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Forgiveness for sex abuse doesn't come cheap

Bill Tammeus | May. 18, 2011 A small c catholic

Perhaps you saw the recent PBS series on forgiveness [1] or read the related book by the director, Helen Whitney, *Forgiveness: A Time to Love, a Time to Hate [2]*.

Both are clear-eyed, moving, even disturbing looks at how to understand forgiveness.

Since seeing the series and reading the book I?ve thought about the role of forgiveness in the priest abuse scandal within the Catholic Church. At one time I might have said, simply (and simplistically), that I think it?s everyone?s obligation to forgive and move on. I?d have said that out of my Reformed Tradition (Presbyterian) theology [3], and no doubt I could have said sincere words to justify it theologically.

But I?m pretty sure now that?s the wrong answer. In fact, I?m increasingly convinced that forgiveness is so complicated that it can be downright dangerous.

Oh, when possible forgiveness -- and, later, even reconciliation -- is desirable, that should be our goal. But if we don?t appreciate the complexities of forgiveness we can quite easily injure already injured people even more.

As I think aloud here about victims of predatory priests, I want to be cautious because I have been neither a victim nor a perpetrator. So although I can empathize with victims and try to grasp what might drive perpetrators, I do so as someone outside the circle of pain and humiliation.

What I do see, however, is that no one but the victim has a right to offer forgiveness to the criminal. I cannot, for instance, be the one to offer forgiveness to the thief who broke into my neighbor?s house. I also now see that forgiveness can?t be received if the perpetrator has not done the required preparatory work.

Beyond that, it takes an enormous amount of work on the part of the victim to be able to get to a point at which offering forgiveness is even possible.

That?s why I and some of the people interviewed in the PBS series and the book were so uncomfortable with the instant forgiveness that the Amish community offered to the man who murdered five Amish girls at a school in Nickel Mines, Pa., in 2006.

Indeed, once one understood the foundational motive for that immediate forgiveness (the German Lutheran martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer called such forgiveness ?cheap grace?) the act became even more problematic. That?s because the Amish understood that if they didn?t forgive, they themselves would not be forgiven by God and that would jeopardize their chances for an eternal relationship with God.

A harsh way of putting it is that they didn?t forgive as an act of charity but as an act of self-interest.

In the case of the priest abuse scandal, however, something even more complicated is at work. For not only must forgiveness be a transaction between the victim and perpetrator, it necessarily would somehow need to

involve the whole church. It was the church, after all, that created the circumstances under which this abuse was possible.

It was, for instance, the terrible actions of bishops who avoided the issue by moving some of the perpetrators around from one parish or diocese to another without alerting anyone about the offending priest. So somehow the leaders of the church must become part of the forgiveness process -- and, indeed, we have seen some efforts by church leaders to take on the responsibility to express regret and seek forgiveness, though that process has struck me as incomplete or haphazard.

No doubt there are victims of various crimes who find it easier to hold on to their wounds, even treasuring them. But this is an indication of ineffectual healing and not final proof of a twisted and recalcitrant nature of the wounded party. In such cases, it?s incumbent on the perpetrators to try harder to warrant forgiveness.

Forgiveness can and should be liberating, but not if we do it on the cheap. In the end, there?s no iPhone app for it.

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[1] http://video.pbs.org/video/1860421436#
[2] http://www.amazon.com/Forgiveness-Time-Love-Hate/dp/160746649X/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1303222392&sr=1-1
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