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Forgiveness and Violence Against Women

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Abstract: The author notes that forgiveness is often prematurely and inappropriately expected of women who are victimized. The way we often speak of forgiveness does trivialize violent crimes against women and further victimize them. The dignity of women demands that the church explicitly acknowledge the injustice of violent crimes against them, hold the perpetrators accountable for it and seek to heal women.

Keywords: Healing, victimization, violence against women, forgiveness, accountability.

I. Introduction

During the monsoon season of 2002, my husband and I had the privilege to live and study in India. I visited several Roman Catholic churches for Sunday mass during my stay and on one Sunday had an experience that taught me that although there are many differences between India and the United States, one thing was tragically common. In both places, the way the church understands and responds to issues surrounding violence against women can sometimes be uninformed and therefore dangerous. That Sunday the priest preached on a nun from the former Yugoslavia who had been raped and subsequently bore a child, and on the familiar story of St. Maria Goretti. The sermon's theme was forgiveness and how we Christians should emulate these women in their examples of forgiveness. The priest did not use any examples in which men had forgiven gross violations of their physical integrity, only women. Further, he spoke in such a way as to make forgiveness in such situations seem easy and the expected response of all good Christians. His comments did not touch on the gravity of the crimes committed against these women's bodies, on the inviolability of all human

bodies, or on women's fundamental right to be free from such violence; only on heroic acts of forgiveness of what by the end of the sermon, seemed like merely minor infractions after all. There was an emphasis on forgiveness with no clear condemnation of the crime and no clear understanding of the hard work of seeking justice that must take place before such forgiveness can be expected. In a way this is not surprising, as I have also encountered this situation in many sermons at home and in the stories of many women who have been victims.[1] I could not help but wonder how many women present in the church that day had been raped or battered in their lifetimes and how they might be hearing this sermon. Had they approached a priest or other representative of the church for support in the aftermath of their victimization? Had they been told to forgive and forget – to pray for their attackers – to go back to battering husbands? Were they hearing this sermon now as yet another indication that the Christian community is blind to the gravity of the crimes against them?

Forgiveness is often prematurely and inappropriately expected of women who have been victims of rape and battering. The way we speak of forgiveness in theology and in pastoral practice can and often does trivialize violent crimes against women and further victimize them. In this paper I will seek to lay out some proposals for how forgiveness in such instances ought to be understood so that women's experience of victimization may be truly acknowledged and their processes of healing may be *honored* and supported by the church.

While forgiveness is an undeniable value in the Christian tradition, and while the future of the world and any type of humane human society may depend on cultivating the capacity for forgiveness, even of the most atrocious crimes, we must examine what forgiveness means and what conditions make true forgiveness possible. We have learned from Political and Liberation theologies of all sorts that context matters. Therefore, to consider the meaning and possibility of forgiveness in any situation requires attention to the concrete experiences of the persons involved. In any consideration of the topic of forgiveness with regard to crimes of sexual violence and domestic abuse against women, the context of such crimes and women's experience of victimization and recovery must be consulted. What is the nature of violent crimes against women? In what

ways are women harmed and what is involved in the process of healing? How do women who have been victims hear and understand the Christian mandate to forgive? How does pastoral advice to forgive affect the possibility of true reconciliation and healing? This paper will argue that blanket recommendations to women to forgive the perpetrators of crimes against them will not do. In all cultures steeped in patriarchal values, what is needed is conversion: conversion to the belief in women's right to be free from violent abuse, conversion to a frame of mind and a praxis that recognizes and communicates the inviolability of women's bodies and the lamentability of any act of violence against them. Until such conversion takes place, pastoral recommendations to women to forgive will only re-victimize women and impede true healing and reconciliation.

