

FORGIVENESS: A WORK OF MERCY NEWLY RELEVANT IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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The historical and contextual analyses provided (in this Conference) for our interpretation of worldwide experiences in the 21st century are profound and thought-provoking. The essays that probe these experiences constitute a serious challenge for discernment of what the Sisters of Mercy must do and be in this unfolding new century. The narratives (whether from Canada or Kenya, Oceania or Ireland, Guyana or Australia, Jamaica or the U.S.) offer a kind of book of pain. The particular foci (whether on human trafficking, or gender troubles, or globalization, or economic and environmental injustices) intensify the urgency of our continuing to read this book. Essays that connect what is in the book of pain to biblical and ecclesial guidelines for response, and to the past and present vision and labors of the Sisters of Mercy, offer new chapters, and perhaps a new book, of hope (whether through biblical explorations of embodied forms of mercy and justice, or critical interpretations of traditions of spirituality, or evaluative overviews of new movements in the church, or constructive proposals based on Catherine McAuley's commitments and the extension of these through time).

Out of all of the essays there emerge moral imperatives, some explicit, some implicit. For us, there may be no genuine moral dilemmas as to what love and justice require in the human situation. Pain can be remedied, at least in part, and the inhumanity of humans in relation to humans must stop. The more difficult question is what actions to choose that are possible or feasible, and what strategies to develop in the face of our own and others' deep human limitations. We now know almost too much about the intractability of sheer greed, abuses of power, and systemic evils that lie hidden behind "business as usual," genuine ignorance, or fear. Yet perhaps every situation in which the Sisters of Mercy have found themselves has been like this. There has always been the problem of more pain, more poverty, more oppression than this band of women could by themselves remedy. It seems abundantly clear, however, that this never made them turn back in despair, or yield to paralysis of action. There were always works of mercy to be done—whether in response to pain of body or spirit. "Little by little" is a strategy of its own.¹ Each work of mercy done in a "spirit" of mercy constitutes a work of peace against the works of war, a work of instruction against the forces of deception, a work of healing against the damages of individual or societal poison.

For the Sisters of Mercy there have always also been designated priorities for choices about what and for whom works of mercy are to be done: priorities for the poor, for women, for the sick, for those hungry in body and in mind. Moreover, from Catherine McAuley, the Sisters of Mercy learned the importance both of perceiving genuine needs (of concrete persons in concrete situations), and of taking "any kind of opening" (rather than waiting for the perfect opportunity) to respond to need with the works of mercy.² Hence, although the challenge of the

¹I borrow this phrase and its significance both from St. Paul and from Dorothy Day. Yet much of what Catherine McAuley said and did expresses its meaning just as fully. See *By Little and By Little: The Selected Writings of Dorothy Day*, ed. Robert Ellsberg (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983).

²I take the point about "any kind of opening" from Mary Clare Moore's "Bermondsey

Sisters of Mercy to discern what they must do in this century remains a serious and difficult one, we are not without general moral principles or more particular strategic and ethical guidelines. Given this, my aim in this brief essay is not to specify what we ought to do in every part of the world today. I take extremely seriously, and affirm, the recommendations for concern and action contained in the other essays, and I expect these recommendations to become even more compelling as we enter the process of the Conference itself. Here, however, what I will try to do is to identify a particular work of mercy called for in a new way by the multiple situations in our time, in our world.

The work of mercy I have in mind is the spiritual work of “forgiving all injuries.” Given the terrible needs that characterize our world, it seems odd to focus on this particular “work.” I do so not to obscure the other urgent works of mercy, both “corporal” and “spiritual,” but to shed new light on these works and the “spirit” of mercy that informs them. Given the massive injustices that lie behind many of the terrible needs in our world, it may also seem dangerous to begin with forgiveness as an urgently needed work of mercy. I do so not by ignoring calls to resistance and restitution, but by incorporating them into my proposal regarding forgiveness. My argument will be that an attitude of “anticipatory” as well as “actual” forgiveness constitutes today a necessary challenge to the church as well as to groups, nations, and societies around the world. And those whose particular calling is to bring mercy to the world, both as agents and as signs, have a new and urgent responsibility for this work of mercy.

