

FORGIVENESS

Friar Bob Hutmacher, ofm



This is the village of Poggio Bustone in the Rieti Valley of central Italy, nestled in the glorious Appenine mountains. In 1988 I was blessed with a monthlong study pilgrimage of all things Franciscan in Assisi. We traveled south to Poggio Bustone and a couple other pilgrims and I climbed through the mountain forest to see tiny hiding places where Francis prayed, including a chapel built to commemorate his visit. Mind you, I was 32 years younger but it was memorable because I returned to the bus wringing wet with sweat but overjoyed to see the effort this man made in order to allow God to touch him on a mountain with a special message.

You may already know the story of Francis at Poggio Bustone. In 1208 he and his earliest followers discovered the isolated and rugged beauty above Poggio Bustone. In the three years after his conversion in 1205 Francis had discovered the power of contemplative solitude. During this particular visit he prayed that God would forgive his wicked past; he was consumed, apparently, by doubt that God would do that. Some of his actions before his conversion, perhaps his entire lifestyle, had plagued him deeply. The Little Poor One of Assisi doubted the expanse of God's mercy! But in this holy place Francis heard God: "Francis, here your sins are forgiven as you have asked." As Thomas of Celano wrote in his First Life of Francis: *Little by little a certain unspeakable joy and very great sweetness began to flood his innermost heart. The darkness that had gathered in his heart because of his fear of sin dispelled, there was poured into him a certainty that all his sins had been forgiven and a confidence of his restoration to grace was given him. He was caught up and absorbed in a*

certain light and...he seemed changed into another man. This experience of God's forgiveness freed Francis completely and he lived the next eighteen years unencumbered by his sinful past. The path to holiness was wide open and he embarked on it like no other Christian in history.

It seems to be common that some people just cannot believe God forgives all sin or that they cannot forgive themselves for past offenses. We hear this in the Sacrament of Penance frequently. And where do these thoughts come from in a person? I have a few observations to offer.

One is the ageing process. Nancy Dennis is an assistant professor of psychology at Penn State who studies the aging brain. Using functional MRI, which offers a look at brain activity in real-time, she identifies changes that occur as people get older, then tries to match this neural evidence with cognitive behavior. "The one thing memory researchers have found," she says, "is that as we age, the brain activates different regions for certain memory tasks than it does in younger people. The big question is 'Why?' What do these changes in brain activity mean?" Memory, she explains, is not a single construct. What psychologists classify as "item memory," the ability to recall individual events or impressions, is actually quite stable in older adults, she says. What tends to fall off is "association memory," the ability to link those impressions. You might remember a name or recognize a face, in other words, but putting the two together becomes a challenge. Another problem older adults encounter is that the ageing brain does not concern itself with details. We may recall the gist of an experience but forget the details because they don't matter any longer. However, similar experiences can get mixed up or confused and lead to false memories. For example, you may think you brushed your teeth this morning but because you did yesterday, it gets muddled with the fact that you didn't brush today. Or when you forget where you parked your car yesterday so you can remember where you parked it today. [We park our community cars in a large garage in the Loop; every time I park (almost daily) I immediately write down the floor and location.] Research has shown that older adults tend to forget what is non-essential. But what about that one sin I committed in 1957? How much of life can reshape the blurred memory of any event? How many layers hide the reality that we

may have confessed it or it didn't really happen as we recall forty years later?

God is not concerned with the past, as prophesied by Isaiah: *Remember not the events of the past, the things of long ago consider not. See, I am doing something new! Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?* [Is. 43:18-19] I offer this passage from Isaiah to people in the confessional who need to hear this message from God. And if God is only concerned with our present state of holiness, why should any of us be concerned with the past? This is exactly what broke the chains that held Francis captive to his past and why he became



such a perfect mirror of the Poor, Crucified Christ; it was because he let go of his memories of wicked past behaviors and **believed that God forgave him.** Please

always believe in the power of God's forgiveness.

Another aspect to consider when we delve into forgiveness: a feeling of unworthiness. I consider this to be part of what I termed years ago: religious schizophrenia. Let me draw an example from the Eucharistic Prayer II. At one point after the Institution Narrative we pray: "We offer you, Lord, the bread of life and chalice of salvation, giving thanks that you have held us worthy to be in your presence and minister to you." About ten minutes later we say "Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof..." So I am worthy. And I am not worthy? Which is it? Well, to be honest, we are both at different times in life. Ever wonder why every Mass includes a Penitential Rite? The Eucharist is the **ultimate act of reconciliation** between God and humans. This is imperative that all of us understand this dynamic; and it is so important that there are two Eucharistic Prayers of Reconciliation presiders can choose from, both of which are absolutely eloquent in voicing this act of love from God. The second Prayer states..."We offer you what you have bestowed on us, the sacrifice of perfect reconciliation." We **are worthy** of God's forgiveness! It is God who initiates forgiveness and we who must accept this freely offered gift, believe it and live it out. Which brings us to a third aspect of forgiveness.

