

Anger, Forgiveness, and Restorative Justice in Light of Clerical Sexual Abuse and Its Cover-up

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Abstract

Catholic tradition provides resources for understanding morally legitimate anger as ordered to the good of survivors and their wider communities, a way of conceiving of forgiveness as a *caritas*-inspired decision to willing what is authentically good for an offender, including just retributive measures, and support for employing practices of restorative justice as a means of addressing clerical sexual abuse and its cover-up.

Keywords

anger, forgiveness, restorative justice, sexual abuse

The ongoing crisis of clerical sexual abuse has generated a variety of intense and interconnected negative emotions—feelings of distress, alarm, hurt, betrayal, fear, anxiety, resentment, dismay, grief, shame, disgust, and, most commonly, anger. Christians often worry that anger of any kind is incompatible with love of neighbor. This intuition is usually accompanied by a sense that Christians ought immediately to forgive wrongdoers rather than register their grievances or press for justice under the law. Forgiving those who trespass against us seems to entail giving up the right to

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vindication. Applied to clerical sex abuse, this moral vector urges victims to “turn the other cheek” rather than press their claims against perpetrators and their enablers.

This way of relating anger, forgiveness, and justice is damaging in that it denies that anger is a legitimate response to wrongdoing and suggests that resentment is never legitimate. It is morally offensive because it imposes on victims a strong moral obligation, and liability to blame. Finally, it is misleading because it construes forgiveness as always requiring one to renounce the offender’s accountability, due punishment, and duty to make amends.

In this article, we would like to argue, on the contrary, that there are sound Christian grounds for acknowledging the moral legitimacy of anger, distinguishing proper from improper forgiveness, construing justice as wider than retribution, and appreciating ways in which forgiveness and justice might complement rather than oppose one another. We hope to show that the Catholic tradition of *caritas* is compatible with feeling appropriate anger toward wrongdoing and wrongdoers. Anger is legitimate when it accurately tracks with a wrong that has been committed, some important good attacked, and/or justice violated. While rejecting the moralistic and self-righteous tone of judgmentalism, we would like to suggest that we have a responsibility to make fair moral judgments about wrongdoing and a right to feel appropriate degrees of anger, resentment, and other negative emotions in the face of injustice.

The fact that we rightly feel outraged at any particular set of circumstances does not of course dictate how we ought to respond to them. We would also like to argue that Christian forgiveness does not require victims to renounce all claims made in justice against perpetrators and enablers and that the virtue of mercy is only intelligible in the light of a reasonably accurate assessment of wrongdoing. Finally, we would like to propose that forgiveness can be complemented by a commitment to justice understood as a restoration of right relationships.¹

This article will accordingly proceed in three stages: we will first differentiate appropriate from inappropriate anger and indicate why the former plays an important role in our response to injustice. We will then explicate the difference between proper and improper forgiveness in order to make room for a balanced alternative to the two extremes of “cheap forgiveness” and unrelenting resentfulness, respectively. Finally, we will argue that a commitment to appropriate anger and proper forgiveness can come together in practices of restorative justice. We maintain that restorative justice can play a constructive role in the church’s response to clerical sexual abuse and its cover-up. Practiced sensitively and intelligently, restorative justice in some cases has been effective in providing opportunities for acknowledgement of legitimate anger and possibilities for healing that would not otherwise have been attained.

1. In this article we will largely focus on individual agents and person-to-person forgiveness rather than on large-scale collective or political forgiveness. See, inter alia, Donald Shriver, Jr., *An Ethic for Enemies: Forgiveness in Politics* (New York: Oxford University, 1995); Charles Villa Vicencio, *Walk with Us and Listen: Political Reconciliation in Africa* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 2009); B. van Stokkom, N. Doorn, and P. Van Tongeren, eds., *Public Forgiveness in Post-Conflict Contexts* (Cambridge: Intersentia, 2012); and Jennifer J. Llewellyn and Daniel Philpott, eds., *Restorative Justice, Reconciliation, and Peacebuilding* (New York: Oxford University, 2014).

Distinguishing Appropriate from Inappropriate Anger

The Christian ethic is often characterized as promoting a radically self-abnegating attitude toward anger, forgiveness, and justice. These are assumed to be hard to reconcile with Jesus's higher righteousness (Matt 5:20) and Paul's kenotic depiction of the Christian way of life (Phil 2:5–8). This stance seems odd to our postmodern ears, thanks to the insights of feminist, black, and liberation theologies.² We have increasingly come to appreciate the value of self-respect, advocacy for victims' rights, and holding perpetrators accountable. Yet major strands of the Christian tradition look askance at interpersonally directed negative emotions, particularly anger and hate. It casts a moral shadow not only on those bent on exacting revenge but also those who press for redress of grievances.