II. The Patriarchal Context of Violence against Women

The causes of violence against women are complex, but not the least among them are entrenched patriarchal values that define women as sexual objects and as appropriately owned or controlled by certain men. These patriarchal values disdain women's physical integrity and well-being. Though perhaps denounced on the surface, acts such as rape and woman-battering are widely tolerated in patriarchal culture and sometimes intentionally used as means to control women. There is a moral callousness that affects all of us who live in a patriarchal context. When crimes against women happen we ask, "What was she doing out at that hour? What did she say to provoke her husband? What was she wearing to attract sexual attention? Such reactions betray an underlying sense that women somehow invite or deserve rape or battering. The result is the trivialization of violent crimes against women. Against such a backdrop, what can the encouragement of women to forgive possibly mean? Does it not run the risk of further burdening women with the responsibility for what has happened to them? Does it not participate in the general tendency to classify acts of rape and battering as somehow less than serious, less than tragic, less than an abomination? In a context that does not defend women's fundamental human right to be free of any form of physical harm and sexual violation, the encouragement to forgive can and often is heard by women as a trivialization of what has happened to them.

III. Taking off Our Patriarchal Glasses to See the Gravity of the Problem

Violence such as rape and battery of women produces traumatic suffering, which, in its destructiveness, can be described as radical de-humanizing suffering. It occurs in epidemic proportions throughout the world. The following will shed light on the prevalence of violence against women in the United States. Sadly, a survey of statistics from almost every country in the world would draw a similarly tragic picture. In 1988 the Surgeon General of the United States warned that violence was the number one health risk to adult women in the United States. In 1992 it was the leading cause of injuries to women aged 15-44 (*Statistics Packet* 1994). Instances of battery and rape are more common than automobile accidents, muggings and cancer deaths combined. The FBI reports that thirty percent of women murdered in 1990 were killed by their husbands or partners and that one in ten women will be physically abused by their husbands in marriage. According to a U.S. Senate report, one million women each year seek medical attention for injuries sustained in abusive relationships. According to the American Medical Association, whose statistics are based not on crime reports, but on the number of women who seek medical care as a result of their injuries, almost one-fourth of all women in the U.S are battered at sometime in their lives by a current or former partner, and an estimated four million women each year are victims of severe assaults by intimates. Further, women battered by intimates account for one-third of all women admitted to hospital emergency rooms. Estimates of the number of battered women who are also raped by their abusers range from thirty-three to forty-six percent. Fifty percent of women in psychiatric care have been victims of rape or childhood sexual abuse. Between one in five and one in eight women will be raped in their lifetimes, either by intimates or strangers, which means that at least 12.1 million women in the U. S. today have been victims of rape (*Statistics Packet*1994).

Rape, childhood sexual abuse and battering all involve the use of force to achieve control over the victim, and they function to deny and override a woman's or girl's capacity for control over herself and her body. They deny the victim her body-right. Many rape victims

report that while the rape was occurring, they were convinced that they were going to be killed. This fear of death is mixed with an intense feeling of humiliation. For many victims, this initial terror and humiliation is followed by shame and self-blame (Waites 1993: 56).

Ruth Seifert, who works with victims of rape in Bosnia-Herzegovina, summarizes the effects of rape, classifying it as a form of torture and an assault on the very identity of its victims:

> A violent invasion into the interior of one's body represents the most severe attack imaginable upon the intimate self and the dignity of a human being; by any measure it is a mark of severe torture. When a woman's inner space is violently invaded, it affects her in the same way torture does. It results in physical pain, loss of dignity, an attack on her identity and a loss of self-determination over her own body (Seifert 1994: 55).

Battering takes the form of slapping, pushing, hitting, punching, kicking, choking, and throwing – onto the floor, down staircases, out of windows. It often involves the use of weapons such as hammers, boards, knives, and guns (Dobash and Dobash 1979: 106). Besides injury, women who are battered are also likely to experience isolation from friends, family, and professional help, economic dependence, inability to find protection from harm, and the immediate debilitating effects of random and unpredictable trauma.

Severe or ongoing abuse through battery or rape or both often result in the condition diagnosed as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This is a physiological condition with serious psychological consequences for victims. It is characterized by somatic disorders, night terrors, eating disorders, self-mutilation, and the inability to act in the interest of one's own well-being, to experience concern for others, and to trust God, self, and others. One researcher describes the effects of PTSD as "psychic death" and "soul murder," which destroy the very identity of the victim (Waites 1993: 22). Women who are victims of such severe trauma require long periods of recovery with explicit attention to regaining the sense of self lost through violence and its aftermath.