My effort to unfold this two-part argument involves four steps, each taken in the four brief—and largely, therefore, only suggestive—sections below. (1) I begin with a biblical text that asks of the church something it has little understood through the centuries, perhaps particularly in our own day. (2) Following this, I describe ways to understand forgiveness in experiences both of forgiving and being-forgiven. (3) I turn then to examples and possibilities of the power of forgiveness in societal and ecclesiastical contexts of conflict and stark injustice. (4) Finally, I propose new ways of “seeing” that can be brought to situations of religious and civil conflict when an attitude of forgiveness is introduced.

Forgive Them

The church has long believed that Jesus established it with a special power and responsibility to judge individuals and groups. It bases this belief, in part, on a text in the gospel attributed to John. In this text (John 20:19-23), we find the post-resurrection Jesus meeting with his disciples, greeting them in peace, giving them his Spirit, and sending them forth with this charge: “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”³ In the Roman Catholic community these lines are traditionally (and certainly popularly) understood to refer to authority. They are frequently put together with Matthew 16:19 (“On this rock I will build my church . . . give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on

Annals 1841,” cited in Mary C. Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995).

³Scripture quotations used in this essay are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Bible: Catholic Edition copyright 1993 and 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

earth will be loosed in heaven”). Together these texts are thought to establish not only authority to judge on the part of the disciples of Jesus, but beyond this a structure and content for authority in the church that followed. Hence, most Christians (especially Roman Catholics) hearing this text, think of judgment, and of the authority of the church to whose judgment they are to submit. As those empowered to judge in and by the church determine, so sins will be either forgiven or not forgiven; the gates of heaven will be either opened to individuals who sin, or closed.

But what if there is another meaning to the text in John? What if its primary meaning is not that the disciples of Jesus, and the church, are to sit in judgment on individuals and groups, but that they are to *free* people, and if they do not do so, the word of God is left silent? “If you forgive them, they are forgiven and freed; but if you do not forgive them, they remain bound. So then, *forgive* them, because if you do not, they will remain bound and unfree. And *if you do not forgive them, who will?*”

John 20:23 is not like Matthew 16, where there is reference, apparently, to technical rabbinic procedures. In the gospel of John, Jesus shows the disciples the marks of his wounds, and then gives them a mission of forgiveness. As some theologians have argued (though not necessarily commenting on this particular text): the message of forgiveness is in a sense the Christian message in its entirety. It is the decisive gift of the Holy Spirit.⁴ It is what makes possible a “new heart.” We are taught to ask for it every day: “Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.” It reaches to communities as well as individuals. It requires repentance, but not total innocence. It is to be offered to all who desire to come to the waters to drink of the Spirit, to all who desire to come to the table of the Lord. Only a power that stretches between heaven and earth can provide such forgiveness, such undeserved but yearned for acceptance. And it is a power given not only to a designated few but to all who share in the gift of the Spirit, all who gather to receive God’s mercy and the mission to reveal it to others.

But *is* this the truth that Jesus said the Spirit would teach in his name, reminding us of all he had said? Jesus, after all, did make judgments; he did not offer instant forgiveness to all. Yet who were those he challenged and judged? only the self-righteous—those whose hearts were hardened with their own self-assurance, those who recognized no need to drink of new waters or ask for greater mercy. Others—so many great sinners—Jesus did not examine for the perfection of their repentance; he simply forgave them when they approached him. He rejected no one—not Peter, who had his troubles; not James and John who needed a long time to learn humility; not any of those who betrayed him; not even Judas, with whom he shared a life and a table (and who today may shine in heaven as a blazing testimony to the power of a forgiven love.) No evil is so great that God’s forgiveness cannot overwhelm it.

What does all of this mean for the significance of forgiveness as a work of mercy in our time? What is the “new heart” that is made possible by the power of the Spirit and that is characterized by forgiveness? Jesus said he did not come to judge, although Christians (especially Christian nations and churches) have been jumping into the judgment seat ever since. What attitudes, dispositions of the heart, would be possible if this were not the case? And what would this mean in the multiple contexts of conflict and injustice today?

