



# forgiveness

forgiveness in the orthodox tradition  
geoffrey ready



### introducing the series

This paper is the seventh in a series of 15 papers to be produced over a two year period as part of the *Embodying Forgiveness* project run by the Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland (CCCI). Drawing on a broad range of contributors, from a broad range of backgrounds, the papers aim to explore the meaning of forgiveness in the Bible and in different Christian traditions, and to ask about the implications of the practice of forgiveness for our society. It is worth saying at the outset that we have not insisted on a particular definition or understanding of forgiveness among those who will be contributing to the series. Rather, our hope is that through this series of papers we will come to a fuller and more authentic understanding of forgiveness and its implications for church and society.

CCCI: 2001

**“love has not arisen from the earth, but is granted from heaven”**

The ideals of compassion and forgiveness — in a word, love — are to be found at the heart of most religious traditions. Certainly many of the world’s greatest teachers and spiritual leaders have laboured to strengthen the bonds of love among human beings. A great many artistic, literary, and philosophical works of various civilisations have also been created to build up the human community and to inspire us to a higher degree of love. Yet as noble as such teachings and efforts might be, from the perspective of Orthodox Christian tradition they all fall short, since, in the words of the spiritual elder, Fr Kallistratos, “Love has not arisen from the earth, but is granted from heaven.”<sup>1</sup>

In these words we find a summary of the Apostolic and Patristic Christian approach to the spiritual life and the acquisition of the virtues, among which love is the last to be acquired but the first in value. First, “love has not arisen from the earth.” Orthodox Christianity teaches that love, compassion, and forgiveness, together with all of the other virtues, are the attributes, the properties of God alone: “There is none good but One, that is, God” (Matthew 19:17). As such, they cannot by any means or in any form be possessed or generated by human beings. Nevertheless, we were specifically created to participate and share fully in the life of God, and are therefore called to manifest love, compassion and forgiveness and the other virtues as the fruit of spiritual growth towards likeness to and union with God. Thus, true compassion and forgiveness are only attained by those who recognise that “love is granted from heaven.”

**divine love**

The starting point of the Orthodox understanding of compassion and forgiveness is God. God the loving Creator. God the forgiving and compassionate Father. God who is “gracious, and full of compassion; slow to anger, and of great mercy” (Psalm 145:8). The basic truth of God’s infinite love and compassion for us is emphasised throughout the hymns of the Church. Again and again in the Orthodox liturgy, the faithful call upon God as Philanthropos — the Friend, the Lover of man<sup>2</sup> — and celebrate their experience of His goodness and loving-kindness. The never-ending refrain of the Orthodox Christian is *Kyrie, eleison* — Lord, have mercy — which is never sung despairingly, but always in the hope and expectation that He will indeed, for He is the God of “great mercy.”

“God is love” (1 John 4:8). The Fathers of the Orthodox Church teach that God is called “love,” not simply for His love for man, but because He Himself is a community of love, a communion of Divine Persons united in eternal selfless love. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not different masks worn by a solitary deity, but rather the Names by which the true Persons of the Holy Trinity are revealed in free and loving relationship with one another: the Father, who is the source of divinity, the Son who is begotten eternally of the Father, and the Holy Spirit who proceeds eternally from the Father, and rests eternally in the Son.

**our vocation to love**

God alone is love, but man was created in the image of the Triune God — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Just as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit share one divine life, so we human beings are all called to a common life of communion in love. According to Orthodox teaching, the Lord God created us expressly to share His divine life, and to participate fully in all His divine attributes — holiness, love, beauty, glory, immortality, and so forth. The Fathers call this divine vocation of ours *Theosis* — which

means deification, or glorification, — teaching that human beings are called to become by God's grace everything that He is by nature.