Post-traumatic stress disorder is diagnosed when extreme trauma has deregulated the physiological functions that control stress

reactions and, as a result, has generated severe psychological problems. Elizabeth Waites defines trauma as "an injury to mind or body that requires structural repair. The emphasis on structure . . . suggests that the main effect of trauma is disorganization"(Waites 1993: 22). Stressful events trigger changes in neurochemistry and result in changes in thinking and behaviour. Normally, when a person is confronted with an extremely stressful situation, these chemical reactions to stress are good; they are what allows the person to cope with the stress in the moment. Most of the time, these chemical changes are temporary and disappear a reasonable time after the stress is removed. The body re-adapts to normal conditions. But when the trauma experienced is particularly extreme, the micro-structural changes that occur may permanently alter a person's neurochemistry. In these cases the experience of trauma pushes people "beyond their adaptive limits" (Waites 1993: 36).

As the effects of the trauma take their toll, women often lose part of their memory. The loss of memory is itself a further trauma that exacerbates the lack of control the woman feels over her life. In response to lack of control, especially in cases of repeated trauma such as ongoing childhood sexual abuse, self-abuse becomes an attempt at self-regulation, encouraged by feelings of self-hatred, and develops into an addiction over time. Masochism has long been considered a psychological problem intrinsic somehow to femininity. Those who study PTSD in women who are victims of violence now believe that these tendencies are a result of the experience of trauma, and not something biologically intrinsic to women (Waites 1993: 23-49).

The process of recovery from trauma has several overlapping stages, but central to the process as a whole is the ability to remember and to mourn the suffering associated with the traumatic event. Mourning becomes the key to the way the events are remembered and to the function of memories in the process of healing. Dominick LaCapra, who has written about the Nazi genocide of the Jews and the trauma experienced by survivors, argues that there are healthy and unhealthy ways to remember (LaCapra 1998). Healthy remembering is characterized by mourning the event(s) and can lead to what he calls "working through" the trauma and coming to some

possibility for engaging in life and its possibilities. Unhealthy ways of remembering elide the negativity of the events, excuse them, cover over them or sentimentalize them. These ways of remembering prevent mourning by minimizing the negativity of the event, and therefore prevent the process of "working through" (LaCapra 1998: 23). The refusal to face the negativity of suffering and to mourn what has been lost, keeps victims trapped in the effects of trauma.[2] The purpose of the healing process is to allow the victim to face the full negativity of the event and to mourn it in order to be able to heal from the effects of the trauma.

In her book entitled *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman provides a comprehensive treatment of the experience of trauma due to violence against women, the effects of PTSD, and the process of recovery from it. Herman delineates three stages of recovery from post-traumatic stress: the establishment of safety, recovery of memory and mourning, and reconnection with community. Although the stages overlap, and the patient may revisit some of the same issues on a deeper level in a later stage of recovery, the general movement of this process is from a sense of unpredictable danger to a reliable sense of safety, from dissociated memory to acknowledgement of the event, and from stigmatized alienation to reconnection with others and with God. The involvement and support of others is indispensable to the victim in her process of recovery. She needs others to assist in naming what has happened as a crime, as an injustice, and in remembering and facing the gruesome facts of the crime. In fact, the public acknowledgement that a crime has taken place and public action to come to the aid of the survivor are necessary conditions for the possibility of the survivor learning to trust again; these assist her in rebuilding a sense of order and justice.

In the first stage, the trauma victim achieves safety. This includes safety from the person who inflicted the trauma, safety from other potential victimizers, and safety from self-injury (Herman 1992: 174). The central task of the second stage of recovery is remembering. Because memories of trauma are often lost in the process of dissociation, this second stage may involve the slow and difficult work of memory recovery (Herman 1992: 181). The final stage of recovery is reconnection with others or commonality. Herman argues

that after the establishment of safety and self-care, and after the process of retelling and grieving, the survivor is capable of meaningful relationships with others. Noting that a significant minority of survivors become involved in the public struggle against violence against women, Herman maintains that in this final stage survivors are able to be interested in the lives and pains of others and to act on their behalf. According to Herman, reconnection with community, the experience of commonality, brings with it freedom to engage in the wider world, and the will and the ability to act in the best interests of self and of others (Herman 1992: 236).