The Meanings of Forgiveness

⁴See, e.g., Walter Kasper, “The Church as a Place of Forgiveness,” *Communio* 16 (Summer, 1989): 162.

To forgive is not to be passive in the face of injury, neglect, betrayal, persecution, abuse. Indeed, forgiveness may be one of the most active responses possible in the face of whatever sort of breach occurs in human relationships. It is easy to understand the necessity and the role of forgiving when treasured personal relationships are damaged. We reach out to the one we love, participating in the restoration of the bond between us. Or at the very least, we wait patiently, holding on to the love and the hope that the relationship represents. It is not so easy to comprehend the necessity or possibility of forgiving when we are harmed by institutions or groups, or injured by those in power, violated by those who are in some real sense our enemies.

To forgive is to “let go” of something within us, in order to *accept* someone who has harmed us. But what do we “let go” of? Not our sense of justice, nor a sense of our own dignity as a person. Yet in forgiving another, we let go (at least partially) of something *in* ourselves—perhaps anger, resentment, building blocks of stored up pain. And we let go (at least partially) of something *of* ourselves—perhaps our self-protectedness, our selves as desiring renewed self-statement in the face of misjudgment or exploitation by another.

To fathom our experiences of forgiving—whether by gaining insight into our reasons to forgive or into the elements in the experience itself—it is useful to recall our experiences of being-forgiven. When we recognize our own responsibility for hurting another, marring a relationship, losing what we treasured in the other and in our way of being with the other, we are afraid for the future which we had taken for granted and in which we hoped. To experience being-forgiven, however, is to experience new acceptance, in spite of ourselves, and the restoration of a relationship with now a new future. It generates joy in us, gratitude that our failure has not finally broken the bonds of friendship, collegueship, or family. The greater our infraction and our realization of its seriousness, the greater the possibility of our gratitude at being-forgiven, and the greater our new love in response. Pointing to the depths of the mystery of a “forgiven love,” Jesus himself observes that the one who is forgiven much, loves more than the one who is forgiven only a little (Luke 7:41-41).

Between and among humans the need for forgiveness is commonplace in our experience. Although, as Hannah Arendt notes, “willed evil” may be rare, “trespassing is an everyday occurrence . . . and it needs forgiveness. . . .”⁵ Why else are we enjoined to forgive “not seven times but seventy-seven times” (Matthew 18:22)? Even when we know not what we do, we are in need of forgiveness (Luke 23:34). “Only through this constant mutual release from what we do are we freed to live into the future.”⁶

Although we no doubt learn what it means to be-forgiven within human relationships, the potentially paradigmatic experience for us is the experience of being-forgiven by God. Our experience with humans helps us to understand our experience with God, but God’s forgiveness is unique; and it sheds distinctive light on what being-forgiven means in every context. To experience the forgiveness of God is to experience ourselves accepted by the incomprehensible source of our life and existence, accepted even without becoming wholly innocent, without being completely turned around in our ways, accepted even while we are “still sinners” (Romans 5:8).

⁵Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 240.

⁶*Ibid.*

From the almost-incredible “good news” of this forgiveness, this acceptance, we learn of the love of God that exceeds our understanding and our telling, that invites us into communion with infinite goodness and beauty. And the one response that is asked of us, and made possible within us, is the response of trust. To trust in the Word of God’s forgiveness is to let go all of our objections and our fears, and to believe. It is to surrender our hearts in our acceptance of being-forgiven. It is, to use a phrase of Emily Dickinson, to “drop our hearts,” to feel them “drop” their barriers and burdens, in freedom, accepting eternal Acceptance. It foreshadows the ultimate experience, of which we have inklings: “By my long bright – and *longer* – trust – I drop my Heart–*unshriven!*”⁷

At the center of human *forgiving*, too, is a kind of “dropping of the heart” that is the surrender, the letting go, of whatever would bind us to the past injuries inflicted on us by others. It entails a letting go of our very selves, a kenosis, that alone frees us to become ourselves. At the center of human *being-forgiven* is another “dropping of the heart,” another kenotic letting go of whatever would prevent our acceptance of the new life held out to us in the forgiveness of those we have injured. “Dropping our hearts,” surrendering our selves, in forgiveness (or trust in being-forgiven) is the beginning choice that makes renewed relationships possible. It comes full circle in the mutuality that restored relationships promise.

