



THE TWELVE-STEP REVIEW

Fr. Emmerich Vogt, O.P.



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Winter 2018

Dear friends,

Here is my schedule for retreats and conferences, but please always check with the parish, for the schedule sometimes changes.

- February 18 - 21. Parish Mission, St. Aloysius Parish, Calmar, Iowa.
- March 1-3. Serenity retreat at St. Albert Priory, Oakland, CA.

- March 11 - 14. Parish Mission, Assumption Parish, Port Coquitlam, BC, Canada.
- March 18 - 21. Parish Mission, Corpus Christi, East Vancouver, BC, Canada.
- March 25 - 28. Parish Mission, Assumption Parish, Powell River, BC, Canada.
- April 12 - 14. Serenity retreat, St. Albert Priory, Oakland, CA.

- May 9 - 12. Retreat, Ave Maria Retreat House, Doylestown, PA.
- May 16 - 19. Retreat, Ave Maria Retreat House, Doylestown, PA.
- May 30 - June 2. Retreat at Mt. St. Mary's Seminary, Emmitsburg, MD.



The Meaning of Forgiveness

Rising from the dead, Jesus tells His disciples that in His name, repentance and forgiveness of sins are to be proclaimed to all nations (Luke 24:46).

God, in and through the death of Christ, has brought forgiveness to the earth, but being forgiven our sins is predicated upon our forgiving others. The key to true sanctity is evangelical love of our enemies. What is evangelical love? A love that forgives, a love that saves—even enemies! Take the example of the Virgin Martyr Maria Goretti.

A teenager named Alessandro Serenelli was born into a poor family well acquainted with

brother would eventually be interned in an asylum, where he also died.



The Gorettis and the Serenellis lived and worked side by side. When Maria was but a child, her father succumbed to malaria, leaving Maria's mother alone to raise her seven children. Alessandro's father was a raging alcoholic which prevented his holding

down a job for very long. Lacking a mother's love, and with his father's increasing alcoholism, Alessandro became more and more reclusive and withdrawn.

hardship. Shortly after he was born, his own mother, suffering from mental illness, attempted to drown him. She was committed to a mental asylum, where she eventually died. His only

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RECOMMENDATIONS:

FATHER EMMERICH'S PAMPHLET SERIES:

\$1.00 plus S&H each pamphlet. Call for bulk orders. Good for parish pamphlet racks.

1. *The Passions*: deals with the role of our feeling and emotions.
2. *Detaching with Love*: explains a popular theme of our retreats.
3. *Friendship*: explains the Christian nature of friendship and its importance for healing and recovery.
4. *Sexual Sobriety*: explores recovery from the sin of lust and the need for chastity in Christian life.
5. *The 12-Step Series*: a series of separate pamphlets, one for each of the 12 steps.
6. *Christian Roots of 12-Step Spirituality* This pamphlet reviews the history of the Twelve-Step Movement from its earliest days in the 1920's Oxford Groups. Many of the major influences in its development and the people involved were devout Christians and used their faith as the foundation for the success of the movement, whose principles came from 2,000 years of lived Christian experience.

OUR MORE RECENT PAMPHLET *In the Image of God He Created Them* deals with the issue of pornography addiction and gives practical solutions for healing in keeping with the principles of 12-step recovery and Catholic moral principles.

EMOTIONAL BLACKMAIL: When the People in Your Life Use Fear, Obligation, and Guilt to Manipulate You by Susan Forward who presents the anatomy of a relationship damaged by manipulation, and gives readers the necessary tools to respond in a reasonable, responsible, and loving way to emotional blackmail. Softcover, \$15.99, plus shipping and handling.



OUR LADY OF RECOVERY. We've had many requests for Our Lady of Recovery prayer cards, so we had another 2,000 printed. They are available to you for free (we simply ask a modest donation to cover shipping and handling costs). The new cards are larger: 4" x 6".

TOXIC PARENTS: Overcoming Their Hurtful Legacy and Reclaiming Your Life is another bestseller by Susan Ford. In it she asks: When you were a child:

- Did your parents tell you you were bad or worthless?
- Did your parents use physical pain to discipline you?
- Did you have to take care of your parents because of their problems?
- Were you often frightened of your parents?
- Did your parents do anything to you that had to be kept secret?

