



# Priestly People

SERVANTS OF THE PARACLETE

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## Welcome, Fr. John Murphy sP *Pontifical Commissary* *Servants of the Paraclete*



Fr. John Murphy was appointed by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life as Pontifical Commissary for the Servants of the Paraclete following the request of Fr. David Fitzgerald sP to resign his position as Servant General of the Servants of the Paraclete, effective May 5th, 2021.

Fr. John Murphy sP will lead the congregation until such a time the members can convene for a General Chapter of Affairs and Election.

Please keep Fr John in your prayers and know of his prayers for our Priestly People.

# Forgiveness:

by Father Liam Hoare S.P.

**Forgiveness is a mystery.** It belongs to the realm of freedom rather than to the realm of necessity: it is scented with the spices of grace rather than the sweat of legalism: it delights and humbles with the impact of wholly unexpected bounty: gentler than a tender embrace, it is tougher than the band of retribution that straps us tightly to our pain.

The mystery of forgiveness resides in our very origins, the deepest underpinnings of our nature which the Psalmist evokes in these words:

‘Know that the Lord is God. It is he that made us, and not we ourselves. (Ps.100: 3). If we believe that we are our own authors, as many in our culture do and as the popular phrase ‘self-made man’ suggests, then forgiveness is almost unthinkable. For the self-generating human being forgiveness may serve as a temporary tactic to secure higher moral ground. But as a fundamental orientation of existence, forgiveness appears to undermine the work of making and maintaining oneself. How can the integrity of personal borders and the security of personal interests be guaranteed unless swift, unambiguous reprisals follow attacks upon sovereign city states which we imagine ourselves to be? This is simple common sense.

But in the Psalmist’s vision common sense gives way before an uncommon conviction: it is God that made us and not we ourselves. To be made by God means that the model for our self-understanding is not so much the city state but rather the City of God, which is to say, God’s dwelling place (Ps. 46: 48). God has not created us defenseless. Yet the bulwarks and citadels, the strongholds and the towers of ourselves have been constructed not to repel or defeat others but to help us resist the power of evil. These structures are as resilient and yet as permeable as love, for it is by love and with love that we have been fashioned. Love is the only power that can overcome evil without using evil means. For this reason we will not be overthrown by the raging and foaming of sea deep animosities. The length and breadth the height and depth of our identity are surer than life itself because they have been patterned according to the being of the one whose mercy endures forever. Forgiveness is therefore native to the City of God that each of us, in some sense, is. Far from undermining our viability, forgiveness permits the renewal and expansion of human infrastructure that builds up into one holy people what would otherwise be a bitter landscape of isolated and carefully walled-in cells.

**What it means to have been made by God is also revealed in how God views us.** God’s regard for us, which penetrates to the place of our deepest yearnings, frames the possibility and the practice of forgiveness. Nowhere Christians believe, is this nature and practice more fully embodied than in Jesus, suspended on a cross above bare Golgotha. We return to the Place of the Skull through the memory of a Roman soldier who was working there that day. In the Gospel according to Matthew (Chapter 22: verses 1 to14) it shows how the hard moment surrounding the death of Jesus was molded by mercy into the foundation stone of a new creation.

**What is forgiveness?** First I believe we sometimes have trouble understanding the precise nature of forgiveness. **Forgiveness or forgiving does not mean denying our hurt.** What on the surface may appear to be a forgiving attitude may merely reveal that we have succeeded in suppressing our pain. If we bury our hurt or pretend it is not real, we experience no sense of being wronged that would require our forgiveness. Forgiveness is a possibility only when we acknowledge the negative impact of a person’s attitudes or actions on our lives. This holds true whether or not harm was intended by the offender. Until we are honest about our actual feelings, forgiveness has no meaning.

It is important to underscore that **forgiveness bears no resemblance to resigned martyrdom.** A person with a weak sense of self may too easily take on blame for the actions of others. A person who finds a unique sense of identity by appearing pitiable can learn to play the martyr with great effectiveness. In either case, resignation to the role of victim will prevent any genuine process of forgiveness. If we feel we deserve to be blamed, degraded, or abused, again we will have disguised the offense that needs forgiveness, not by denial but by taking inappropriate responsibility for the offense.