Created in the image of the Triune God, human beings are personal and relational. As with the Divine Persons of the Holy Trinity, each man's personhood is revealed in relationship: the unique human person is only realised and revealed in communion with God and with his fellow human beings, in the freedom of love. This divine gift of freedom means that the fulfilment of human life in love has never been an automatic thing. St Irenaeus of Lyons, a second-century Father of the Church, explains that man at his first creation was "as a little child" and needed to grow through co-operation with divine grace into perfect love and full union with God.<sup>3</sup>

As we all know too well, we have abused our freedom and turned away from our high calling to share in the eternal life of God. In Orthodox teaching, the "Fall of man" was not a descent from an exalted state of perfection, but rather a kind of arrested development of a creature whose vocation is much greater than he can imagine. Likewise, sin is not conceived primarily as legal transgression, as a trespassing of rules, but as breaking of relationship. Above all, it is a failure to love — a failure to realise in our lives the compassion of God that we are called to participate in and manifest to others. Indeed, the whole of the Law, all of the commandments given to the people of God, are summed up in the Commandment to Love: to love God with all our heart, strength and mind, and to love our neighbours as ourselves (cf. Deuteronomy 6:4, Leviticus 19:18). This was our failed vocation; this is what the Lord Jesus Christ came to fulfil.

### **the love of christ**

"Overcome by love," St Romanos the Melodist writes, God "came into the world to seek His creature who had wandered."<sup>4</sup> Because of His infinite compassion, Christ who was by nature God became man, in order to restore us to our true life in communion with God. The devil had deceived us by drawing us away from this life, away from love towards God and neighbour. And so, according to St Maximos the Confessor, the very purpose of Christ's Incarnation was to deliver us from the power of the devil and to "lift the ancient curse of Adam" by the complete fulfilment of love: "What a wondrous war! Instead of hate He showed love, and through goodness defeated the father of evil. Therefore He endured so much evil at their hands, or rather, for their sake, and fought as a man unto death for the Commandment of Love."<sup>5</sup>

"Love is granted from heaven." In Christ, man is once more made capable of freely growing towards the divine life of selfless love. This is the heart of the Orthodox Christian Faith — a transforming and saving relationship with the living Christ. Orthodoxy has carefully preserved the ancient Christian therapeutic model of salvation, teaching that the Church is the spiritual hospital in which the human heart — biblically, the centre of the human person — is healed by the compassionate forgiveness of God. This "salvation therapy" is a twofold path, undertaken through participation in the holy mysteries (sacraments) of the Church, the sacred acts by which God shares His uncreated life and grace with man, and through ascetical efforts — prayer, worship, fasting, almsgiving — by which the human heart is opened to receive this divine grace. It is only once our hearts are healed by the grace of God, and we begin to grow into the life we are called to live in union with Him, that we can truly learn to love.

## the struggle to love and forgive

The beginning of the spiritual life is man's acceptance of the boundless mercy and forgiveness of God. Yet for God's love to permeate our hearts, we must struggle in co-operation (*synergeia*) with divine grace to rid ourselves of selfish passions. This necessary struggle is not lightly undertaken, as St Ignati (Brianchaninov) explains: "At the beginning of the labour the disciple of love must endure the brutal struggle with his own self, with his own deeply damaged nature; evil, inborn to human nature by the fall into sin, became for it a law belligerent and rebelling against the Law of God, against the law of holy love."<sup>6</sup> The spiritual life requires, in the words of St Gregory the Great, that we offer "to God on the altar of our hearts the sacrifice of ourselves." Though this self-sacrifice and struggle against selfish and utilitarian concerns is difficult and life-long, the rewards are plentiful, as St Ignati says: "Improvement in love offers inexplicable spiritual consolation, enjoyment, and enlightenment."

The Fathers of the Church emphasise again and again the Biblical principle that being forgiven and forgiving are two sides of the same spiritual coin. St Theophan the Recluse writes: "Let us forgive — and we shall be forgiven; let us forgive again — and we shall again be forgiven; and so on without end. He who forgives will himself walk under God's all-forgiveness, in the embrace of God's mercifulness and love."<sup>7</sup> Indeed, we discover and deepen our own experience of forgiveness by forgiving others, as St Maximos the Confessor teaches us: "Let us love one another and be loved by God; let us be patient with one another and He will be patient with our sins. Let us not render evil for evil, and we shall not receive our due for our sins. For we find the forgiveness of our trespasses in the forgiving of our brothers; and the mercy of God is hidden in mercifulness to our neighbour."<sup>8</sup> For St Maximos, the relationship between God's forgiveness of us and our forgiving of others — the Lord's "Forgive, and you shall be forgiven" — means that "our salvation is in our will's grasp." In other words, we have been given the choice to receive God's mercy and forgiveness, and we exercise that choice by choosing to forgive: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy."

