

FORGIVENESS THAT OVERCOMES HATE IN MARRIAGE

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Abstract

The forgiveness of the other in a case where one is offended is neither a mechanical nor an easy exercise. It is a weighty but demanding and serious undertaking.¹ This is true in almost every human relationship. It assumes a more serious dimension in a marital relationship where the one offended is physically and psychologically traumatized. Of all the questions asked during the last annual retreat of the laity in some dioceses East of the Niger, when a talk on the message of the Third Extraordinary Synod of Bishops on the family was presented to the faithful, the one on forgiveness in marriage featured most prominently. The questions were mostly about how difficult it is for husbands and wives to forgive each other when there is a crack in their marital relationship. In fact, these questions have eventually informed the choice of the topic for this essay especially as the Bishops' message on the family, Part II, No.15, has it that through Christ's reconciliation the period began by Moses, the period of hardness of heart, has ended and that marriage and the family have been restored to their original form (3rd ESOB, No.15). Consequently, this write-up considers forgiveness not merely a simple matter but a substantive issue which liberates the offended partner in the crisis of marriage as well as the one offending by relocating them back into God's plan for marriage which is greater than sin and creates for them a new path in the human fragile love they have for each other.

Keywords: Forgiveness, Overcomes, Hate, Marriage

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¹ J. Aniagwu, *Called to Act in Persona Christi*, Ambassador Publications, Iperu Remo 2014, 58-59.

The Marital Relationship of Christians: A Transforming Path of Love

The marriage of Christians is a very unique encounter. The husband and wife are called to show to each other the completely selfless love that Jesus has for his Church (Eph 5:21-33). They are also to proclaim that they need Jesus to empower them and show them how to love the way Jesus himself loves the Church. This is the reason a wedding is done in the Church. The wedding ceremony is not merely an external rite but it is a ceremony done in order to help the spouses to turn away from selfishness, pride and division.

The grace received in the marriage is to enable them to put on love and to let that love cover a “multitude of sins” (I Peter 4:8). It points to them also what should stay in the relationship, and what should be changed in the way the couple relate to each other. The grace of the sacrament makes them to act wisely and selflessly, and finally it enables them to be attractive to one another. Thus, the Catechism of the Catholic Church affirms: “in the sacrament of marriage, the Spouse of the Church encounters Christian spouses. He dwells with them and he gives them strength.”²

The grace given here is called by Pope John Paul II in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Familiaris Consortio*, No. 13, the grace of a 'new heart'. It brings divine power into the natural ability of spouses to love each other. Over and above all, it allows the love that the spouses have for each other to be raised up by the power of God so that their marriage may become a sign pointing to Jesus and his transforming power. It is also when their love reaches this level that they can attend to each other at the deepest and most ultimate levels of their personhood and uniqueness. The basis of this love is in their orientation to God and their faithfulness to one another.³ Though God has made each couple's love “forever” and “faithful” this way, the reality of human situation shows that every family is touched in one way or the other by the painful side of marriage. This is true of our contemporary society as indicated in the first part of the document of the Third Extraordinary Synod of Bishops on the Family (3rd Extraordinary Synod of Bishops, Nos. 5,6,7,8).

The Painful Side of Marriage: The Challenges in Marital Relationship

The challenges in marital relationship in our contemporary society have been well articulated by the bishops of the Third Extraordinary Synod on the family. They have noted with pride and thankfulness to God that in spite of these challenges, some families are living with joy and faith in their marital union. They are facing obstacles, misunderstandings and sufferings. This could be termed the painful side of marriage. It includes infidelity, spouse abuse, abortion, divorce, alcoholism and drug addictions. Most people in the situation of this nature may be tricked into thinking that they are complete failures in their marital relationships. They may think that Jesus has abandoned them. The transformation needed in such a situation depends on the maturity of the couples, their ability to communicate the relationship they have with God and their

²CCC 1642.

³Karl Rahner, *Marriage as a Sacrament*, in Paulinus I. Odozor, ed, *Sexuality, Marriage and Family*, University of Notre Dame Press, Indiana 2001, 354.

commitment to allow love to cover the multitude of sins and to forgive each other in Christ. This forgiveness is not a superficial or mechanical one.

Forgiveness that is Light

The issues that come from the painful side of marriage are often no light matters. They are usually no small misunderstandings or daily annoyance of husbands and wives. In most cases, these issues are real betrayals. They include meanness, pride, arrogance, deceit and drunkenness that have lasted for years. In some cases, there are issues of deep resentment, injustices, anger, and sharp division that cannot be remedied or forgotten over the years. The issues can spread into the relationship of the spouse with children, in-laws, village and the clan. It follows that a quick call for forgiveness in these cases is something insincere and inappropriate so long as the evil or offence in these cases that ban forever the possibility of recovering the trust and intimacy once enjoyed has not been recognized or identified. Where the emotional attachment to the one offending is stronger to the offended, the offence that obstructs the relationship becomes more serious. It is so hard to forget and forgive in such a situation: 'if an enemy had reviled me that I could bear; if my foe had viewed me with contempt, from that I could hide. But it is you, my other self, my comrade, and friend' (Ps 55:13-15).