But what if the injuries we undergo leave our hearts incapable of the kind of love that makes forgiving possible? And what if those who injure us continue to do so? Whether knowing or not knowing “what they do,” what if there is no regret or remorse, no willingness or ability to accept our forgiveness? What if the perpetrators of oppression believe their actions are justified—by whatever twisted stereotyping, judging, stigmatizing? How can forgiveness be a remedy in the new killing fields of the century, this era’s tangled webs of enslavement, and new levels of destitution? Must our focus now be not on forgiveness, but on justice? Not on “dropping our hearts,” but on a struggle against the evils that cry to heaven for change?

Forgiveness and Resistance

⁷Emily Dickinson, in *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1987), 108.

Forgiving and being-forgiven have nothing to do with tolerating grave wrongs, or—as I indicated earlier—with being passive in the face of massive injustices. Neither the forgiveness offered by God in Jesus Christ, nor the forgiveness that can be a graced and towering human work of mercy, is to be equated with “premature reconciliation” or a covering over of exploitation and ongoing violence. Christian and even human forgiveness can include a radical “No!” to the world as a place of injurious conflict, of gross injustice and needless destruction. It can require that we resist the forces of evil until we can do no more. The attitude of forgiveness, however, the disposition of heart required for this work of mercy, does entail that we must not return lies for lies, violence for violence, domination as a supposed remedy for domination. In relation to these evils, a stance of forgiveness can, nonetheless, mean “Never again.”

Three stories come to mind that provide glimpses of the power of forgiveness (or at least its attendant possibilities) in diverse historical situations. The first is a story from the Catholic Worker movement during World War II; the second comes from more recent experiences of the role of “truth commissions” in bridging the gap between claims of justice and needs of broken societies; and the third emerges, perhaps most clearly, in the context of fractures within the church.

1. Dorothy Day and World War II: Who Are Our Enemies, and How Shall We Love Them? Shortly after the United States declared its official entrance into World War II (which in the eyes of many was a “good” and necessary war), Dorothy Day wrote the following: Lord God, merciful God . . . shall we keep silent, or shall we speak? And if we speak, what shall we say? . . . ‘Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who persecute you. . . . We are still pacifists. . . . Our Works of Mercy may take us into the midst of war. . . . I urge our friends and associates to care for the sick and the wounded, to the growing of food for the hungry ‘But we are at war,’ people say. ‘This is no time to talk of peace. It is demoralizing to the armed forces to protest, not to cheer them on in their fight for Christianity, for democracy, for civilization.’⁸

⁸Dorothy Day, *By Little and By Little: The Selected Writings of Dorothy Day*, ed. Robert Ellsberg (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), 261-63.

Catholic Workers were being attacked in person and in the press for their ongoing refusal to support military action as such. They were accused of being cowardly, timid, too frail to stand up for allies unjustly overrun by hostile armies. Day's response was "Let those who talk of softness, of sentimentality, come to live with us in the cold, unheated homes in the slums."⁹ She resisted the counsels even of friends who urged her at least to keep silent about the war. "But we cannot keep silent. We have not kept silence in the face of the class war, or the race war that goes on side by side with this world war"¹⁰ Day took her stand on the words of Jesus: "'Greater love hath no one than this, that he should lay down his life for his friend' Love is not the starving of whole populations. Love is not the bombardment of open cities. Love is not killing, it is the laying down of one's life for one's friend."¹¹ Here forgiveness (of perpetrators of violence) is coupled with resistance, kenosis with action, and judgment (if you will) with love.