The Fathers always recognise, however, that growth in the spiritual life is a gradual process. When our hearts have been so long wounded and darkened by our own passions and the hurts received from others, we cannot simply or suddenly choose to manifest the fullness of God's love and forgiveness. In his guide to the spiritual life, *The Path to Salvation*, St Theophan outlines a set of practical steps for the Christian to follow: "Of course, it is not possible suddenly to acquire such a profound and abundant peace that would swallow up every insulting blow. The first degree of insusceptibility to offences and, consequently, forgiveness is silence. When they offend you, keep silent. Do so one time, and the next time you will keep silent more easily; and the more often you keep silent, the more often you will meet offences with less disturbance. Lack of disturbance will bring rest, while rest will be reborn as peace. Then, in the face of offences you will be as a firm wall exposed to grains of sand flung up by the wind. The frequent forgiving of offences not only imparts ease and skill to this, but develops even a thirst for offences, for the Lord's sake, during which he who is struck on the cheek turns the other, and he who is forced to go one mile goes two. This is a height which seems unattainable to us, but to which he who has begun to forgive as one ought ascends easily, naturally, without special efforts."<sup>9</sup>

The Fathers' emphasis on our needing to choose to forgive never changes the fundamental truth that all love and forgiveness is the Lord's alone; we are only able to participate in and manifest His love. At those times in our spiritual life when we feel our hearts go cold, when we cannot

love, when we cannot show forgiveness and mercy to our brother, then we must return again to our Heavenly Father, the Infinite Source of Love. St Seraphim of Sarov says: “God is a fire that warms and kindles the heart and inward parts. Hence, if we feel in our hearts the cold which comes from the devil — for the devil is cold — let us call on the Lord. He will come to warm our hearts with perfect love, not only for Him but also for our neighbour, and the cold of him who hates the good will flee before the heat of His countenance.”<sup>10</sup> There is no heart too cold or unforgiving that cannot be transfigured by God if we turn to Him with singleness of purpose, as St Innocent of Irkutsk explains: “If you bear your sufferings with submission and surrender to the will of God and do not seek consolation anywhere or in anyone except the Lord, then in His mercy He will not abandon you and will not leave you without consolation; He will touch your heart with His grace and will communicate to you the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Amid your sufferings, and perhaps even at the very beginning of them, you will feel in your heart ineffable sweetness, a wonderful peace and joy which you never felt before; and at the same time you will feel within you the power and ability to pray to God with true prayer and to believe in Him with true faith. Then your heart will burn with pure love for God and your neighbour. All this is a gift of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>11</sup>

### failure to forgive

The Fathers of the Church teach us the necessity of forgiveness in the spiritual life by highlighting the consequences of not forgiving. St Tikhon of Zadonsk spells out the terrifying truth, writing: “Do we forgive our neighbours their trespasses? God also forgives us in His mercy. Do we refuse to forgive? God, too, will refuse to forgive us. As we treat our neighbours, so also does God treat us. The forgiveness, then, of your sins or unforgiveness, and hence also your salvation or destruction, depend on you yourself, man. For without forgiveness of sins there is no salvation. You can see for yourself how terrible it is.”<sup>12</sup> This is a recurring theme in the stories of the Desert Fathers: “A brother whom another brother had wronged came to see Abba Sisoës and said to him: ‘My brother has hurt me and I want to avenge myself.’ The old man pleaded with him saying, ‘No, my child, leave vengeance to God.’ He said to him, ‘I shall not rest until I have avenged myself.’ The old man said, ‘Brother, let us pray.’ Then the old man stood up and said, ‘God, we no longer need Thee to care for us, since we do justice for ourselves.’ Hearing these words, the brother fell at the old man’s feet, saying, ‘I will no longer seek justice from my brother; forgive me, abba.’”<sup>13</sup>

### the sunday of forgiveness

The profound connection between the spiritual life and forgiveness in the Orthodox Church is illustrated in the celebration of the “Sunday of Forgiveness” each year at the beginning of Great Lent. During the Great Fast of forty days which precedes Holy Week and *Pascha* (Easter), the Orthodox Christian is directed back to the “basics” of the Christian life — not only to increased prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, but also to increased attention to healing broken relationships. On the eve of the Fast, a rite of mutual forgiveness is celebrated in Orthodox churches, in which all the faithful bow down and ask forgiveness of one another. This rite illustrates that there is no such thing as a private sin, that every failure to love in thought, word or deed is a betrayal of all human beings; but it also shows that the Church, the new man fashioned in Christ, is founded upon and united by divine forgiveness and compassion. This is what the Russian theologian Alexei Khomiakov describes when he says: “If any one believes, he is in the communion of faith; if he loves, he is in the communion of love; if he prays he is in the communion of prayer. . . This holy unity is the true life of the Church.”<sup>14</sup> Commenting on this service, Fr Alexander