One spiritual writer has astutely pointed out that forgiveness does not mean ‘Putting the other one on probation’. We may think we have forgiven someone only to catch ourselves waiting impatiently for evidence that the person’s behavior merits our clemency. If the offender does not measure up to our expectations, the gift of mercy is withdrawn: to grant forgiveness at a moment of the softening of the heart, is an emotional crisis, is comparatively easy; not to take it back is something that anyone knows how to do’.

**To forgive is not to excuse an unjust behavior.** There are evil and destructive behaviors which are inherently inexcusable: fraud, theft, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, physical violence, economic exploitation, or any denial of human rights. Who could possibly claim that these are excusable? To excuse such behaviors, at least in the sense of winking and pretending not to notice, or of saying ‘Oh, that’s all right’ or even ‘I’ll overlook it this time just don’t do it again’, is to tolerate and condone them. Evil actions are manifestly not ‘all right’. They are sins.

Finally, to forgive is not necessarily to forget. Perhaps the small indignities that prick our pride we can simply excuse and forget. But for major assaults that leave us gasping with psychic pain, reeling with the sting of rejection, bowing under the weight of oppressive constraint, or aching with personal loss and grief, we find ourselves unable either to excuse or to forget. Moreover there are situations in which it is not desirable to forget. It would be but another expression of arrogance for those of us with European roots to ask native or African Americans, under the guise of forgiveness, to forget the way they and their ancestors have been treated by the cultural majority in first world countries. I understand why our Jewish friends insist that we never forget the horrors of the Holocaust. They are brutalities against body, mind and spirit that

must not be forgotten if we are to avoid replaying them. Blows intentionally rendered to crush the vulnerable cannot, humanly speaking, be forgotten. They can, nonetheless, be forgiven.

If we now have greater clarity concerning what forgiveness is not, then what is it? Let me characterize it in this way: **to forgive is to make a conscious choice to release the person who has wounded us from the sentence of our judgment, however justified that judgment may be.** It represents a choice to leave behind our resentment and desire for retribution, however fair such punishment might seem. It is not in this sense that one may speak of 'forgetting'; not that the actual wound is actually completely forgotten, but that its power to hold us trapped in the continual replay of the event, with all the resentment each remembrance makes fresh, is broken.

Moreover, without in any way mitigating the seriousness of the offense, forgiveness involves excusing persons from the punitive consequences they deserve to suffer for their behavior. The behavior remains condemned, but the offender is released from its affects as far as the forgiver is concerned. For the one who releases, such forgiveness is costly both emotionally and spiritually. I believe this reflects in finite way both the way God forgives us and the costliness of that infinite gift.

Forgiveness constitutes a decision to call forth and rebuild that love which is the only authentic ground of any human relationship. Such love forms the sole secure ground of our relationship with God as well. Indeed, it is only because God continually calls forth and rebuilds this love with us that we are capable of doing so with another. **Thus, to forgive is to participate in the mystery of God's love.** Perhaps this is why the old adage rings true: 'To err is human to forgive, divine'. Genuine forgiveness draws us right into the heart of divine life. Authentic forgiveness flows freely from the heart.

### **Our Resistance to Forgiveness**

This brings us to the second basic form of our difficulty with forgiveness. We may be quite clear about what is called for but find ourselves unable or unwilling to do it. How do we release a person who has deeply wounded us from the sentence of our condemnation, a judgment that rises spontaneously, unbidden, from feelings of hurt, anger, fear or resentment?

The experience of being unfairly or inhumanely treated usually leaves us with a desire for revenge. We may be inclined to return the wrong in kind, inverting the golden rule: 'Do unto others as they have done unto you'. We may prefer more sophisticated varieties of punishment that are expressed in oblique ways: withdrawing from the relationship, engaging in 'passive aggression', or venting our anger in manipulation and deceit.

If lashing back is not our way of responding to hurt, it is probable that we at least expect restitution. The offender ought to do or say something to mend the hurt, to repay us for the loss of dignity and trust we have experienced. What, then, do we do if the culprit even refuses to acknowledge that a problem exists? How can we forgive if there is no contrition?