IV. Conversion to Women's Well-being: A Challenge to the Church

In light of the gravity of the problem of violence against women and the dynamics of radical suffering, trauma and healing, I argue that the church must undergo a conversion. Conversion from what and to what? We must be converted from the common patriarchal assumptions about women and women's bodies and the ways these have affected Christian pastoral practice toward women who have been victims. In order to support victims and help them truly in the long run to forgive, we must eschew the lure of easy forgiveness. Any understanding of what forgiveness might entail for women who have been victims of rape or battering must be formed by the explicit belief in women's body right and in women's right to concern for her own well-being. Without these, the encouragement to forgive participates in the larger patriarchal context that victimizes women in the first place.

A. Body-right

The first belief to which the church must be converted is the belief in women's body-right. Affirmations of the inviolability of women's bodies, women's right to control what happens to their own bodies, and the right to physical well-being are nothing less than revolutionary in the face of patriarchally structured patterns of relation. Patriarchy defines women as appropriately owned by men. Women's sexuality and reproductive capacities are put at the service

of patriarchal concerns. The claim to body-right provides the basis for naming acts of violence against women's bodies as crimes.

In pastoral practice with victims, Christian communities have often disregarded women's body-right in *favor* of other concerns. When pastors and/or Christian communities encourage women to spiritualize their suffering and to forgive before safety and justice are established, they subordinate the physical inviolability of women to other concerns. The encouragement of passive acceptance of suffering and easy forgiveness of acts of rape and battering betray the tendency to minimize the seriousness of the violation of women's bodies. From the standpoint of women's inviolability, suffering that results from the loss of body-right is a dehumanizing form of suffering which has no benefits or salutary effects. Further, women's body-right and the right to physical well-being must be explicitly understood and affirmed in any reflection on the value of forgiveness in cases of violent abuse. Without a consciousness of the importance of body-right and the fundamental inviolability of women's bodies, communities are ill-equipped to help women secure their safety and to accompany women through the long process of recovery and eventual forgiveness. A strong affirmation of women's body-right will empower women to name their own inviolability and to see the right to control their own bodies as rooted in God's will for their well-being.

B. Solidarity with Self

The second belief to which Christian communities must be converted is the belief in women's right to concern for their own well-being. Belief in this right is precisely what is taken from women in and through the experience of abuse. Women's growth in their ability to claim the right to loyalty to their own well-being is a necessary step in the arduous process of recovery from severe trauma. A firm conviction of the moral and religious correctness of women's active concern for their own well-being is thus a necessary aspect in Christian communities that would support women in this process.

This is not selfishness or narcissism. For too long and with grave consequences women have been led to believe that concern for their own well-being is contrary to their Christian calling to love and

sacrifice for others. Pastoral advice to victims that *centers* on this theme can be deadly for women and represents an appalling fusion of Christian values and patriarchal norms.[3] There is a direct rather than an inverse relationship between concern for oneself and concern for the well-being of all. The option for women's well-being, therefore, always also includes the option for one's own well-being. These theological insights are born out by psychological research into the connection between self-empathy, or loyalty to the self, and the possibility of active concern for others (Herman 1992: 235-36 and Huff 1987: 169) This research has shown that empathy with others and self-empathy are intrinsically related to each other. Thus, rather than being selfish, a loyalty to one's own well-being is a condition for the possibility of concern for and service to others. Solidarity with others, then, necessarily involves solidarity with self.

Violence against women destroys that which God intends for each person: her identity as subject, as agent of her own life, with the responsibility and dignity attendant to becoming responsible for herself. Understood in this way, women have not only the right but also the moral obligation to manifest loyalty to their own well-being.