Important figures in the Christian tradition have been properly wary about the problems that ensue when strong negative emotions are unleashed. Scripture alerts us to the fact that anger can lead to vengeful thoughts, harsh words, cruel actions, and a host of other evils. Thus, "A fool gives full vent to anger, but the wise quietly holds it back" (Prov 29:11, NRSV throughout). Paul lists anger as one of the "works of the flesh" (Gal 5:20; also Col 3:8, along with wrath) and admonishes the Ephesians not to let the sun go down on their anger (Col 4:26–27). Jesus himself sternly warns his disciples, "if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire" (Matt 5:21–22).

Steeped in an ancient Greek culture alert to the tragic nature of cycles of revenge, the Fathers diagnosed proneness to anger as caused by pride, manifested in those who overreact to perceived slights, lose self-control, and explode in destructive violence. Prolonged anger can render one hypersensitive to offenses, given to hasty and rash judgments, and prone to bear grudges, keep score of grievances, and nurse resentments. These can trigger emotional outbursts, harden into hate, inspire revenge fantasies, and drive one to aggressive violence or even destructive rage.

The patristic tradition generally understands anger as a threat to one's spiritual well-being. The enormously influential fifth-century monk John Cassian, for example, describes anger as blinding the "soul's eyes" and obstructing one's "spiritual vision." He writes, "If we wish to receive the Lord's blessing, we should restrain not only the outward expression of anger, but also angry thoughts." We must not only refrain from violent deeds and harsh words, but also purify our thoughts and, "with God's help, eradicate the deadly poison of anger from the depths of our souls ... [and make ourselves] a stranger to all sinful anger and wrath." Cassian explains: "Listen to what St. Paul enjoins: *Rid yourselves of all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, evil speaking, and*

2. See, inter alia, Beverly W. Harrison, "The Power of Anger in the Work of Love," *Union Seminary Quarterly* 36 (1981): 41–57; James Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1969). From secular perspectives, see Audre Lorde, "The Uses of Anger," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 25 (1997): 278–85, and more recently Soraya Chemaly, *Rage Becomes Her: The Power of Women's Anger* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018) and Rebecca Traister, *Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Anger* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018).

all malice (Eph 4:31). By saying ‘all’ he leaves no excuse for regarding any anger as necessary or reasonable.”³

Rather than resent those who treat us unjustly, this way of thinking holds, we ought to love and forgive them. The sixth-century monk Abbot Dorotheus of Gaza writes that even when strongly convinced you have been treated unjustly, if you look closely enough you will always find some basis for self-accusation.⁴ Self-blame, however, neither absolves the wrongdoer of guilt nor make forgiveness unnecessary. If the other obstinately refuses to acknowledge his or her need for forgiveness, one must simply imitate Jesus, exercise patience, and forgive unilaterally.

Rather than just curtailing its worst expressions, the Fathers urged their monks to nip anger in the bud and resist its growth at each stage: provocation, irritation, consenting to annoyance, and then giving into our impulse to lash out. If we seek to cultivate “perfect love,” we must strive to be humble, love friend and foe alike, hold no grudges, endure wrongdoing without retaliating, and think evil of no one. To make sure that offenses do not incite us to anger, agitate our souls, and drive us to vengeance, we ought to cultivate patience, self-control, long-suffering, forbearance, temperance, gentleness, meekness, and calm patience. Instead of repaying wrongdoers an “eye for an eye,” true Christians are generous, merciful, and forgiving. To be able to love this way, Maximus the Confessor advises his monks, one must learn to disdain self-love, good reputation, honor, and possessions. If we are not attached to these things, we will not take offense when someone threatens or damages them.⁵

This strain of the Christian tradition is echoed in the self-abnegating approach to anger, forgiveness, and justice noted above. The patristics no doubt communicate important wisdom about Christian morality and spirituality, but their perspective also suffers from significant shortcomings when viewed in the light of the clerical sex abuse crisis. The self-abnegating ethic leaves victims vulnerable to exploitation, fails to acknowledge the legitimacy of proper self-love, and undercuts the moral ground of legitimate resistance to abusers. Rather than disdaining all forms of self-love, then, a more balanced ethic discards improper self-love while cultivating proper self-love that is exercised, as Thomas Aquinas puts it, when we love God more than ourselves and love ourselves “in God” (see *ST* 2–2, q. 25).⁶ This perspective renders acquiescence in injustice morally problematic rather than spiritually praiseworthy.

