

Which Way to Forgiveness?

BY CAROLINE J. SIMON

How can we become people who forgive? Why would we want to be such people? Three recent books offer answers to these questions. One piece of wisdom that they all share is that forgiveness is a process that we cannot complete once and for all.

George Appleton's *The Oxford Book of Common Prayer* contains one of the more remarkable prayers of which I am aware. It was written by an unknown prisoner in Ravensbruck concentration camp and left on the body of a dead child.

O Lord, remember not only the men and women of good will, but also those of ill will. But do not remember all the suffering they have inflicted on us; remember the fruits we have bought, thanks to this suffering—our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility, our courage, our generosity, the greatness of heart which has grown out of all this, and when they come to judgement let all the fruits which we have borne be their forgiveness.

I am reminded of this prayer when I am feeling particularly estranged from someone, often for quite trivial reasons. How, I ask myself, could I grow into someone who could pray such a prayer—not just over petty affronts but also over matters of monstrous harm?

For Christians, one of our clearest directives is to forgive. Yet the scriptural tradition acknowledges that this will be one of our hardest mandates to fulfill. Luke records that when Jesus said to his disciples, "And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive," the disciples' immediate response was, "Increase our faith!" (Luke 17:4-5). How can we

become people who forgive? Why would we want to be such people? Three recent books offer answers to these questions.

Johann Christoph Arnold, in his book *Why Forgive?* (Plough Publishing House, 2000; 158 pp., \$10.00 paperback), answers his title question by emphasizing that forgiveness is a door to peace and happiness. This very readable book is full of stories of forgiveness and its good effects. Some of these stories are connected with famous contemporary incidents. The parents of Cassie, a student who was shot at Littleton High School, recount their decision to forgive the gunmen. The father of a young woman killed in the Oklahoma City government building bombing talks about why he sought out and expressed his compassion for the father of Timothy McVeigh. *Why Forgive?* also contains a few stories of unwillingness to forgive and its ill effects, illustrating the Chinese proverb alluded to in several places in the book: "Whoever opts for revenge should dig two graves." Other stories, including ones from Arnold's own life, deal with forgiveness for more mundane hurts—injuries within marriages, families, and work situations. Though all the stories told are brief, many of them are moving and inspiring. This book offers a wealth of illustrations about forgiveness; it may also be a source of motivation for some who are debating whether the hard work of forgiveness is worth their time and effort.

L. Gregory Jones, the author of *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995; 302 pp., \$22.00 paperback), while applauding Arnold's narrative approach, would be likely to find fault with Arnold's answer to the question "Why forgive?". Jones is extremely suspicious of what he calls "therapeutic forgiveness" because it locates the motivation to forgive in the benefits of forgiveness for the person who forgives. Jones calls this a "frighteningly shallow perspective" (p. 52) He seeks to replace this motive with a deep sense that our own forgiven-ness calls us to forgive others. "Most decisively, we are called to love enemies because that is what we have experienced as the enemies of God—love that is capable of transforming enemies into friends" (p. 263). This sense of ourselves as forgiven, thus forgiving, cannot be acquired quickly or in isolation. We need the life of the Church as a community of the forgiven and as the embodiment of God's Trinitarian presence to tutor us in the practices of forgiveness. We also need those who are more spiritually mature than we are to befriend us and apprentice us for the craft of forgiveness.

Jones' discussion is thorough and deep. *Embodying Forgiveness* can serve as an introduction to what many other theologians and philosophers have said on the subject of forgiveness, as Jones contrasts his views with theirs. One might at times wish that he treated other theologians with

somewhat more charity; his criticisms of Lewis Smedes, for example, may strike some people as unnecessarily harsh. Jones makes use of narratives, both fictional and biographical to provide embodiments for his conceptual analysis. He makes extensive use of the life, writings and death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer as a model of what the complex life of forgiveness looks like. However, Jones' discussion is at times highly theoretical and many readers unused to reading systematic theology will find the book heavy going. Those who successfully undertake the task of pondering his exposition will be rewarded with a fuller understanding of many important issues. Jones discusses where forgiveness fits among the Christian virtues, how Christian conceptions of forgiveness differ from other religious and secular conceptions of forgiveness, and how to avoid "cheap grace". He also deals with how forgiveness relates to the nature of God and the Church, as well as how forgiveness can inform our view of baptism, the Eucharist and other Christian practices. Moreover, Jones is not afraid to contend with such thorny issues as whether forgiveness can be irresponsible or otherwise inappropriate in some cases.

Jones emphasizes in his ambitious project that forgiveness is a process that unfolds over time. Patrick J. Brennan's *The Way of Forgiveness: How to Heal Life's Hurts and Restore Broken Relationships* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 2000; 216 pp., \$10.99 paperback), is a very practical book that leads the reader through steps toward forgiveness. Brennan deals with steps in repenting and seeking forgiveness. We cannot seek forgiveness until we can see ourselves

clearly enough to understand that we need it. Brennan thus encourages a practice of daily moral inventory, along with the cultivation of empathy for others and sincere prayer for the grace to repent. Brennan also deals with seeking to forgive. We need to face, understand and name our

hurts, decide to forgive, and reach out in hospitality to those who have hurt us. This can be a halting and lengthy process, which we may need to repeat or restart many times. Brennan also deals with hard cases like reconciliation with those who have died, and forgiving institutions and groups that have done harm. Each of the twenty-three chapters has an exposition of a central issue or concept, followed by scripture readings,

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reflection questions, and suggested prayers. *The Way of Forgiveness* is a book to be lived with, rather than one to be read through. Working one's way seriously through the book will provide insight into suppressed resentments, as well as ways to deal with present estrangements. It would thus be highly suitable as a set of spiritual exercises to use during a spiritual retreat or as a devotional guide to be used over an extended period.

Father Brennan is a Roman Catholic priest and his discussion is set within that tradition. References to the Penitential Rite of the Mass and the Sacrament of Reconciliation may seem foreign to Protestant readers. However, those from other Christian traditions will still find this a helpful book. It is full of wise counsel and human insight. In many ways, it is like having a portable spiritual director.

One piece of wisdom that *Why Forgive?*, *Embodying Forgiveness*, and *The Way of Forgiveness* all share is that forgiveness is a process that we cannot complete once and for all. Not only will new occasions of hurt, and thus for reconciliation, arise. We may also find to our surprise that some past hurt, with which we had thought we had dealt, is still not fully resolved. As Brennan puts it, "Hurt, sin, sorrow, and forgiveness are never behind us. The journey of forgiveness lies constantly before us [I]n the midst of praise and celebration we use past material for learning and growth and to move toward new life" (p. 133). As we work through the process of seeking and conferring forgiveness again and again, we will grow more fully into conformity with Christ. As the Church becomes more fully a community of reconciliation, we can more effectively bear witness to the God who forgives. As Jones exhorts us, "Let us be watchful for the ways in which we can embody the forgiving, transforming, and reconciling power of Easter in a world that all too often seems bent on finding ways to crucify" (p. 301). May God increase our faith and grant us the grace to live into forgiveness.



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