V. Forgiveness and Violence against Women

In a converted Christian community that affirms women's body right and right to concern for their own well-being, what will be the contours of forgiveness? Feminist pastoral theologians Pamela Cooper-White and Marie Fortune are both clergy women who have had extensive pastoral experience in working with women who have been victims of battering and rape. Their work offers insights into the nature of forgiveness in these specific contexts. They argue that the nature of violence against women and its traumatic effects must be kept in view in any discussion of the possibility of forgiveness by women of their perpetrators. A rush to forgiveness, a mandate to forgive that does not hold the perpetrator accountable for his crimes, minimizes these acts of violence, fails to recognize women's bodies as inviolable and violence done to them as truly lamentable, and frustrates the process of healing in women.[4]

Victims who turn to the church for support are commonly encouraged to forgive. Pamela Cooper-White addresses the danger of this situation, arguing that pastors who advise forgiveness can easily "retraumatize" the victim by seeming to minimize what has happened to her and encouraging her to take responsibility for her perpetrator, when she needs to be concerned with establishing her own safety. Cooper-White and others emphasize a victim-*centered* understanding of the issue. They argue that forgiveness should happen according to the victim's timeline, that it should not be rushed, that it is dependent upon true and reliable repentance or restitution on the part of the perpetraor, or is in some other way brought about by the accomplishment of justice. The focus on justice for the victim places her and her well-being in the *center* of concern (Cooper-White 1995: 254-257).

Marie Fortune's understanding of forgiveness in the case of violence against women is *centered* on the well-being of the victim (although she also argues that holding the perpetrator accountable is also ultimately for his own good as well). Specifically, the conditions she places on the appropriateness of forgiveness point to the need to acknowledge the victim as valuable, her experience as valid, and her right to act as a moral agent in her situation. Fortune does not discard forgiveness as a Christian value, and indeed recognizes its value in re-establishing peace and right relationship. However, she urges against the lure of easy forgiveness that minimizes the seriousness of the act of abuse, denies accountability, and misplaces blame. Such easy forgiveness, she argues, dehumanizes both the victim and the perpetrator, by failing to insist on the inviolability of the victim and the responsibility of the perpetrator.

Fortune defines forgiveness as "a letting go of the immediacy of the trauma, the memory of which continues to terrorize the victim and limit possibilities" (Fortune 1995: 203). She argues that when forgiveness occurs, the victim is freed from seeing everything in life through the lens of her victimization. Anger no longer controls her. But it does not mean she will not ever feel angry again, and it does not mean that the initial injustice is covered over, forgotten, or deemed excusable in some way. This process of forgiveness takes a great deal of time and is only possible after the victim is safe from further

harm, the injustice has been acknowledged and the victim has had time to work through the feelings of anger at the violation (Fortune 1995: 203-204).

Fortune seeks to avoid sentimental or facile understandings of forgiveness, which she believes are widespread, and she insists that any question of forgiving the perpetrator begin with the explicit acknowledgement that what happened should never have happened. She argues that forgiveness in the case of violent victimization cannot mean forgetting or, more importantly, classifying the *offense* as a non-*offense*. For Fortune, any discussion of forgiveness must stay focussed on the fact that what happened is not acceptable. Fortune sees forgiveness in the larger context of making justice. It is one step on the road to making justice where there has been injustice, and a step that requires certain conditions to be in place before it is possible: "Truth-telling, acknowledgment of the violation, compassion, protection of the vulnerable, accountability, restitution, and vindication are the requirements for doing justice and mercy in the face of violation and injustice" (Fortune 1989: 114).

Thus the forgiveness that Fortune recommends is part of a larger process of reconciliation based on justice for the victim. This process will include acknowledgement of the wrong, true repentance, and restitution on the part of the perpetrator. Citing Luke 17:3-4 where Jesus commands his followers to forgive those who wrong them, Fortune emphasizes Jesus' injunction to first rebuke the offender, that is, confront him or her with the injustice and hold him or her accountable. Fortune also points out that in this passage forgiveness follows repentance, which she says in the case of sexual offenders and batterers takes a long time and involves complete accountability for their actions, participation in therapy, and a demonstration that they have truly turned from this behavior (Fortune 1995: 204).