2. Truth Commissions: Can Truth Serve Forgiveness? Forgiveness Serve Justice?

Since the 1970s, "truth commissions" have been established in nearly twenty countries—in for example, El Salvador, Chile, Argentina, and perhaps the best known of them all, South Africa. Although their results have varied, many of them offer insights into possibilities of transforming hostilities, equalizing relationships, and starting anew in ways that do not always reach the level of forgiveness but also do not descend into the quagmire of past horrors of conflict and oppression.¹² The commissions aimed precisely to structure new approaches to rebuilding societies in the aftermath of horrendous acts perpetrated against innocent people—acts of abduction, torture, exploitation, widespread murder, and sometimes full-scale genocide. Previously, in similar situations, when the killing stopped there might have only been courts to re-establish justice, to judge and to punish perpetrators, perhaps to require some restitution. But when so many were involved in so much evil, the task of bringing all to justice in court systems appeared impossible. Judicial processes alone could not ferret out all who were guilty, nor determine exact degrees of guilt, nor heal the desire of victims for revenge. Courts by

⁹Ibid., 263.

¹⁰Ibid., 264.

¹¹Ibid., 265.

¹²I rely heavily here on the marvelous analysis of these truth commissions provided in Teresa Godwin Phelps, *Shattered Voices: Language, Violence, and the Work of Truth* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004). For other useful views on the commissions and similar proposals for reconciliation, see Miroslav Volf, "Memory of Reconciliation—Reconciliation of Memory," *The Catholic Theological Society of America: Proceedings of the Fifty-ninth Annual Convention* 59 (June, 2004): 1-13; Denise M. Ackermann, "Reconciliation as Embodied Change: A South African Perspective," *ibid.*, 50-67; Raymond G. Helmick & Rodney L. Peterson, eds., *Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Religion, Public Policy, and Conflict Transformation* (Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press, 2001); Robert J. Schreier, *The Memory of Reconciliation: Spirituality and Strategies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998). I note here that while my own rendering of the work of truth commissions emphasizes their positive value, they have had their many critics as well. Some of these are considered in the works cited above.

themselves could not bring about in a timely manner the healing of whole societies whose fabric had been torn apart by wide scale violence. Above all, courts could not mend the fissures from years and years of conflict between groups, now marked by so much blood.

If countries or societies were to have a future, something more was needed—that is, the freeing of the voices of the victims, the telling of their stories in order to make visible the truth of their suffering, making it known to the world, and receiving an official, public acknowledgment of what had happened. Not all victims lived to tell their stories; of those who lived, not all could by themselves tell the truth of their experiences; not all by themselves could forgive. But with truth commissions it was possible to develop procedures that might provide healing (and in fact did so in many instances). Here was a shared process aimed at remorse on the part of perpetrators and forgiveness on the part of victims.

Words, language, became the way to new life. Previously shattered, silenced voices were able to speak; what they spoke were their own stories, the truth of their experiences. Truth swelled up out of the seemingly dead ashes of broken lives and lost loves. Speaking the truth became a form of resistance to evil: “Never again” was part of its message. For victims, it became a way to recover one’s life, once again to gain control of one’s own agency and destiny. After testimony was given, witnesses were asked what reparations they desired. The responses were modest: sometimes to go to college, or to have a plaque mounted in memory of lost ones; or just to know the name of the perpetrator who had tried to crush their lives, to silence their voices forever.¹³

Sometimes in this process forgiveness became possible; sometimes it did not. But even when it was not possible, or at least not yet possible, something happened to those who spoke or heard one another. The story is told of a South African woman who, after listening to the testimony of her husband’s killer and thereby “learning for the first time how her husband had died . . . was asked if she could forgive the man who did it. Speaking slowly . . . her message came back through the interpreters: ‘No government can forgive No commission can forgive Only I can forgive. . . . And I am not ready to forgive.’”¹⁴ Yet somehow her dignity was affirmed; she had been given the truth, and an opportunity to choose. Once again her own voice counted; the conditions for forgiveness began to be in place.

What the stories of the truth commissions reveal is that forgiving and being-forgiven have a role deep within large-scale conflicts and injustices as well as small. They offer alternative ways to provide “conditions for the possibility” of both justice and mercy. Thus cycles of external violence and internal violence (the poison of rage and revenge) can sometimes be broken; a new future can sometimes emerge.

