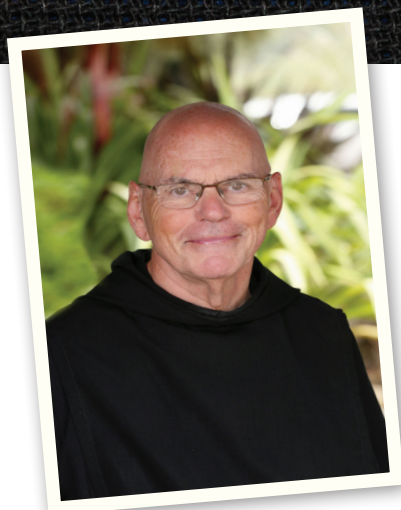


# Why forgiveness is so hard — *and so necessary.*



## REVISITING A CONVERSATION ON FORGIVENESS WITH ABBOT MATTHEW LEAVY

**R**eflecting recently on the amount of suffering and injustice that afflicts so much of our world right now, as well as the many divisive hurts within so many people's lives in our own nation, neighborhoods and families, we decided this Lent to reprise a conversation we had with Abbot Matthew Leavy, O.S.B., way back in 2008.

Back then, he had been abbot of Saint Anselm Abbey for 20 years. A native of the Bronx, Abbot Leavy received his doctorate in formative spirituality at Duquesne University. In nearly 60 years as a Benedictine, he has served and continues to serve people in numerous ways, including teaching, campus ministry, pastoral work and counseling.

Today, Abbot Leavy works at Woodside Priory and School in California, where he entered the Benedictine order 56 years ago. Besides his numerous roles there, he also serves as the assistant pastor of the priory's Hungarian parish.

What follows is the original conversation *Parable* had with Abbot Leavy some 15 years ago, with a special addendum.

**Parable: Why does so much of your pastoral work center on reconciliation?**

**Abbot Matthew Leavy:** I suppose because we all live in relationship with one another – with spouses, family, friends, professional associates, neighbors, organizations and institutions. Love is at the center of many of these relationships, but because our love is imperfect, we all encounter occasional, or sometimes enduring misunderstanding, hurt or betrayal. Just as essential to the human condition as relationship, therefore, is the need for forgiveness.

**Parable: What exactly is forgiveness?**

**AML:** Forgiveness is an act of the will prompted and sustained by grace.

**Parable: An act of the will? So forgiveness is something we decide to do?**

**AML:** Right, and it's one of the most important decisions we can make.

**Parable: So, why do you think people have such a hard time forgiving?**

**AML:** For one thing, many people have a real misunderstanding about what forgiveness is. They've heard things like "to forgive is to forget." That's a nice thought, but it is not true psychologically or spiritually. Forgiving someone who has done us wrong and forgetting what that person did are two very different things. We tend to believe that if our forgiveness is genuine, forgetting should follow immediately, but it's a mistake to use our memory as a barometer of our forgiveness. The Christian act of forgiveness is not a memory alteration that obliterates the past or brings about selected amnesia.

**Parable: So even after we decide to forgive, we may still carry the hurt we experienced?**

**AML:** Well, just as the Christian act of forgiveness does not bring about forgetfulness, it is also not a mood-altering substance, which immediately changes our feelings. Having forgiven someone, we can, and likely will, still hurt. If we wait for the feeling of forgiveness to come upon us, or if we wait until the memory of the hurt is dim or vanished, we will likely never forgive another person.

**Parable: Many people might ask, "If I'm still going to hurt then why bother?"**

**AML:** We should bother because it is our life, and everything in our life has meaning, even the pain, perhaps especially the pain. None of us can change the facts of our history. But we can change the meaning of that history. Time and grace have a way of putting past hurts into a new light, sometimes allowing us to forget, but more often enabling us to find new meaning. We can find paschal and redemptive meaning in past wounds, difficulties and relationships.

**Parable: Often, people won't forgive because they feel that the person or institution that hurt them doesn't deserve to be forgiven.**

**AML:** In a sense, they're right. The person or organization probably doesn't deserve forgiveness. Which of us does? Forgiveness is like love. It isn't something we can earn. It's a gift. If we wait until a person deserves our forgiveness, it will probably never happen. Our very act of holding someone bound to our anger is a misunderstanding of forgiveness itself, because,

truth be told, none of us deserves forgiveness. And yet God gives it to us upon this condition: I will forgive you though you do not deserve it, if you will do the same for others.