The offence in this deep situation of betrayal has been carved into memory.⁴ It has affected the affective dimension of the human person and has blocked the memory of the offended. Livio Melina maintains that it is memory that holds deep images and recollections of wounds that have never been healed and that continue to hurt. The freedom needed for forgiveness which includes the will of a person, reason, affectivity and memory requires a form of healing. This is difficult of course, to happen in people. It takes a period of time and needs courage that comes from within. The one who has been offended has also to accept forgiveness from the one who offended him or her as it is painful to offer a gift like forgiveness which is difficult and the offended refuses it. Any refusal like this shows that the wound suffered has not been healed but stored in the memory. The offended does not want to risk being betrayed or hurt again. This happens mostly in a marital relationship because this relationship is founded on human freedom not on blood relationship: "Therefore, a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife and they become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24). The one offended in a marital relationship is the person who feels what is lacking in the married love and the pains of it are his or her flesh (Livio Melina, *Building a Culture of the Family*). The offence itself is what blocks the full realization of the promises made to each other as well as the path to reconciliation and transformation. The one offended is always the victim of humiliation and degradation. There is a reduction of self in the person and a feeling of abandonment. In most cases the victim bears the weights of the irrevocable promises made on the wedding day by both of the partners.

The picture here is not a light matter because of the loss of self esteem, hope and enthusiasm in life. The trauma of such a betrayal cannot be waved aside by a superficial talk of forgiveness. The wound here is not only on the victim but on the children and the common good of the society. The damage done to the partner

⁴Cf. Livio Melina, *Building a Culture of the Family*, St Paul, New York 2011, p.23.

disrupts the intimacy in the marital bond. It calls for a rediscovery of the original trust and simplicity of the love once enjoyed in the married life. In fact, the evil done to the offended partner is not addressed; any talk about forgiveness becomes even irritating to the one offended. It is often seen as a lack of sensitivity of the one who offends the other over the suffering of the offended: there is a need to remove injustice and to create communion by seeking a much deeper form of forgiveness. This form of forgiveness enables both the one offended and the one who offends to rediscover the providence of God in marriage and the new way of living together in spite of the fragile human love.

Forgiveness that Liberates: A New Path in the Human Fragile Love

The truth about forgiveness that does not go deep is that there is a fomenting of the evil in secret or a rewinding of the offence. In most cases, it has a vicious circle with reactions here and there and of course, revenge behind one's mind in dealing with the other partner. These are signs that forgiveness is hollow and should take on a higher level of treatment for the recovery of the plan God has for marriage and a new living of togetherness, forgetting the painful past and holding on to a brighter future in the relationship.

The forgiveness of the one that offended the other at this level is an act of God's grace. This grace as indicated above has been restored to us by Christ after the fall of our first parents. It enables the one offended and the offender to rediscover the source of newness in life. This rediscovery passes through the judgment of the cross, making forgiveness a 'costly grace', in the language of D. Bonhoeffer. It implies a real and concrete acknowledgment of the gravity of sin one has committed against the other in the relationship and the conversion for this sin.

The price of forgiveness is paid by both the offender and the offended. It is a passage rite from death to the resurrection for the two persons. The one who offends has to die to false and hypocritical way of life and to the security of feeling alright while he has offended the partner. The death rite of the offender includes death to the complacency of sensing an unjustly received offence and death in accepting an offence given that wounds one's own dignity and not stepping back out of shame (Livio Melina, *Building a Culture of the Family*, p.31).

In this case, to forgive, in the words of Melina, is to step down from one's pedestal and lower oneself to making a difficult climb back up together with the one who created the offence. It is taking responsibility together for the converting of the other without allowing self-righteousness get in the way. The acceptance of forgiveness when it is offered to the one offended means to see the cost of one's healing in the cross. It is to become capable of re-establishing justice, and thereby arriving at the resurrection of the wounded love.

This is indeed a form of rebirth in salvation history: "By his wounds we have been healed" (I Peter 2:24). The act of forgiveness becomes for both the offender and the offended a common transformation. The offence that wounds marital love of husband and wife is described by Jesus in Matt 19:8 as 'hardness of heart'. It hurts and threatens the unity between them, the unity that God himself established at the beginning. The 'hardness of heart' is what usually brings about the inability of the couple to give oneself to the other in faithful, fruitful and indissoluble love. But when forgiveness arrives at this level, it enables the spouses to surrender to God first and then to one another. The self-surrendering is no degradation or humiliation but a new beginning from

the one offended and the offender. The willingness to begin again comes from the Holy Spirit, the Source and the Agent of a new creation. The Spirit renews the offender and the offended and makes them people of novelty in their marital life. With this principle, both the offended and the offender are able to create a new way of living together according to the original plan of God for their marriage. They will come to know that the plan of God is stronger than any sin or mistake. Furthermore, willingness to begin again or start again is a profound expression of their freedom as sons and daughters of God. This freedom has not been inhibited by any rancour, bitterness, anger and a sense of loss of self-esteem, because the guilt has been acknowledged and the offer of forgiveness accepted. The ability to do this in a marital relationship is a true expression of freedom. It is an act of the Holy Spirit within the couple as well as an expression of "costly grace", in the words of D. Bonhoeffer, not a 'cheap grace' like the case of light forgiveness.

