituality, an egocentric one which uses God as an alibi. The main motivation is thirst for power and God is considered as the best means for this. It does not care for the other and for love, but only for the self; if works of love are present they are reduced to external behavior. Father Thomas Hopko remarks: "The saints speak about spiritual hedonism, where you want peace and joy, but you don't want reality. That's why Saint Paul says that you can give your body to be burned, but if you have not love, you are nothing. Not only does it profit you nothing, you are nothing"¹² (1 Cor. 13: 3).

Forgiveness becomes a privileged topic for reassessing the meaning we give in spirituality. It forces us to decide whether we choose the individualism of psychological experiences as our guide, or we align ourselves to the ecclesiological virtue of love for all. Love is the essence of the Church because it is the ultimate quality of God, His single definition (1 John 4: 8). Love is the only eschatological virtue, the only virtue that survives death and becomes the nature of the Kingdom to come. Thus the Church has been assigned the mission to reveal this Kingdom by the way she functions. Besides, this is the most effective way of witnessing about God in the world, of persuading people that it is worthwhile.

The mission is double. First, to preserve love among the members of the Church according to Jesus who declared: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13: 35). Second, to react with love and forgiveness to those who fight the Church or the Chri-

11. Spiritual fathers should be capable to discern harsh superego and its interference in interpersonal life, like illusions about innocence of oneself or sadistic bitterness toward the other. As Otto Kernberg writes, "the capacity to forgive others is usually a sign of a mature superego, stemming from having been able to recognize aggression and ambivalence in oneself and from the related capacity to accept the ambivalence that is unavoidable in intimate relations. Authentic forgiveness is an expression of a mature sense of morality, an acceptance of the pain that comes with the loss of illusions about self and other, faith in the possibility of the recovery of trust, the possibility that love will be recreated and maintained in spite of and beyond its aggressive components. Forgiveness based on naiveté or narcissistic grandiosity, however, has much less value in reconstructing the life of a couple..." (*Love Relations*. Yale University Press, 1995, p. 103).

12. Op.cit.

stians, as the Lord and the martyrs did: "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23: 34). Actually Christ is the source of fullness of life; He *is the Life* (John 14: 6) because He is the archetype of this survival, as He literally *resurrected* and forgave His persecutors. Resurrection becomes the tangible sign, appropriate for this metaphorical survival, concerning the death we dealt before.

Love for enemies makes the peak achievement of love enterprise. As metropolitan John Zizioulas writes, "no other form of love is freer than this, and no other form of freedom is more suitable to be identified with love for enemies... Love which does not expect reciprocity is truly "grace", namely freedom... Only when love and freedom coincide there is cure. Love without freedom and freedom without love are pathological situations and need therapy".¹³ Freedom can induce embarrassment to psychological schools, because it emerges exactly at the point where they end. Psychology and psychotherapy have very little to say about freedom as they deal basically with psychological laws. However, they have a strong motivation for inner freedom as in many therapies can be seen, a freedom from bad objects; actually this can be the best anthropocentric basis for forgiveness.

Another interesting point is the impact which this Theology can have –and should have– on psychotherapy. As the latter has been declined in numerable cases into a support and justification of egoistic demands, it has reached the worst consequences of western individualistic tradition. Many psychotherapies find it natural to devote in merely removing any guilt and do no more than assuring the individual that he can ask for anything as far as he does not harm any other; assertive training is often mistaken for this purpose. Psychotherapy runs the risk of becoming a pillar of consumerism, a part of the capitalistic system, trying to fill the psychic void, as with perspicacity Philip Cushman wrote.¹⁴ Moreover Paul Vitz thoroughly criticized what he calls selfism, which he finds relevant to moral egoism.¹⁵ They both fight an egocentric vision of relationships that is far from forgiving.

With ecclesiological ontology as a guide standards are put high, which can

13. *Sickness and Therapy in Orthodox Theology*, "Theology and Psychiatry in Dialogue" (proceedings of a conference, in Greek), Apostoliki Diakonia, 1999, p. 133-156. (My translation).

14. *Why the Self Is Empty: Toward a Historically Situated Psychology*. American Psychologist, May 1990, p. 599-611.

15. *Psychology as Religion: the Cult of Self-Worship*, 2nd ed. W. Eerdmans publ. comp.-The Paternoster Press, 1994.

be an explanation why very few persons meet the criteria for true forgiveness. Undoubtedly the difficulty is real and the task will always be reached by few, but things become worse when Christians are not educated to give priority to such a spirituality. "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot" (Matthew 5: 13). Church life is rarely orientated to exercise unconditional love, which is its very essence; instead she frequently cultivates the pursuit of pious psychological experience.

At the other hand, while pastoring we should not apply this maximalistic Theology without taking under consideration the developmental level of the faithful, who may not be capable for assimilating this demanding spiritual food at once. Adjustment of spiritual diagnosis and guidance to each one's developmental stage is a basic principle of Church life and an indication of true careful love. Further research on the boundary between Theology and psychology is required to provide answers to questions like "why the individualized variation of susceptibility to forgiveness?" or "why do some people tend to behave more disruptively in spite of their intentions?" or "how could we integrate this Theology to therapy without superimposing it to the patient?" etc; obviously they cannot be elaborated in this introductory article. Orthodox Theology should remain loyal to a constant dialogue with current psychological ontologies, in order to be able to fertilize them with a different morality, a process that will lead to their own evolution.

The lack of an ontology of love and unity, in psychotherapy becomes a handicap, but in spirituality makes a disaster. It creates a dissonance between will and the logos of human nature, so individuals remain split. Elements of this split should be traced in today pastorage and catechesis, so that ecclesiastical life can become healthier and more spiritual. At the other hand, questions of self-criticism should be put by therapists, as "what does therapy mean in terms of love?" or "which conception of human relationships is presupposed in order to promote forgiveness?" or "which aspects of Theology can psychological schools embody in order to be renewed?", so that the psychotherapeutic work could be built on a more therapeutically influential theory. As far as we are concerned about the future of psychological theories and techniques, any convergence in the meaning of therapy should include the quest of unity and of nature of human bonds. And to the degree we care for a more reliable presence of the Church in society, an emphasis on the spirituality of love and forgiveness is the undoubtedly solid ground, a real witness of Grace, a persuading indication of fullness of life.