Schmemmann writes: “The triumph of sin, the main sign of its rule over the world, is division, opposition, separation, hatred. Therefore, the first break through this fortress of sin is forgiveness: the return to unity, solidarity, love. To forgive is to put between me and my ‘enemy’ the radiant forgiveness of God Himself. Forgiveness is truly a ‘breakthrough’ of the Kingdom into this sinful and fallen world.”<sup>15</sup> The Sunday of Forgiveness reminds us that the starting point of the Christian life is God’s forgiveness of us, and that if we are to progress in the spiritual life we too must learn to “forgive from the heart” (cf. Matthew 18:35).

### **the love of the friends of god, the saints**

“The perfection of love is contained in union with God,” writes St Ignati,<sup>16</sup> echoing a theme which is emphasised throughout the lives and writings of the saints, those men and women who by God’s grace have opened their hearts and lives to His holiness and love. The saints are living examples of the truth that to have forgiveness and compassion is to share and manifest God’s own forgiveness and compassion for all. St Makarios the Great describes this divine love when he writes: “Christians therefore ought to strive continually never to pass judgement on anyone — no, not upon the harlot on the street, or upon open sinners and disorderly persons — but to regard all men with singleness of intention and purity of eye, so that it may become like a fixed law of nature to despise no one, to judge no one, to abhor no one, to make no distinctions between them.”<sup>17</sup> He goes on to explain that this love is only achieved as the fruit of prayerful communion with God: The saints are able to have compassion on all because, while “according to the outer man they appear to men as contemplating what goes on in the world, according to the inner man they are conversing with God.”

### **the eucharist: mystery of love**

The central symbol in Orthodox Christianity of this divine love in which human beings are called to share is the Holy Eucharist (Thanksgiving) — the Mystical Supper in which the Lord Jesus Christ in His own glorified Body and Blood comes to dwell within His faithful. The celebration of this holy mystery, on all Sundays and Feast-Days of the year, is both the means to and the end of Divine Communion. Receiving the Holy Eucharist, Orthodox Christians are forgiven, healed, and sanctified by the merciful compassion of God, and made ready to share in the divine life. At the same time, the Holy Eucharist is itself the consummation of man’s life in God, the manifestation to the world of a communion of selfless love, that love which “does not seek its own” (I Corinthians 13:5). Participation in the Eucharist thus demands an active preparation on the part of the believer, through repentance and fasting, and above all through mutual forgiveness. (It is the tradition of some Orthodox churches and monasteries to have a rite of mutual forgiveness akin to that on the Sunday of Forgiveness at each Eucharistic service, right before the distribution of the gifts of consecrated bread and wine, with each communicant going to the centre of the temple and bowing to the assembled faithful, humbly asking their forgiveness.) This double significance of the Holy Eucharist — by which we prepare through acts of selfless love for the communion of selfless love — is best expressed by St John the Theologian: “If we love one another, God dwells in us, and His love is perfected in us” (I John 4:12). Nourished by Divine Communion, the faithful are sent out into the world to continue the struggle to manifest God’s unconditional love for all creation.

### consumed by the love of god

St John Cassian writes that “Love belongs exclusively to God.”<sup>18</sup> No matter how hard we try, there is no way that we can generate true love and compassion within ourselves. Yet this does not mean that we must resign ourselves to broken relationships and division among human beings, for as St John continues, love belongs also to those “who have renewed in themselves the image and the likeness of God.” True compassion and forgiveness become possible when we ourselves experience God’s love. This is what St Diadochos of Photiki describes: “When a man begins to perceive the love of God in all its richness, he begins also to love his neighbour with spiritual perception. This is the love of which all the Scriptures speak.” The saint goes on to give the practical example of a quarrel between friends: “When a person is spiritually awakened, even if something irritates him, the bond of love is not dissolved; rekindling himself with the warmth of the love of God, he quickly recovers himself and with great joy seeks his neighbour’s love, even though he has been gravely wronged or insulted by him. For the sweetness of God completely consumes the bitterness of the quarrel.”<sup>19</sup>

Being completely consumed by the sweetness of the love of God - this is the very purpose and foundation of true human life, and this is fundamentally what the Orthodox Christian Faith is about. The Orthodox Church invites all of us, broken and wounded as we are, to follow the path of the prophets, apostles, and saints, to seek healing and glorification through union with Jesus Christ, the living Son of God, so that every aspect of our lives may be consumed by the eternal and selfless love of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, One God, unto the ages of ages. Amen.

