

Vasilios THERMOS

# I Forgive, Therefore I Am:

## Forgiveness as Fullness of Life

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

### Natural Human Bonds

The failure to forgive is really remarkable, even among people who strongly wish to forgive. The content of forgiveness remains difficult to capture, given that quite often we encounter just a so-called forgiveness or an unreliable sort of forgiveness. Many faithful 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 with growth or passage of time. Psychoanalysis has contributed to the undoing of certainties by articulating its theory of illusion-building defence mechanisms, such as repression, denial, reaction formation and rationalization.

Many people, religious or not, persuade themselves that they have forgiven, whereas in reality they have simply forgotten or do not hate. Is it adequate? What is forgiveness at the end of the day? On which theoretical basis can it be considered a value? Is ineffectual forgiveness simply a matter of personal sinfulness and imperfection, or a shortcoming to 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 turning our life into a jungle.

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Forgiveness out of *empathic mutuality*: we remember our own sins and faults, so we find ourselves inclined to forgive too. Forgiveness as a source of *inner peace*: we have to forgive in order to find relief and serenity; if not, we are the ones to pay the price.

All three types of forgiveness can be found outside religions as well. A fourth one is present only inside them: *submission to the Lord's commandment*. We forgive because God commanded us to do so. Very often all four are endorsed by spiritual mothers and fathers. Although they are not trivial and useless but rather observe developmental stages,<sup>1</sup> they promote forgiveness out of a motivation to profit, more or less. 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 the United States, therapists have amazingly surrendered to such bizarre, 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.

## Retaliation and Destruction

All anthropocentric versions of forgiveness constitute a challenge to Orthodox psychotherapists, let alone the clergy. The idea, of course, is not to make our differentiation an end unto 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 shall start with Donald WINNICOTT and his remarkable thoughts on *destructiveness*. Although he develops them in an analytic context, they can be applied in interpersonal relationships as well because the same laws prevail. Thus he writes that prior to the destructive attack, the subject does not have a clear and proper idea about the object; that is why one 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."<sup>2</sup> 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,"<sup>3</sup> 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.

1 Forgiveness has been correlated to human development in articles ENRIGHT R. D. - SANTOS M. J. D. -AL-MABUK R. *The Adolescent as Forgiver*. Journal of Adolescence 1989, n. 12, p. 95-110. Enright R. D. - Cassin E. A. - CHING-RU WU *Forgiveness: a Developmental View*. Journal of Moral Education 1992/2. 99-114.

2 Saint John CHRYSOSTOM On David and Saul (Third Homily). 5-6. (Translation mine.)

3 WINNICOTT D. W. *Playing and Reality*. London, 1991. 90.

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*.” He explains the same ideas in a different context, 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 only then 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.”<sup>4</sup>

To the degree that the victim avenges her- or himself, she or he remains entrapped in the attacker’s imaginary net, in the unreal world of shadows; a genuine encounter has not yet taken place. The attack offers the other the opportunity to change things into a real relationship, functions 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 in which they have been trapped and which distort the reality and the other; therefore by attacking they give their victims the possibility to free themselves 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 perfect failure. Impressive examples of sinners, torturers included, converting when they are granted a saint’s forgiveness can be found in Church history.

## Revenge as Death

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 WINNICOTT draws our attention to the convergence between psychological and ontological parameters. Obviously this is a death of psychological (more precisely: *imaginary*) nature: by undergoing vindictiveness, the attacker becomes assured of her or his own killing power and the real world dies once more. At the same time, the attacker confirms wrong representations of her or his own psyche and personality, thus leaving its omnipotent fantasies intact. In one’s unconscious imagination, one 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 a point for extension. Although resentment and revenge are often 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*. The Bible and Church 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. The person who attacks may

<sup>4</sup> WINNICOTT D. W. *Deprivation and Delinquency*. London, 1994. 227.

already be ontologically dead (“Be merciful to the evil-doer because he destroys himself ... This is the nature of wickedness”<sup>5</sup>), 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 above, we seek a forgiveness which is neither reduced to *condescension* nor to *extenuation*.

### Forgiveness out of Communion

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. *Love substantializes the self* because it fulfils the *truth of creation*, which is the divine *logoi*, the preconceived will of God.

The shift from ontological priority to psychological prevalence, which is nowadays universal, has almost deprived us of the “receptors” necessary to recognize others as our own life. We no longer define our lives in terms of communion, but in terms of individualistic criteria. This is what makes forgiveness difficult today; compared to this, personal narcissism (admittedly inflated in our years) contributes rather meagrely.

The harm is fed by factors acting on a level no longer familiar, because we have 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; 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.

