



# Priestly People

SERVANTS OF THE PARACLETE

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**Forgiveness** *is a gift*  
*you give yourself.*

# How is Forgiveness Possible?

## PART TWO

by Father Liam Hoare S.P.

**Now we find ourselves** in something of a quandary. We must be willing to forgive others if we desire to receive the gift of God's forgiveness. Yet we cannot force ourselves to forgive. Forced forgiveness is mere grudging acquiescence. Authentic forgiveness flows freely from the heart. But how do we get, or open ourselves to, a change of heart? The cry of the Psalmist becomes our own: 'Create in me a clean heart oh God' (Psalms 51: verse 10).

Perhaps the starting place is simply to recognize that we do, in fact, need God's presence and grace in order to learn how to relate rightly to one another. The central spiritual fact that we remain helpless to forgive out of our own paltry ego strength is illustrated in this story from the desert:

'One of the brethren had been insulted by another and he wanted to take revenge. He came to the Father Abbott and told him what had taken place saying "I am going to get even Father". But the Elder besought him to leave the affair in the hands of God. "No" said the Brother, "I will not give up until I have made that fellow pay for what he said". Then the Father Abbott stood up and began to pray in these terms: "Oh God you are no longer necessary to us and we no longer need you to take care of us since, as this Brother says, we both can and will avenge ourselves". At this the Brother promised to give up his idea of revenge'.

When we recognize our need for God's care, both personally and in our relationships, we must be more prepared to give up our illusion of control. Our deep seated belief that we ought to be in a position to judge and punish the faults of others is a part of our 'control agenda' in life. It is a painful but inevitable part of spiritual maturation to discover that vengeance upon the perpetrators of evil is not our responsibility. 'Vengeance is mine says the Lord' (Romans Chapter 12: verse 19). Only God has the wisdom to know what consequences are needed in any person's life to heal and restore human sanity and wholeness. As Christians, as Ministers, we trust that God's ways of dealing with sin are more merciful than our own inclinations are likely to be.

As we recognize more deeply our dependence on God we will also come in touch more profoundly with our shortcomings. We may become aware of the beam in our own eye that has prevented us from seeing clearly how small the speck is in our sister's or brother's eye. Discovering the depth of our sin has a way of putting the way of others in perspective. It is shocking to some when Mother Teresa of Calcutta claimed she engaged

in her ministry of love because she knows there is a Hitler inside her. The great Saints are not shocked by any form of degradation in the human heart; they know its potential deep within themselves.

This capacity to identify with human sin to its outer reaches characterizes the humility and lack of judgementalism present in so many Holy Ones through the centuries. Mercy for others grows from sorrowful knowledge from the human heart we share. The ability to acknowledge fully one's own sin is thus a powerful path to forgiveness of others. Here is one of my favorite illustrations from this theme from the desert tradition:

'A Brother at Monte casino committed a fault. A Council was called to which the Father Abbott was invited but he refused to go to it. Then the Priests sent someone to say to him, "Come, for everyone is waiting for you". So he got up and went. He took a leaking jug, filled it with water and carried it with him. The others came out to meet him and said to him, "What is this, Father?" The old man said to them, "My sins run out behind me, and I do not see them, and today I am coming to judge the errors of another". When they heard that, they said no more to the Brother, but forgave him'.

Here is a compassionate perspective on sin. Compassion means 'to suffer with'. Jesus suffered with and for us from a complete identification with humanity, yet without sin. We can identify with one another not only in the fullness of our humanity, but in our common human sinfulness. How real and vital, then, our compassion should be! If our eyes are fully open, how can we help but suffer with another, seeing our sin as a form of suffering?

The great Swiss Theologian, Carl Barth, was convinced that God sees even the most despicable human evil as an expression of profound suffering. Can we learn to see with such merciful eyes? I can imagine, given a combination of circumstances that my reactions of fear or rage might erupt into violence I would either shamefully regret or feel compelled to justify by rationalization. The layering of self-defensive strategies can lead quickly to great injustice against others. My capacity to choose self-interest is a proven fact. How, then, can I remain self-righteous when I manage, by the Grace of God, not to fall into the web of rationalization and self-justification that leads to destructive error? If it is by the Grace of God that I am prevented from falling and equally by the Grace of God that I am enabled to stand again after



falling, how can I refuse the Grace of God to a fellow human being?

As we learn more about the hidden depths of our heart, our capacity for compassion and mercy grows, and the ability to forgive with it. It is not an impossible task, this Divine Command to forgive as we have been forgiven. Nor is it unique to Christians. It is simply by the Spirit of God, by which I believe is made known to us with the unique clarity in Christ that any human being is capable of participating in Divine Merciful Love.

Such Grace resides in the Jewish prisoner who wrote these words from a concentration camp in Germany. I can think of no more powerful expression of forgiveness, and the spirit of compassion undergirding it, then these words with which I conclude:

“Peace to all of evil will! Let there be an end to all vengeance, to all demands for punishment and retribution. Crimes have surpassed all measure; they can no longer be grasped by human understanding. There are too many martyrs. And so, weight not their sufferings on the scales of your justices, Lord, and lay not these sufferings to the torturer’s charge to exact a terrible reckoning for them. Pay them back in a different way! Put down in favor of the executioners, the informers, the traitors of all of evil will, the courage, the spiritual strength of the others, their humility, their lofty dignity, their constant inner striving and invincible hope, the smile that staunched the tears, their love, their ravaged, broken hearts that remain steadfast and confident in the face of death itself, yes even at moments of the utmost weakness. Let all this, oh Lord, be laid before you for the forgiveness of sins, as a ransom for the trials of goodness, let the good and not the evil be taken into account! And may we remain in our enemies’ memory not as their victims, not as a nightmare, not as haunting specters, but as helpers in their striving to destroy the fury of their criminal passions. There is nothing more that we want of them.”

The above letter, was found in a German concentration camp archives and is quoted by the writer Bloom in his book *Living Prayer*.

And the final quotation: “Without being forgiven, release from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever, not unlike the sorcerer’s apprentice who lacked the magic formula to break the spell”.

### Prayer for Forgiveness:

*Lord Jesus, for too long I have kept you out of my life. I know that I am a sinner and that I cannot save myself. No longer will I close the door when I hear you knocking. By faith I gratefully receive your gift of salvation. I am ready to trust you as my Lord and Savior. Thank you, Lord Jesus, for coming to earth. I believe you are the Son of God who died on the cross for my sins and rose from the dead on the third day. Thank you for bearing my sins and giving me the gift of eternal life. I believe your words are true. Come into my heart, Lord Jesus, and be my Savior. Amen.*

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