**prayer at the beginning of the day  
by metropolitan philaret of moscow (+1867)**

O Lord, grant me to greet the coming day in peace.

Help me in all things to rely upon Thy holy will.

In every hour of the day reveal Thy will to me.

Bless my dealings with all who surround me.

Teach me to treat all that cometh to me throughout the day with peace of soul, and with firm conviction that Thy will governeth all.

In all my deeds and words guide my thoughts and feelings.

In unforeseen events let me not forget that all are sent by Thee.

Teach me to act firmly and wisely, without embittering and embarrassing others.

Give me strength to bear the fatigue of the coming day with all that it shall bring.

Guide Thou my will and teach me to pray, to believe, to hope, to suffer, to forgive, and to love.

Amen.



## notes

1. Bishop Nikolai Velimirovich, *Kassiana: Lessons in Divine and Christian Love*, from his Collected Works.
2. In Greek, the word *anthropos* (man) means at once the individual human person and all human persons together. (The Hebrew *adam* is the same.) In English, traditionally the word 'man' has meant this as well. God created man — each one of us as persons, all of us together as the human race. This understanding is essential to Patristic Christian teaching. The Fathers insist that each human being is not simply a part of a larger humanity, but a concrete 'enhypostasisation' of our common human nature. That is, each human being sums up in him or herself in a unique, irreplaceable way the 'whatness' of being human — in effect, the whole of humanity is contained in every human being. (Just as each person of the Holy Trinity 'enhypostasises' the fullness of the Godhead.) The danger of replacing the traditional noun 'man' with 'humanity' or 'humankind', as is fashionable today, is that these words are abstractions, and this important theological concept is destroyed. In this article, therefore, I am using 'man' in the concrete Biblical and Patristic sense of *anthropos*, which is inclusive of all human men, women, and children.
3. St Irenaios, *The Preaching of the Apostles*.
4. St Romanos the Melodist, *Kontakia on the Resurrection IV*.
5. St Maximos the Confessor, *Centuries on Love*.
6. St Ignati (Brianchaninov), *Essays* (from *Orthodox Life*, 1968, No. 1).
7. St Theophan the Recluse, *The Path to Salvation*.
8. St Maximos the Confessor, *The Ascetic Life*.
9. St Theophan the Recluse, *The Path to Salvation*.
10. St Seraphim of Sarov, *Modern Orthodox Saints*, Vol. 5.
11. St Innocent of Irkutsk, *An Indication of the Way into the Kingdom of Heaven*.
12. St Tikhon of Zadonsk, *Journey to Heaven*.
13. *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*, translated by Benedicta Ward.
14. Alexei Khomiakov, *The Church Is One*.
15. Fr Alexander Schmemmann, *Great Lent: Journey to Pascha*.
16. St Ignati (Brianchaninov), *Essays* (from *Orthodox Life*, 1968, No. 1).
17. St Makarios the Great, *Spiritual Homilies*.
18. St John Cassian, *Conferences*.
19. St Diadochos of Photiki, *On Spiritual Knowledge and Discrimination* (in *The Philokalia*, Vol. I).

**recommended reading***introductory article*

Gary Thomas, "The Forgiveness Factor" pp 38-45 *Christianity Today*  
January 10, 2000

*theological perspectives*

L Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis*  
(Eerdmans: Grand Rapids 1995)

*websites*

[www.forgiving.org](http://www.forgiving.org)  
[www.forgivenessday.org](http://www.forgivenessday.org)  
[www.forgivenessweb.org](http://www.forgivenessweb.org)  
[www.forgiveness-institute.org](http://www.forgiveness-institute.org)  
[website.lineone.net/~andrewhdknock/index.html](http://website.lineone.net/~andrewhdknock/index.html)

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Concluding Reflections

*about the author*

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