Adopting the psychological model and applying it in the Church betrays the theological truth of humanity. One may feel peaceful by recruiting various psychological mechanisms, while simultaneously remaining alienated from real peace because true forgiveness has not taken place. Another may be sure she or he loves, but this “love” is achieved by disdaining 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 person 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.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, when you feel the person as a part of yourself.

### Precedence of Forgiveness

Through incarnation, Jesus Christ entered human territory and became part of 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 first glance it seems paradoxical that we are taught in the Lord’s Prayer to bring ourselves to God as models. His interpretation however sheds light on the question:

<sup>5</sup> Saint John CHRYSOSTOM *Homily on Psalm 7* (Translation mine.)

<sup>6</sup> Saint John of SINAI *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. New York, 1982. 153.

“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 by separating himself as human from any other humans. For since free will has been thus united to the principle 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 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 has been united to the principle of nature, the free choice 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 the 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 rancour and shining with the light of reconciliation with one’s neighbour 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 cancelling his complaints against another.”<sup>7</sup>

This excerpt explains why petition for forgiveness precedes the one for redemption from temptation. But above all it interprets the Lord’s command: “First be reconciled to your sister or brother, and then come and offer your gift” (Matthew 5,24). Obviously resentment disrupts the unity of human nature, so it is also impossible to be united to God, 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 took on human nature; thus by resentment or hostility and the like, we are separated from Him as well. We would be right in 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 gifts to the Liturgy and to participate in the Holy Communion. That is why it is called Communion.

## **Logos of Unity**

Some people find reason enough for resentment in the fact that the other is simply different. They cannot tolerate difference, although very often this difference is 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.<sup>8</sup>

In the writings of Saint John of SINAI and Saint MAXIMUS, it is implied that the

7 MAXIMUS Confessor *Commentary on the "Our Father..."*. In *Selected Writings* (ed. BERTHOLD George C.). New York, 1985. 115–116.

8 MAXIMUS Confessor *Various Chapters*, 2, 64, P. G. 90. 1244C.

necessity for forgiveness is founded on the need for 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 it was for oneself, or to repent for others' sins as if they were one's own. Archimandrite SOPHRONY has commented on Christ'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 one prays for the entire world and for forgiveness, viewing and feeling them as members of one's own flesh. Father SOPHRONY adds that this is exactly the laity's priesthood, the fulfilment of human destination, the fullness of life.<sup>9</sup>

A strong temptation for all of us now is to ask how these constitutional ideas apply in today's 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' accusations; 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, even the Church herself, all suffer from the feeling that the other is a threat, not a blessing; our hell, not our heaven.

## False Self and Structural Truth

One major reason for this failure is the pervasive popularity of a kind of *psychological spirituality*, quite in concordance with the age of psychologism we witness nowadays. In this distortion of spirituality what counts is feeling, not depth; the spiritual is defined as the pious experience of self, not as the *structural truth of the hypostasis*.

With this distinction, the focus is 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 are deceived by them. This is a peculiar kind of narcissism, although the subject may be devoted to religious works.

Conversely, it can be found in the phenomenon that WINNICOTT called *false self*: namely, the self who is alienated from body, feelings and desires, through inflation of the intellect (*ratio*). Often they are religious types, but at the deep ontological level they are almost atheists; they denounce the very core of religiosity, which is communion, by their own self-sufficiency.

A false self does not need to forgive, by thinking that she or he has no complaints or that has easily overcome them. Spiritual mothers and fathers might well be ill-prepared to identify a false self; rather they tend to get fascinated by it and to sur-

<sup>9</sup> Archimandrite SOPHRONY *We Shall See Him as He Is*. Greek Edition, 377–389.

render to those really assiduous and cooperative Church members. Spiritual mothers and fathers should become capable of discerning the harsh superego and its interference in interpersonal life, like illusions about the 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 naïveté or narcissistic grandiosity, however, has much less value in reconstructing the life of a couple."<sup>10</sup>

It is a kind of spiritual hedonism where one seeks for well-being and avoids reality; it is reality which calls for love. 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 behaviour. That is 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" (1Corinthians 13,3).

## Love for Enemies

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; it is God's 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 Christians, 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 double survival, as He both 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 becomes the peak achievement of love. 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, is there a cure. Love without freedom and freedom without love are pathological situations and need therapy.”<sup>11</sup>

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. They have, however, a strong motivation for inner freedom, as can be seen in many therapies a freedom from bad internal objects; actually this can be the best anthropocentric basis for forgiveness.

