

## Forgiveness as the Catholic yoga

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 28, 2011 NCR Today

**ROME** -- In a post-modern, pragmatic, "gimme-something-that-works" sort of world, Eastern religions have had considerable success in exporting elements of their spirituality and tradition that meet perceived contemporary needs. Plenty of fitness-conscious people have been exposed to Hinduism through yoga, for example, just as many stressed-out Westerners have been intrigued by Buddhism through transcendental meditation (TM).

As a thought exercise, here's a question: Does the Catholic church have something similar to put on the market? A practice which meets or exceeds imminently practical, secular standards of effectiveness, but which could also serve as a calling card for the broader Catholic tradition?

Robert Enright believes the answer is "yes," and he knows what it is: Forgiveness, not just as a virtue or an abstract idea, but a concrete therapeutic tool.

"Hatred has a long shelf life," Enright says. "Once it enters into the human heart, it's hard to get it out. It breeds destruction, discouragement, and hopelessness."

"If we are to save the planet," Enright says, "we must be bathed in forgiveness."

Enright spoke in Rome Monday morning, as part of a conference on "Neuroscience and Moral Action" sponsored by the Opus Dei-run Pontifical University of the Holy Cross.

Enright is a psychologist at the University of Wisconsin who's spent the last quarter-century pioneering what he calls "Forgiveness Therapy," an approach to psychotherapy designed to help a patient overcome emotional suffering by learning to forgive the person, or persons, who caused it. He's developed a four-phase, twenty-step process to lead patients to forgive, and he's got empirical studies to back up his claim that it works: anxiety and stress levels go down, he says, and people experience emotional relief.

Enright told the conference that "forgiveness therapy" has been tested with various subgroups at risk of emotional vulnerability: elderly women, incest survivors, men who were cut out of an abortion decision made by their partners, drug rehab patients, even people suffering from cardiac disease. In each case, he said, the therapy made a positive, and provable, difference.

The cardiac cases are especially illuminating: Cardiac disease often involves a tightening of the arteries, he said, especially when people are angry. Peer-reviewed medical tests, Enright said, show that after the experience of "forgiveness therapy," the arteries function better, meaning that patients have a reduced risk of chest pains and sudden death.

"Forgiveness therapy," Enright says, is a different animal from the traditional Catholic sacrament of confession. In confession, God forgives the sinner; in forgiveness therapy, a victim forgives his or her victimizers. While

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one can reinforce the other, he says, it doesn't take any religious belief to benefit from forgiveness therapy.

Enright is currently involved in a project to teach forgiveness in schools in Belfast, in Northern Ireland, and in the Holy Land. (Among other things, the curriculum involves showing kids the movie "Horton Hears a Who," with its memorable slogan "a person is a person, no matter how small.")

Importantly, he said, forgiveness therapy works even if the offender has no interest in being forgiven. It doesn't require an apology or act of repentance to work its magic.

"If it did, and our enemies knew that, they would never apologize, so that we would wallow in our own resentments," he said.

Forgiveness therapy, Enright said, turns conventional psychoanalysis on its head by placing the focus not on the patient and his or her own pain, but on the offending party — the person or persons who inflicted the trauma from which a given patient is trying to recover. The idea is to help patients express an unconditional "act of mercy, rooted in self-giving love, for those who have acted unjustly toward the forgiver."

In that sense, Enright says, forgiveness is more than a skill or a coping strategy — it's a moral virtue, and one with empirically demonstrable value in the real world.

Enright acknowledged that forgiveness can be a tough sell, especially when people suspect that it's opposed to justice — holding people accountable when they harm others.

"The idea is not to throw justice out the window," he said. "People can and should seek a fair solution to the wrongs they've suffered."

Instead, he said, the point of forgiveness therapy is "to bring in mercy alongside justice, without condoning or excusing the wrongs that have been done."

Part of the process, Enright said, is to try to understand the offender. What was life like for them growing up? What was happening in their lives at the time they hurt someone? The idea, he said, is to try to summon the will to forgive — with the paradox being that "as we forgive those who hurt us without expecting anything in return, we are the ones who are healed."

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Though he's a Catholic himself, Enright developed "forgiveness therapy" as a psychoanalytical tool, not a spiritual discipline. It's only recently that he's turned his attention to forgiveness in the church, or the church's potential role as an ambassador of forgiveness to the wider world.

Enright announced to the Rome conference this morning that he's working on a book on "The church as a forgiving community," the centerpiece chapter for which will be supplied by Cardinal Raymond Burke, an American who currently heads the Vatican's main appeals court, the Apostolic Signatura. Enright said he intends to line up other top-tier theologians, bishops and pastors as contributors, and hopes that the book will eventually be published in the United States by Ignatius Press.

Enright has recently been invited to speak at a Eucharistic Congress in Dublin, Ireland, in 2012, which will give him the opportunity to apply his ideas on forgiveness, justice, and reconciliation to the Catholic sexual abuse crisis.

"The aim is to make person-to-person forgiveness a norm in the church," he said, with sermons organized around the idea and laity engaged in studying it.

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