Of course it makes forgiving much easier if the offender is willing to admit guilt and ask for pardon but can we make conscious admission and remorse a condition for the kind of condition that reflects God's love?

**Jesus' words of forgiveness from the Cross were offered up freely for all who would receive them.** Indeed, the reason he gives is that brief prayer for asking God's mercy is precisely that we know not what we do.

If we don't comprehend the full impact, the true sinuousness of our behaviors, how shall we know enough to ask forgiveness? More often than not, those who have hurt us do not comprehend the destructive magnitude of their behavior. We are called to offer unconditional forgiveness, as God and Christ offers it to us. Jesus tells Peter (Matthew 18: 22) to forgive 'seventy times seven', a hyperbolae by which he indicates that those who wish to be his disciples should place no limits on their mercy. Nowhere does Christ exempt us from this call merely because the offending party has not confessed to sin.

This raises an important distinction between forgiveness and reconciliation, two intimately related but distinct spheres. Forgiveness, it seems, can be offered unilaterally and therefore without conditions. I can forgive a friend who does not know she has hurt me; I can forgive a parent or a grandparent who is no longer present on this earth; I can forgive persons or groups of persons without their consciously knowing it or having a way to respond.

My one way forgiveness is a matter of releasing others from judgment in my own heart. Such unilateral forgiveness does more than release me from the corrosive burden of anger and bitterness that eats away my peace of soul, although this is certainly one of the great gifts inherent in forgiveness. It also removes any hidden or overt effects of resentment in my way of relating to the other, either person to person or with third parties. Moreover, I believe that hidden forgiveness affects the spirit of the person who has been released in ways that go beyond our comprehension or perception. Reconciliation, on the other hand, is a two way street.

**Reconciliation** is the promise that lies at the heart of forgiveness; **it is the full flower of the seed of forgiveness**, even when that seed is hidden from sight. The gift of forgiveness will always feel incomplete if it does not bear fruit in reconciliation. This, I am convinced, holds as true in God's forgiveness of us as it does in our forgiveness of one another. Reconciliation means full restoration of a whole relationship, and as such requires conscious mutuality. No reconciliation can take place unless the offender recognizes the offense, desires to be forgiven, and is willing to receive forgiveness. Thus, the role of acknowledgement and confession of sin belongs to the dynamic of forgiveness in relation to reconciliation, not to forgiveness alone.

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***Thank you!***

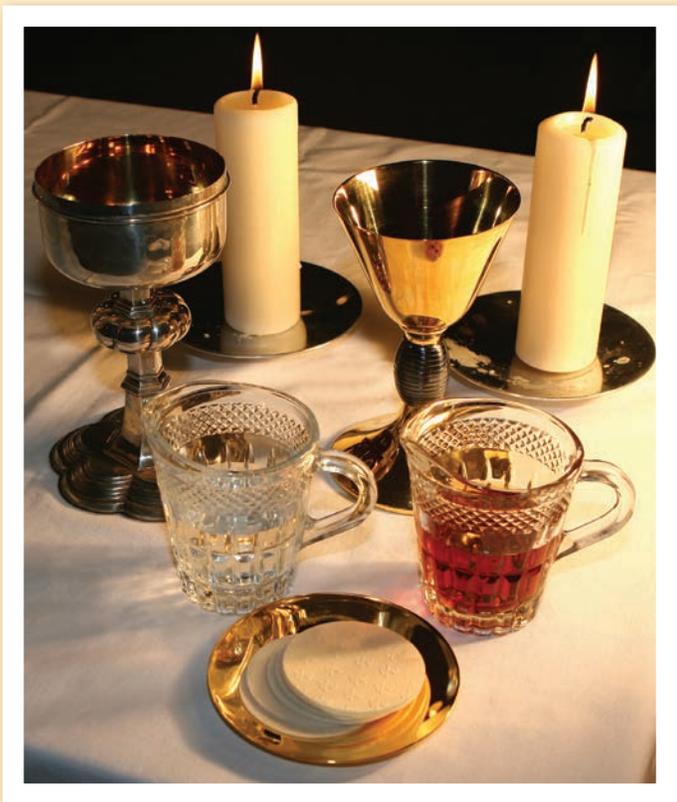


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