Softcover, \$15.99, plus shipping and handling.

THE VERBALLY ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP: How to Recognize it and How to Respond by Patricia Evans. Shows you why verbal abuse is more widespread than ever, and how to deal with it. She shows how to recognize abuse when it happens, respond to abusers safely and appropriately, and most important, lead a happier, healthier life. Evans reveals the Outside Stresses driving the rise in verbal abuse—and shows how to mitigate the devastating effects on relationships. She also outlines the Levels of Abuse that characterize this kind of behavior—from subtle, insidious put-downs that can erode your self-esteem to full-out tantrums of name-calling, screaming, and threatening that can escalate into physical abuse. Drawing from hundreds of real situations suffered by real people, Evans offers strategies, sample scripts, and action plans designed to help a person deal with verbal abuse—and the abuser. Softcover, \$15.95, plus shipping and handling.

See other recommendations online at www.12-step-review.org. Or call us toll free at: 800-556-6177.

The Meaning of Forgiveness, continued.

Being impure in mind and body, he cultivated lust towards young Maria. But she would have nothing to do with him, so in a fit of rage, Alessandro stabbed Maria 14 times with a metal file.

In her agony, Maria's thoughts were not about herself (which would be understandable) but on Alessandro and the state of his soul. She did not want him to go to Hell. Her last words to him were, "Alessandro, I want you to be in paradise with me." Maria Goretti died on the feast of the Precious Blood, which celebrates Christ's offering of Himself for the forgiveness of sins.

At the trial Maria Goretti's mother—a saintly woman herself—approached Alessandro and forgave him, although he never asked her forgiveness. He was sentenced to 30 years. In prison he was locked in isolation, as his anger would lead to outbursts of physical violence against other inmates. But one night he had a vision or dream of Maria Goretti offering him 14 lilies for the 14 times he stabbed her. Taking it as a sign of her forgiveness, his immediate reaction was contrition. He converted. He became a loyal assistant to the prison chaplain and a model prisoner, and was released three years earlier because of it. Now in his forties, he had nowhere to go. No family. No friends. But receiving a letter of invitation from his parish priest to come to the rectory, he accepted the invitation and knocked on the rectory door, only to find it opened by the housekeeper, Assunta—Maria Goretti's mother. He burst into tears, and she gave him a big hug—the man who had murdered her innocent daughter! Forgiveness like this is found nowhere except in the hearts of those who love God and are loved by Him.

Alessandro stayed with her as a son until she died, whereupon he joined the Capuchin Franciscans and, as a lay brother, worked as a gardener, porter, and general laborer. He died in the peace of Christ, with the love and admiration of those who knew him, at the Capuchin convent at Macerata, Italy, on May 6, 1970.

St. Thomas says nothing makes us so Godlike as merciful forgiveness. Mercy, he says, is to have a pain in our hearts over the pain of another and to take pains to relieve their pain. That's what God did for us in Christ. No one can forgive like this without God's grace at work in his heart. We recognize that hurt people hurt people, that happy people are not likely to harm others. We don't know what hurts people are carrying. We forgive. One of the fundamental laws of the spiritual life as proclaimed in Sacred Scripture is: "The measure you give will be the measure you get back" (Luke 6:38). As Father Jacques Philippe notes (*Interior Freedom*):

How inconsistent it is to expect pardon of sins to be granted to a repentance which they have not fulfilled. This is to hold out your hand for merchandise but not produce the price. For repentance is the price at which the Lord has determined to award pardon.

Tertullian (3rd century)

The Gospel expresses a "law" that is part and parcel of being human: those who refuse to forgive, who refuse to love, will sooner or later be victims of their own lack of love. The evil we do to or wish on others will end up turning against us. Those who are strict with their neighbor

will suffer that strictness. Our judgments, mistrust, rejection, or resentment imprison us in a net that will strangle us. Our deepest aspirations for the absolute, the infinite, will be blocked and go unfulfilled, because lack of mercy toward another has enclosed us in a world of calculation and self-interest. This is an inexorable law: "You will never get out till you have paid the last penny." Forgiveness releases us from that curse. The cancellation of debts that it brings about makes possible a relation to the other based on free give-and-take, which is essential to genuine love. And none of us can live without genuine love.