3. Anticipatory Forgiveness: The Greatest Challenge of All? There are situations, however, in which injury is ongoing; abuse, violence, and exploitation do not stop. How, then, is forgiveness possible, and what would be its point? In such situations, is forgiveness simply a naive and futile work of mistaken and ineffective “mercy”? Is it here that struggles for justice must take priority over efforts at forgiveness? How, otherwise, are we not to be seduced into

¹³Phelps, 110 and 158 n. 19.

¹⁴Timothy Garton Ash, “True Confessions,” *New York Review of Books* (July 17, 1997): 36-36; as cited in Phelps, 112.

“premature reconciliation,” the kind of covering over of evil that allows it to continue unchallenged and unchanged? Is the disposition to forgive even relevant at all to responses of the oppressed to their current oppressors?

The challenge in each of these questions is not to be taken lightly. I want to argue, however, that even in situations where injustice still prevails, where the rights of individuals and groups continue to be violated, the dispositions in the heart of the oppressed and violated ought to include (insofar as this is possible¹⁵) forgiveness—or more precisely, ought to include the readiness to forgive. To argue this in no way contradicts what I have said about the need for resistance—against exploitation, abuse, domination. If we think that forgiveness all by itself is a sufficient antidote to injustice, this is a mistake. But if we think that struggles for justice are sufficient, no matter what is in our hearts, this, too, is a mistake. The challenge and the call to forgiveness in situations of ongoing humanly inflicted evil and suffering is a call to forgive even those we must continue to resist. Forgiveness in such situations is what I call “anticipatory” forgiveness.

Anticipatory forgiveness shares the characteristics of any human forgiving. That is, it involves a letting go within one’s self of whatever prevents a fundamental acceptance of the other, despite the fact that the other is the cause of one’s injuries. It is grounded in a basic respect for the other as a person, perhaps even love for the other as held in being by God. It does not mean blinding oneself to the evil that is done to oneself or to others. It does not mean passive acquiescence to subservience, or silence when it comes to naming the injury that is imposed. It does not mean failing to protect victims or to struggle with all one’s might to prevent the “breaking of the bruised reed.” It does mean being ready to accept the injurer, yearning that he or she turn in sorrow to whoever has been injured; it means waiting until the time that the enemy may yet become the friend. It is “anticipatory” not because there is as yet no disposition for acceptance and love, but because it cannot be fulfilled until the one who is forgiven (the perpetrator) acknowledges the injury, and becomes able to recognize and accept the forgiving embrace.

Nowhere is this challenge and call to anticipatory forgiveness more clearly demanded than in the community of the church. It is here that the moral imperative comes forth to love our enemies. It is here that grace should be passed from one to the other, making possible the melting of our hearts and the acceptance of friend and enemy, neighbor and stranger, alike. It is here that we are to be marked by the encomium, “See how they love one another.” It is here we learn of the model of God’s anticipatory as well as infinitely actual love and forgiveness—whether as expressed in the story of the “Prodigal Son” where the son is awaited and greeted with open arms, seemingly without judgment, seemingly only with yearning desire for the son’s return; or in the story of salvation historically enacted in the forgiveness of Jesus Christ, which holds out for our recognition and acceptance, the forgiveness of God.

Many stories could be told, however, of those who have experienced injury in and from the church itself—from its leaders or co-believers. I know of one that remains vivid in my mind.

¹⁵“Ought” may be too strong a term here. By using it, I do not want to impose yet another burden on those who suffer under ongoing oppression of whatever kind. I simply mean that it is an appropriate disposition, one that can be freeing and strengthening, even under these circumstances.

