

Tom Sullivan Family Life Director

For those who dare to forgive, foregiveness can heal

One of the great Catholic principles is that grace builds on nature. This means that nature is not bad or corrupt, but that order in nature actually supports religious truths. This concept may seem purely theological, so I'd like to explain how it actually works. We'll see how it applies in a counseling situation.

Let's say you're burdened by anxiety and depression. You're not sure what the source of this emotional condition is, but you know you're suffering. So you finally decide to go see a counselor.

In the world of psychology, at least until recently, the focus has been almost entirely on reducing emotional distress. Counselors may not have any understanding of why you feel the way you do, but they are trained to help you function better, and a way that you can cope with these negative emotions without dragging you down.

When you go to a counselor to be treated for anxiety and depression, then, you're not likely to hear about anything religious. You're not likely to be asked about your prayer life, church attendance or your relationship with God. Odds are that you will be taught some coping skills or referred for medication. This will make you more functional.

Something is happening, however, in the world of psychology. Instead of just focusing on reducing emotional distress, there is a movement in modern psychology to use counseling to help people embrace what is positive and good. As an example of this, Dr. Robert Enright, a Catholic psychologist, has founded the International Forgiveness Institute.



Dr. Enright's conviction, which arises from his Catholic faith, is that forgiveness is healing for the one who forgives. Because grace builds on nature, forgiveness can help someone overcome anxiety and depression even if they don't believe in God. Forgiving is a healthy thing to do for any human being. This is built into the fabric of our humanity. For it to work, the therapist does not necessarily have to talk about Jesus or God, although it would be better to do so.

Dr. Enright has written a book, "Forgiveness Is a Choice," which lays out the pathway to forgiveness. Here is a summary of the process.

The first task is to acknowledge that you have been treated unjustly, admit that you have been hurt and that you might even be angry. Next, you have to understand what forgiveness is. It doesn't mean excusing or forgetting that you have been wronged. It does not necessarily require reconciliation.

The third step is to have internal, forgiving thoughts about the person you resented. The fourth step, and one that can take some time, involves opening up to the possibility of compassion and love toward the one who hurt you. Finally, the forgiver accepts the pain that comes from the unjust act. For a Christian, this means identifying with Christ's suffering on the cross for our sins. It's going to take some grace to get to this level.

Enright and his colleagues have worked effectively with victims of incest. The process took a full year, but the results were worth it. He has also introduced his concepts into Catholic and public schools in Belfast, Ireland, to lay a foundation for peace between Catholics and Protestants there.

A retired Episcopal bishop, Bishop William Cox, who has had

a long and successful healing ministry, always starts the healing process by asking the person in need if he or she has any grudges or resentment toward another person arising from some past incident. He has found that the door to healing is opened by identifying this resentment and dealing with it.

In my own life, at various critical stages in my development, God very clearly let me know that I had to resolve past hurts before I could move forward. In both cases, I was reluctant to act but knew that I had to. It was incredibly liberating to meet with the two individuals involved in these past events and to bury the hatchet forever.

I have a good friend who once became angry with me for emphasizing the importance of a positive father-son relationship. This friend had a very poor relationship with his own father. His father, at a late stage in his own life, was sending messages that he wanted to reconcile, but the son wasn't having any of it. The son told me, "I put that relationship on the shelf a long time ago and it has nothing to do with anything." I am convinced that this poor relationship influenced my friend in a very significant way every day of his life.

Dr. Enright concluded a recent interview by saying that we should help turn our homes, schools and churches into forgiving communities, "where people encourage one another in the mystery of forgiving." This can be done even in places, such as public schools, where they won't let you do anything in God's name.

Our closing verse is from the Letter of James: "Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, and you will be healed."