Jesus reveals that the Father's perfection is best characterized by His love of enemies, which is followed by His call to all of us to imitate this radical form of love. Nothing of this is found in the Qu'ran. Nothing is said by Allah of loving one's enemies, of never returning evil for evil. This is the call of Christ, true God and true Man.

However, forgiveness by itself does not satisfy the human craving for justice. Forgiveness does not prescind from justice. We want the murderer to go to jail; we do not want the evil-doer to get off scot-free, so to speak.

The teenager who brutally stabbed 12-year-old Maria Goretti to death rightly went to prison. She forgave him before she died. Her mother forgave him. But justice had to be served.

Steps 8 and 9 focus on reconciliation, an important ingredient in recovery from the effects of that original wound we were born with and which has been deepened by our past sinful behavior. And an important ingredient in taking the step of reconciliation is forgiveness. By the time a person in recovery reaches Steps 8 and 9, he is aware of harms done in the past for which he never took responsibility. Step 8 is the beginning of the end of our isolation from our “neighbors” and from God. We cannot expect to be reconciled with God without being reconciled with others. Thus does Jesus teach (Matthew 5:23-34):

Therefore if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

What’s the point in praying and going to church if there is no firm purpose of making amends and being reconciled?

The Desert Fathers, using the image of a wheel with all the spokes leading to the center, express it this way:

Take the analogy of a wheel. The radii are separate, but at the center they meet. To approach the center, which is God, is to love our neighbor. This is the nature of love: to the extent that we distance ourselves from the center and do not love God, we distance ourselves from our neighbor. But if we love God, then the nearer we draw to Him in love, the more we are united with our neighbor in love.

This expresses the spirit of Steps 8 and 9. Step 8 tells us, “Made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all.” Releasing the past by being honest about our treatment of others where harm has come to them because of something we said, did, or failed to do, opens us to new life in Christ. After taking an honest assessment of our past behavior, we proceed to Step 9 which says, “Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.” The readiness to accept the full consequences of our past, and at the same time to take responsibility for the well-being of others, is the

spirit of reconciliation that the Gospel calls for. Step 9 gives us the chance to clean up the past and to start living in the present.

Now if the person to whom the amend is being made will not accept our amends, then practicing the Serenity Prayer where we agreed to accept the things we cannot change, will leave us in peace.

Also, we have to be careful not to confuse apologies with amends. Amends are made by acting differently. This is true of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Unless there is a firm purpose of amendment, no forgiveness has been given. For example, suppose a father has a daughter who will be making her First Communion on Sunday. His wife suggests that it would be good for the whole family to receive Communion that Sunday. So her husband goes to confession on Saturday and confesses to having a mistress. Even if the priest thinks the man is repentant and absolves him, but the man has no intention of giving up his mistress, he has not been forgiven. He must make a firm resolution to change. The sacraments are not Catholic voodoo. Grace works if you work it. It’s the same in the secular world, so to speak.

If I am playing ball with my kids and their friends on a Saturday afternoon, and the ball goes clear through my neighbor’s picture window, uh-oh! We are responsible. Now if we go and apologize but continue to play ball in the back yard, and again the next week break the neighbor’s window, if we apologize, our neighbor will no doubt refuse to forgive. Apologies are meaningless without change of behavior.

Okay, so we apologize and decide this isn’t working, and we change to playing ball down the street in the park. Now we’ve changed, and our neighbor, seeing the change, forgives us. But is that it? We are truly sorry for what happened; it was our fault; we took responsibility for it and we changed our behavior, but that doesn’t repair the damage we’ve done. We have to fix the window. It is the same in the moral life. The Sacrament of Reconciliation doesn’t repair the damage our sins have done. We need to repair those damages. Steps 8 and 9 help us to do so. ✨

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