A woman religious was judged by church leaders to be unworthy of her status as a woman religious. The reason for this judgment was that although she served primarily the poor in her role in state government, the budget of her department also distributed funds for abortion for women with no other recourse. She could therefore, it was determined,¹⁶ no longer continue as a member of her religious community. The rest of her life's journey was marked, not only by utter service to the poor, but by a form of exile, by swords of sorrow, and by the cross. She responded to what was "done unto" her with integrity and visible humility. She remained faithful to her call no matter what forces tried to pluck it out of her heart. There was in her no bitterness and no loss of who she was. "I shall always be a Sister of Mercy in my heart," she said to reporters in those most painful years. She remained in relationship to the community with which she said she had "cast her lot." She lived simply, even frugally. She prayed her office daily, said her rosary, shared in Eucharist. When, just before her death from cancer, she was asked whether she still needed to be reconciled with those who had harmed her, she said simply, "I forgave them." This is what I mean by anticipatory forgiveness. In one context or another of all of our lives, it is asked of us—whether in the church or in the world. And my argument is that it is of particular need in the multiple conflicts, oppressive contexts, of the 21st century. It may be especially needed but also especially possible in the church, where people die because of unreflective traditional teachings regarding sexuality, where people are starved spiritually because they are denied access to the table of the Lord, where actions for justice are sometimes considered betrayals of the gospel, and where power is exercised in ways that are harmful to the marginalized; but also where grace works in ordinary and extraordinary ways and can be counted on still to abound.

New Ways of Seeing

A primary source of conflict among peoples, as well as of desire to maintain dominance, one people or group over another, is the way in which we "see" those who are different from ourselves. Hence, for example, perceptions of gender, racial, and class differences have long undergirded assumptions about superiority and inferiority among human persons. The same is true of cultural and geographical differences. Longstanding conflicts are sustained by myths of human difference, assumptions regarding "each one's place," and memories of the conquered and the conquerers.

The attitude of heart that I have been describing in terms of forgiveness, trust, and readiness to forgive, makes possible new ways of understanding human difference. It allows us, for example, to step back and to look again at biblical warrants for divine valuation of the importance of difference. A quick but extremely thought-provoking instance of this lies in new interpretations of the Genesis account of the story of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9).¹⁷ In most of the traditional articulations of this story in Christian churches, it is said that God punished the descendents of Noah by confusing their language and dividing them, scattering them across the earth. In this rendering, the creation and reinforcement of difference is a punishment for human pride. An alternative reading of the story of Babel, however, is that God

¹⁶The determination was made by church officials, not by the leaders of her own community.

¹⁷These interpretations are not as new to the Jewish tradition as to the Christian.

did not act out of wrath to punish the people who wanted only to stay together; who wanted only to build a city for themselves, with a tower in the midst high enough (“reaching even to the heavens”) *not* to challenge God, but to identify themselves among themselves, to give themselves a name so that they would not lose their unity.

On this alternative reading, God intervened not to punish the people but to prevent them from frustrating God’s *original plan* for diversity among humans. These people were not intentionally rebellious against God. Rather, out of fear of loss of one another, they attempted to absolutize their human community, in order to protect themselves from vulnerability and to enable progress in human invention and shared public discourse. The Christian ethicist John Howard Yoder has argued, for example, that what God may have done in this case was to respond graciously to this defensive effort on the part of a people, and thereby to restore God’s original plan for human diversification.¹⁸

Sometimes, in earlier efforts at interpretation, this text has been coupled with the Pentecost story in Acts 2:1-11. And the question is raised: If diversity was God’s intent all along, why should there be—by the power of God’s Spirit—a seeming reversal of the importance of human difference, now making irrelevant the different languages, cultures, experiences that had marked the history of humans since God’s scattering them across the earth. Perhaps the answer to this question lies in the text of Acts which says, after all, not that everyone now spoke and heard the same language, but that *hearing and speaking different languages, they nonetheless understood one particular message*. Those present at this graced moment said to one another: “How can each of us hear [these Galileans] speaking of the mighty deeds of God in our own native language? speaking in our own tongues?” It seems that differences were not erased; deep human difference that is characterized by diverse languages, histories, cultures, did not become irrelevant. From this we discern that the word of God is not foreign to any human experience; that difference can not only be accepted but needed (and blessed) because it forms the ears that can hear in every tongue the voice of the Spirit.

Today we can recognize in human relationships two meanings of difference, two attitudes in perceiving the “other.” “Othering” can be negative or positive. It can mean our projection onto an “other” all the things we consider (however unconsciously) negative in ourselves; it can mean seeing the “other” as always a stranger, making it easier to see her or him as an enemy, or as less than human. In this first way of perceiving the “other,” difference becomes a source of violence.