In order for spouses to come to this level of 'costly forgiveness', they need to be very prayerful partners. In the words of St Paul, they have to allow their love be in Christ: 'your life is hid with Christ' (Col. 3:3). It is only in this hiddenness that they see the workings of the Holy Spirit, the Source of selfless love.

The Holy spirit here will enable the couple to pass from the stage of being in love to the stage of actual loving of one another. It is striking to know that the state of being in love is always characterized by illusion on the projection of one's dream about the other. It is the Holy Spirit that sustains the mutual gift of one another in married love when the expectations of the couples are different and sometimes disappointing. In this case, the Holy Spirit effects a change in the couple who are disappointed from love of self in the other to the love of the other for his or her own sake. This carries the couple forward in the moments of crisis. It helps them to be obedient to Jesus who himself sort his way in the midst of temptations and provocations from the evil one.⁵

According to Livio Melina -- citing Hannah Arendt, a German-American Philosopher of Jewish origin -- it is this inner strength of the Holy Spirit that is the agent of novelty in every human person. For him, every human being in acting is capable of being new and being the principle of novelty.⁶ This, according to him, is the profound meaning of freedom. With this freedom every human being begins anew when there is a breakdown or a crack in relationship or in anything that a person does in life. In the area of human relationship, this freedom or principle of novelty enables both the offended and the offender to begin again. It regenerates inner strength in the couple to overcome hate and to give themselves anew to each other. This ability of re-discovery of newness in married love or the application of the principle of novelty in the situation where marital relationship has not been going on well, has not been very much emphasized in the document of the synod of bishops in the family before coming to stress the point of accompaniment of the couple. Much has been said about the marriage tribunal and personnel and cost of putting the case to tribunal for annulment without indicating positive means of reconciliation and forgiveness of the spouses. It is to be emphasized here that the inability to forgive and to ask for forgiveness is the thing that destroys married love and life, not

⁵Marc Quillet, *Divine Likeness: Towards a Trinitarian Anthropology of the Family*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Cambridge 2006, 114-116.

⁶Livio Melina, *Building a Culture of the Family: the Language of Love*, 29-31

quarrels between husband and wife. According to Cormac Burke, “Quarrels (even big ones) made up, do not destroy love; they even cement it; Quarrels(even small ones) not made up, gradually poison married life and make it seem intolerable.”⁷ In fact, to love one's spouse as he or she is, with his or her defects, means to swallow up one's pride, overlook hurtful things, to forgive and to forget.

An example abounds of how a couple once came to this level of forgiveness within the context of deep prayer life. They went for a retreat in a retreat centre for married people. The retreat moderator asked the participants to outline three things they would like to see changed in their respective partners. As one husband began to list the changes he felt the wife needed to make, he realized how self-centred he was towards his wife. He began to see how he had been treating the wife with less respect than he should, with negative comments, quick but fiery glances when the wife did something he disagreed.

At the end of the exercise, the husband told the retreat moderator he always thought that he was the glue, the strength, and the brain of their marriage. But when he sat down to list the wife's weakness, he felt as if God exposed his flaws instead and the moderator told him to share that with the wife. He went to the wife and showed her the list. It read this way “1. Forgive me for hurting you; 2. Let me honour you because your commitment to our marriage is so strong; 3. Please be patient with me(*The Word Among Us*, vol.21, No.9 (2002), p.12-13)”. This brought about a powerful transformation in their marriage at end of the said retreat. It shows that 'costly forgiveness' comes when couples come close to God in deep prayer. It happens with the pastoral care of the married people by opening of centers for them for deep personal prayer among fellow married couples.

Little wonder the Third Synod of Bishops on the Family has asked that centers for marriage seminars and retreats be opened in dioceses and parishes all over the world. The art of accompaniment has also been recommended, and Bishops, priests, deacons and even married people themselves have been asked to accompany married couples in their journey together as spouses. This accompaniment will help those that their marital relationship has hit the rock to begin all over again, walking together in the light of the Spirit.

Conclusion

Forgiveness is not an easy exercise as many people think, especially when it has to do with an intimate relationship like marriage. The one who offends and the offended are both involved in the laborious exercise. The one who offends the other has to acknowledge the evil or offence done to the other, and the offended too has to receive the offer of forgiveness. The offended and the offender have to begin again, motivated by the spirit of Christ in them. It is this ability to start again that puts two of them once more on the journey of life. It reveals to the world how profoundly free in Christ the spouses are and how docile they are to the prompting of the Holy Spirit who enables them to see the divine providence in their married life which is greater than mere human error. This is the forgiveness that regenerates inner strength in the couple to overcome hate. It creates a new path in human fragile love.

⁷Cormac Burke, *Covenanted Happiness: Love and Commitment*, Four Court Press, Dublin 1990, 60-61.