**Parable: But when I forgive someone, aren't I letting them off the hook or approving of what they've done?**

**AML:** Yes, you are letting them off the hook of your anger and resentment. I don't know if that metaphor refers to fishing or medieval torture, but either way it's very powerful, isn't it? Do any of us really want to drag someone through life on hooks? Do any of us hope to arrive at the Kingdom of God carrying someone on a hook? At the same time, we should understand that forgiveness is not approval. What is wrong remains wrong. Forgiving someone does not mean that you are condoning what was done.

**Parable: So why should people forgive?**

**AML:** First of all, because Jesus did and commanded us to do likewise. Besides, from a strictly human point of view, forgiveness is good for us. All experts agree on that. Our relationships, our work, our thought processes, our prayer lives and even our physical health, are impacted negatively by the bitterness that results from a harbored grudge. Forgiveness frees us from that suffering. When we forgive, it affects others, but more significantly, it affects us by freeing us of frustration, resentment and anger. These poisons drain out of the wound, as it were, so that we can begin to heal.

**Parable: Poisons?**

**AML:** Yes, resentments and anger can become corrosive to our very

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## Forgiveness is an act of the will prompted and sustained by grace.”

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person. One spiritual counselor I know observes that in prolonged anger, we “are mixing a cocktail of poison for our enemy that we end up drinking ourselves.”

**Parable: As Christians, must we forgive everyone?**

**AML:** Yes, if we desire to follow in the footsteps of Christ. This is the most obvious and persuasive reason to forgive others. When we forgive someone, we are imitating Christ, whose first and last acts on earth were acts of reconciliation.

**Parable: So, for the Christian, there’s more at stake than just psychological healing?**

**AML:** Of course. Simply stated, forgiveness is redemptive. It is unlikely that the skies will open up the moment that we decide to forgive, but the very act of forgiveness sets in motion the redemptive change to which Christ calls us. Though there are a variety of spiritual truths articulated in the Our Father, perhaps none is more profound, more difficult and more essential to our well-being than forgiveness. Forgiveness is at the very core of God’s relationship with us, and, therefore, at the very core of our relationship with one another.

**Parable: You speak with a certain urgency about this.**

**AML:** Yes, probably because I have seen so much hurt over the years in so many people holding on to one kind of a grudge or another, unable or unwilling to forgive themselves or others. I have come to understand that a commitment to forgive and

to seek forgiveness is nothing less than a radical and restorative act by which we determine to put right the relationships in our lives. Nothing could be more important, more healing or more profound. And there is nothing to which God calls us with greater urgency and promise than to forgive others as He has forgiven us.

**Parable: When we originally published this conversation, we heard from some readers who were deeply impacted by it and who took specific steps to address grudges they had held for years. But we also know people, and you probably do too, who say, “Well, maybe I am a lost soul, but I am just unable to forgive (someone) for (something). Is there anything you can offer a person who feels this way?”**

**AML:** I would start by assuring them that they are not a lost soul. They are a seeking soul, wrestling with a difficult, sensitive and hurtful episode in their life. Then, I would share with them a story that took place in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide.

A man appeared at the Catholic counseling center that was set up in Rwanda to help survivors deal with the trauma of the war and the personal losses that occurred. With much trembling and many tears, he recounted to the priest his tragic story of loss.

His wife, all his children and his parents had been slaughtered in a raid on his village while he was out in the fields at work. He recounted his struggle to forgive those who were responsible for this heinous crime.

He moaned and groaned that he wanted, above all, to forgive but felt

unable to do so. Then he revealed the only consoling strategy keeping him from ultimate despair. “Even though I can’t forgive them directly, I ask God to forgive them. This is the only prayer that brings me some peace. What more can I do, Father?” he pleaded.

The priest was himself moved to tears as he listened to the man’s story.

He consoled the man by telling him that he had done all that he could do at this point and that he was in good company. He told him that he was following in the footsteps and pattern of Jesus himself, who, while on the cross, modeled forgiveness. Jesus did not personally address those who were torturing or crucifying him. He did not say, “I forgive you and you and you over there.”

Rather, he turned to his Father and said, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”

The man left, still in great and lasting pain, but consoled by the priest and with greater hope and peace of heart.

There is a practical lesson in this story for all of us. We likely have not experienced the depth or extent of loss that this man did.

Our hurts, misunderstandings, grievances and grudges may be of a lesser proportion. But the practice of using Jesus’ own approach to forgiveness, and even His very words, can be a powerful means for us to experience the healing and peace that authentic forgiveness brings.

Here, repetition can be helpful. Sometimes, I take my rosary beads and pray on each bead, “Father forgive (name) or (him, her, them), for they know not what they do.”

Doing this 59 times does have an effect on my heart. It reinforces my intention to forgive and actually places the major responsibility for forgiveness where it ultimately belongs, with God, the Father of Mercies. ■