### Salt of the Earth

Another interesting point is the impact which this theology can have – and should have – on psychotherapy. As the latter has 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 themselves to the mere removal of guilt and do no more than assure the individual that she or he can ask for anything as far as it does not harm any others; assertiveness training is often mistaken in 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 Philip CUSHMAN wrote with perspicacity.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, Paul VITZ thoroughly criticized what he calls *selfism*, which he finds relevant to moral egoism.<sup>13</sup> They both fight an egocentric vision of relationships that is far from forgiving.

With ecclesiological ontology as a guide, standards are set high, which can explain why very few persons meet the criteria for true forgiveness. Undoubtedly the difficulty is real and the task will always be accomplished by few, but things become worse when Christians are not educated to give priority to such 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 oriented to exercise unconditional love, which is its very essence; instead she frequently cultivates the pursuit of mere pious psychological experience.

On the other hand, while pastoring, we should not apply this maximalistic theology without taking into consideration the developmental level of the faithful, who may not be capable of 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 suscep-

11 ZIZIOULAS John *Sickness and Therapy in Orthodox Theology*, In *Theology and Psychiatry in Dialogue*. Athens, 1999. 133–156. (Translation mine.)

12 CUSHMAN Philip *Why the Self is Empty: Toward a Historically Situated Psychology*. *American Psychologist*, 1990/5. 599–611.

13 VITZ Paul *Psychology as Religion: the Cult of Self-Worship*. Grand Rapids, 1994.

tibility to forgiveness?" or "Why do some people tend to behave more disruptively or revengefully in spite of their intentions?" or "How could we integrate this theology into therapy without superimposing it on the patient?" 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 ontology of love and unity in psychotherapy becomes a handicap, but in spirituality it is a disaster. It creates a dissonance between the will and the *logos* of human nature, so individuals remain split.

Elements of this split should be traced in today's pastoral theology and catechesis, so that ecclesiastical life can become healthier and more spiritual. On 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 psychotherapeutic work might 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 for unity and for the 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 an undoubtedly solid ground, a real witness of Grace, a convincing indication of fullness of life.

#### Suggested Reading

- Saint John CHRYSOSTOM *On David and Saul (Third Homily)*. 5–6. (Translation mine.)  
 Saint John CHRYSOSTOM *Homily on Psalm 7*. (Translation mine.)  
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**Vasilios THERMOS:**

**Je pardonne, donc je suis:**

**Le Pardon comme profondeur de la vie**

Le pardon, malgré qu'il a été recommandé par notre Seigneur comme la vertu qui rend l'être humain assimilable à Dieu, est un concept qui est globalement mal compris et déformé dans la vie contemporaine. Cet article essaie d'explorer cette qualité extraordinaire en commentant l'ontologie qui prévaut dans la vie ecclésiastique et les travaux psychothérapeutiques. Le concept chrétien de pardon ne doit pas être réduit à la condescendance, ni à l'exténuation, mais doit plutôt tendre vers la notion de communion, du un et de la nature commune de l'humanité. L'unité avec Dieu se réalise uniquement en Christ, qui a pris la forme humaine, ainsi, le ressentiment ou l'hostilité à l'égard de notre prochain, causé par une refus de pardonner, nous sépare de Dieu aussi. Le pardon, conçu comme communion avec soi-même, Dieu et les êtres humains constitue un standard élevé pour le chrétien – beaucoup plus élevé que le standard demandé par la psychothérapie moderne qui se focalise sur une simple guérison de la culpabilité – mais c'est seulement en s'efforçant d'atteindre ce but noble que nous pouvons vraiment vivre la plénitude de la vie.

**Vasilios THERMOS:**

**Perdono, por lo tanto soy: el perdón como plenitud de vida**

El perdón es un concepto que ha sido ampliamente malentendido o distorsionado en la vida contemporánea; a pesar de que fue elogiado por nuestro Señor como la virtud que hace semejante los hombres a Dios. Este artículo pretende investigar esta extraordinaria cualidad al comentar sobre la ontología prevalente en la vida eclesiástica y en el trabajo psicoterapéutico. Un concepto cristiano de perdón no debe ser reducido a la condescendencia ni a la extenuación; antes bien ha de florecer a partir de la noción de la comunión, la única y común naturaleza humana. La unidad con Dios tiene lugar sólo en Cristo, quien tomó forma humana, por lo tanto los resentimientos u hostilidad hacia nuestros semejantes causados por una falla al perdonar, nos separa de Dios también. El perdón, entendido como la comunión con uno mismo, Dios y nuestros semejantes, plantea una gran exigencia al cristiano/a – más alto que el que demanda la moderna psicoterapia, la cual se enfoca en la sola eliminación del sentimiento de culpa – sin embargo, solamente al esforzarnos hacia este elevado objetivo es que podemos alcanzar la plenitud de vida.