Justice flowing from acknowledgement, true repentance and restitution on the part of the offender is the ideal, in Fortune's view, but she admits that such complete accountability from offenders is rare. She argues that other forms of justice can help the victim come to the point of forgiveness. A satisfactory resolution of the crime in the justice system is one form. A clear and insistent message from a

pastor and/or from the Christian community that what happened to the victim is criminal and undeserved, and that they are sorry that this happened to her, is another. What each of these examples has in common is the explicit recognition that the abuse is sinful and that it is fully the perpetrator's responsibility. According to Fortune, victims need to hear and believe from at least one other person that what happened to them is utterly unjustified. This emphasis upholds the inviolability of the victim, because it avoids the minimization inherent in forgiveness urged or tried too soon. Finally, although we can name elements that need to be in place for forgiveness to occur, Fortune argues that it is a grace that cannot be effected merely by an act of the will on the part of the victim, extorted by the perpetrator, or forced by a pastor:

For the Christian, it is finally the power of the Holy Spirit that enables the healing process to take place. This spiritual power gives the victim the strength to forgive, to let go. It gives the victimizer the strength to repent, to change. It gives the church the strength to help both persons in the justice-making process. But the power of the Holy Spirit is released only when justice is made manifest for the victim and offender. Whenever there is an attempt to cut the process short and jump to premature reconciliation, the possibility of authentic healing is lost (Fortune 1995: 205).*

Conclusion

In some ways the understanding of forgiveness in cases of violence against women set forth in this article parallels much of what we have learned from the truth commission movement around the world and in particular of the Truth and Reconciliation process in South Africa. Crimes of rape and battering are gross violations of human rights. They result in trauma that debilitates victims and their communities. They happen in epidemic proportions around the world. The truth commission process holds to the necessity of bringing to light crimes against humanity, speaking the truth of what happened in individual instances, supporting victims and affirming their feelings of outrage and pain. We may settle for no less for the victims of violence against women. A Christian church must surely always uphold the value of forgiveness, but it must just as surely always

explicitly uphold the inviolability of the human person, body and soul. To the extent that we have failed in the past by imposing on women a rushed mandate to forgive without first helping her to heal and seek justice, we must repent. In opposition to patriarchal customs and practices to the contrary we must be converted to belief in women's body right and right to well-being. I will end with a quote from Desmond Tutu quoted by Chapman: Reconciliation is not about being cozy; it is not about pretending that things were other than they were. Reconciliation based on falsehood, on not facing up to reality, is not true reconciliation and will not last (Chapman 2001: 201).

The dignity of women demands that the church explicitly acknowledge in word and practice the injustice of violent crimes against them and seek to protect them and aid them in their healing. The human dignity of perpetrators demands that the church hold them accountable for their actions. In such circumstances we may pray that the Holy Spirit will bless all with true reconciliation.

Notes

1. In the U.S., of course, the most recent and public instance of clergy disregard for victims and their experience is the clergy child sex-abuse crisis. Beyond the crimes themselves, it has been the fact that Bishops covered over the abuses, reassigned priests and thereby endangered more children that has shocked and saddened American Catholics. Even as the church tries to address this scandal, victims' right groups argue that a full understanding of sexual abuse and its effects is lacking.
2. It must be noted that victims during and in the immediate aftermath of the victimization will often minimize what is happening through dissociation and memory loss as part of a survival strategy. Victims should not be criticized for doing this, since this is a coping strategy that functions to protect the victim from the immediacy of the event. Facing the full impact of the suffering and working through the trauma can only take place some time after the traumatic event in a protected environment, once physical safety has been established.
3. As Felissa Elizondo, among many feminist theologians, has argued, Christian moral thought has recommended self-abasement and servitude as "virtues" for women and confused them with the Christian virtues of humility and self-sacrifice (Elizondo 1994, 106).
4. An intriguing study of the meaning of forgiveness in the New Testament is found in Frederick Keene. Keene focuses on power relationships and argues that forgiveness

is only possible "down the power scale," (the more powerful in an oppressive relationship forgiving the less powerful) or between those of equal power. For Keene, the New Testament neither commands nor recommends that the oppressed or abused forgive their abusers (Keene 1995).

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