On the other hand, as my colleague Letty Russell has said many times, difference can be understood primarily as a gift needed for human community. If we were all exactly the same, the possibilities of community would be extremely limited. But if difference is necessary for the richness and vitality of community, then in a sense there is no real “other.” As some groups have learned to say, “She is not the other; she is my sister.” Or “he is not the other; he is my brother.” The response made possible, then, to difference is not enmity, not exploitation, not

¹⁸See John Howard Yoder, *For the Nations* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 61-65. This same view is articulated from a Jewish perspective in Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (New York: Continuum, 2002).

violence, but hospitality.¹⁹

There remain, however, tendencies in us to make of difference a kind of eternal barrier between and among us. Religious diversity, for example, has been a tragic source of violence through the centuries. In our era it has returned in multiple forms—the violence of judgment and rejection, exclusion and persecution, and even the ultimate violence of killing. Radically new ways of approaching this phenomenon must be tried, ways that will foster the “conditions of possibility” of acceptance, forgiveness, and friendship. Significant work is being done, especially but not only, by feminist religion scholars.²⁰ A new initiative has been undertaken, for example, to heal the breaches among Christians, Muslims, and Jews. It involves a “new way of seeing” the heritage of these religions and the potential for peace among them. Instead of focusing, as in the past, on a putative unity among these traditions based on the common fatherhood of Abraham, women scholars of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism choose now to focus on their two mothers, Hagar and Sarah. These scholars believe that the problems and possibilities of the past and present can better be understood by following the history of these two women. They believe also that the responsibility of mutual understanding and shared actions for justice falls now to “the myriad children of Hagar and Sarah, now unto the thousandth generation,” including those of us who are their daughters and sons today.²¹

A new “way of seeing” is made possible first by at least the minimal “dropping of our hearts” in *respect* for adherents of religions other than our own. Each tradition must find in itself reasons to respect the others. The new way of seeing is then forged through interacting, learning, attempting to understand the beliefs of other traditions, and to comprehend the histories that have led to the imposition of terrible harm. The farther we travel in this new way, the better we “see” our sisters and brothers, and the more clearly we recognize the imperative for being-forgiven and forgiving.

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I began this essay by proposing that a particular work of mercy is called for in a new and urgent way in the 21st century, and that those whose whole vocation is to bring mercy to the world have a special responsibility for this work. I suggested that this work of mercy, the “spiritual” work of forgiving all injuries, would not substitute for or counter the other works of mercy or of justice. As a disposition it is radical enough, and sufficiently “embodied,” to shape genuinely compassionate love at the heart of all the deeds of love, all the works of mercy. It is conducive to forming hearts that will comfort the sorrowful, counsel those under the stress and pain of doubt, share insight and wisdom, reveal Gods’ beauty in God’s mercy so that the hearts

¹⁹I am indebted to Letty M. Russell for key insights in this regard. See her forthcoming, posthumously published work, *Just Hospitality*, ed. Shannon Clarkson & Kathryn Ott (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008).

²⁰See, for example, the many relevant writings by Rosemary Radford Ruether, Diana Eck, and others.

²¹See *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives*, ed. Phyllis Trible and Letty M. Russell (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 1.

of others are awakened and turned to God and neighbor, endure wrongs not passively but actively, reaching out to forgive and transform. It is conducive, too, to deeds of loving justice, and the further works of mercy: finding food and drink for the hungry and thirsty, clothes for the bereft, shelter for the homeless poor, companionship as well as fairness for the imprisoned; and it can motivate responses to the sick, and reverence for the dead.

If Sisters of Mercy can learn to embody this particular work in new ways, in all the troubled and troubling contexts of human distress and need, we will, I believe, be able to speak truth to power, stand in solidarity with those powerless and injured, challenge forces of evil whether in systems or ideologies, surrender our hearts in a plea for divine forgiveness for ourselves and for all whom we refuse to judge as our enemies. Insofar as this is today's challenge and call to all the world, and within the church, surely it is our call in a particular way.