That same Second Prayer also states: "graciously endow us with his very Spirit, who

takes away everything that estranges us from one another." And that's the third aspect of forgiveness I want to highlight – how we forgive others. Every day we pray the Lord's Prayer, saying "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Every day! And do we, can we express what we pray in actions? I have come to see that the biggest challenge Christians face is to forgive another person. It takes humility, doesn't it? Sometimes an immense amount of energy. But there are marvelous rewards, one of which is freedom that happens when we, again, forgive past hurts.

Ever notice how much energy it takes to hold a grudge, even to hate someone? We flavor our memories and present lives with such clouds of negativity that we so often miss the goodness and happiness that surrounds us. What a complete waste of life it can be. Again, drawing from being with penitents for 41 years, people express such anger and pain that it hurts to listen to them and how it cripples their happiness. Yet there is that horrid lasso of hatred that some people choose to live with around their hearts that always mystifies me. Why?

A grudge is anger held against another person who has (often unknowingly) hurt the one holding the grudge. People consciously choose to remain estranged, even retaliate against the other verbally or non-verbally. Either way, the grudge holder refuses to forgive. That's the lasso that chokes life and stifles any creative growth in that relationship. Think of your own family's dynamics over the years and I'm sure you can find some of this, perhaps even in yourself. Reconciliation comes about because the one who hurt has to know that he or she did, indeed, hurt the other. And both people must be willing to heal the relationship.

Susan K. Whitbourne, Ph.D. wrote in *Psychology Today*: "expressing forgiveness is one of the most therapeutic ways to repair a broken relationship, as well as to promote your own mental health. People who show forgiveness are able to overcome the ruminative feelings that come along with anger toward those who have wronged them."

Fr. Bob Oldershaw, a priest of the Archdiocese of Chicago, was one of my mentors in liturgy and music in the '70's. For a few years he was pastor of St. Nicholas Church in

Evanston, IL. During his time there, a young man, a former altar server, murdered another young man gang style. Through a desire for peace and brilliant preaching, Fr. Bob said publicly: "faith asks that we believe redemption is possible and that there is a justice that heals." He brought the two families together and assisted them in forgiving each other and living in harmony again. What courage that must have taken both families! **Justice That Heals** is the name of a documentary film that included this powerful story of reconciliation. It is quite possible for humans to come together in forgiveness, to live together in peace.

This is the Franciscan quest: to live the Gospel message of peace, to activate in daily life the mission of Jesus Christ – reconciling human



nature with our one Creator, reconciling shattered human relationships, whether two people or two nations or two religions. This is why for over a century St. Peter's Church in the Loop has become world renowned for the ministry of reconciliation called for by St.

Paul in his letter to the Romans, called for by Pope Francis in his missives about global warming, social justice and living the joy of the Gospel. Jesus lived this reconciliatory power of God by never drawing boundaries. Every child of God was worthy of God's forgiveness, worthy to be included in the family of the Church.

The legacy of Franciscan Friars and the Sacrament of Penance here at St. Peter's is legendary. There's no possible way we can say how many confessions we've heard here over the years. This church opened in 1953 and the old church at Clark and Polk Streets was also a haven for sinners seeking forgiveness. Here on Madison Street at least one confessor is in church from 7:30 a.m. until 6:00 p.m. Monday through Friday and on Saturday from 12:00 until 4:30 p.m. We are seldom alone because God calls sinners constantly and, thanks be to God, they listen! Thousands upon thousands of people are embraced by God's tenderness and grace throughout the year. It is a great honor and very humbling to be part of someone's often priceless moment of turning their life

around. Who are we to be chosen to be in that divine interchange as confessors?

LENT began as a preparation time for catechumens in the 3rd century Church as they neared Easter initiation. The Period of Purification and Enlightenment was gradually embraced for the universal Church to help all the baptized to "turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel." Join us at St. Peter's for the Lenten journey. I gave you the hours we're in confessionals and please don't wait until Holy Thursday when we stop for the Triduum. But do come to experience God's endless forgiveness. Check our web page and bulletin for our Ash Wednesday celebration, Communal Penance services, Stations of the Cross on Fridays, our Lenten Lecture Series on [Mentalities that Bind](#) (I'm giving one on pride March 4), and, of course, we celebrate the Eucharist 7 times on weekdays, plus more on weekends, our **Ultimate Act of Reconciliation** with our loving God.

From the world of the arts, perhaps read some of the works by Flannery O'Connor. Her *A Prayer Journal* from a year when she was in college is a gem, or her story *Revelation* expresses a Catholic heart before God in a mad world...just like many of us feel today. I did a course at Notre Dame in grad school about her writing that was tied into our study of the Sacrament of Penance.

Reflect on how you might be able to forgive someone you disagree with politically and agree to be civil with one another. Resolve a long grudge or conflict you may have with someone. Introspection is a solid way to honestly take inventory of your own personality, emotions, actions and life with God; it's a classic way to grow humbly within the grace-filled embrace of God. Glance over at that drawing of Francis embracing the leper and see which one you are: the one loving or the one who needs to be loved?

We friars of St. Peter's walk with you in many ways during Lent and all year. Thank you for your generous ways of supporting our ministries. May you allow God to draw you closer to himself and transform you with lasting, reconciling peace. Your life will never be the same and - it's called Easter!

Fr. Bob Hutmacher, ofm