3. St. John Cassian, “On the Eight Vices,” in *The Philokalia* 1 (London: Faber & Faber, 1979), 86; emphasis in text. Michael McCarthy provides a helpful discussion of patristic views of anger in “Divine Wrath and Human Anger: Embarrassment Ancient and New,” *Theological Studies* 70 (2009): 845–74, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056390907000405>.

4. St. Dorotheus of Gaza, *Discourses and Sayings* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 1977), 141–42.

5. See Maximus the Confessor, “The Four Hundred Chapters on Love,” in *Maximus the Confessor: Selected Writings*, trans. George C. Berthold (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1985), 33–98.

6. Texts from Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae* will be incorporated into the text parenthetically and abbreviated as *ST*. Citations are taken from St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1981). The relevant Latin texts are found in S. Thomae Aquinatis, *Summa theologiae*, ed. Patri Caramello (Rome: Marietti, 1950).

It does not take much life experience to know that anger can lead to serious problems. Marilynne Robinson's John Ames is right to observe, "A little too much anger, too often or at the wrong time, can destroy more than you would even imagine."⁷ Yet in some circumstances anger can constitute an appropriate response to wrongdoing. Our duty to respect ourselves includes allowing ourselves to get angry at unjust injury.⁸ Victims of clerical sexual abuse therefore have a right to get angry at their abusers. Blanket condemnations of anger, motivated by misplaced piety or any other source, ought to be repudiated as insulting to victims, psychologically obtuse, and morally crippling. We also ought to see that asking the abused to engage in soul-searching self-accusation is nothing less than a pious version of victim blaming. If anything, victims ought to be encouraged to admit their anger and be assured that they did nothing to bring the abuse onto themselves.

This positive assessment by no means blesses all forms and expressions of anger, but acknowledgement of legitimate anger resonates with deep strands of the Christian tradition. Scripture itself does not consistently condemn all expressions of anger. Yahweh is slow to anger (Exod 34:5–6; 34:9) but is provoked by Israel's infidelity (Hos 11:9) and other kinds of wrongdoing (Ps 7:11). Jesus himself of course is outraged by the sellers and money-changers at the Temple (John 2:13–18; Matt 21:12–13; Mark 11:15–16; Luke 19:45–46). His temper flares at his own disciples (Matt 17:17; Luke 9:14) as well as at his enemies (e.g., Mark 3:5). Paul does not mind communicating his impatience with opponents and he urges the Ephesians to be angry and sin not (4:26). Rather than condemn all forms of anger, then, these and other scriptural texts challenge us to distinguish controlled anger from the kind of vicious anger that worried the Fathers.

In contrast to many of his patristic predecessors, Aquinas also holds that we can learn how to feel angry in ways that contribute to our flourishing (*ST* 1–2, q. 24, aa. 1–2; 1–2, q. 46; 1–2, q. aa. 59, 5 ad 2).⁹ He treats Jesus as the exemplar of virtuous

7. Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2006), 6.

8. Contemporary Christian ethicists tend to endorse a qualified but real appreciation of the positive value of ordered anger. See for example William Werpehowski, "Do You Do Well to Be Angry?" *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 16 (1996): 59–77, <https://doi.org/10.5840/ascel1996165>.

9. Helpful discussions of Aquinas on anger include William Mattison, "Virtuous Anger? From Questions of *Vindictio* to the Habituation of Emotion," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 24 (2004): 159–79, <https://doi.org/10.5840/jsce200424128>; Michael Rota, "The Moral Status of Anger in Thomas Aquinas and John Cassian," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 81 (2007): 395–418, <https://doi.org/10.5840/acpq200781320>; and Robert Miner, *Thomas Aquinas on the Passions: A Study of Summa Theologiae 1a2ae 22–48* (New York: Cambridge University, 2009), ch. 12. From the Reformed tradition, we find endorsement of properly ordered anger in Jonathan Edwards, Lecture IX, "The Spirit of Charity is the Opposite of an Angry or Wrathful Spirit," in *Charity and Its Fruits*, ed. Tyron Edwards (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1969), 186–203, and (drawing on Aquinas) Rebecca Konynduk DeYoung, *Glittering Vices* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2009), 117–38.

anger (*ST* 2–2, q. 157).¹⁰ Three features of his account of anger are worth pointing out. First, while it can be evoked by many kinds of harm, we get angry when we feel someone’s conduct has been disrespectful to or otherwise “slighted” us (*ST* 1–2, q. 47, a. 2). If we truly love ourselves, Aquinas holds, something is wrong with us if we do not get angry at someone who has deliberately unjustly harmed us (he calls this deficiency the vice of “insensibility” [*ST* 1–2, q. 48, a. 1]).¹¹

Second, when we are angry we naturally seek vindication (including what we might call “validation”), a desire for things to be made right and specifically for them to be made right by someone exacting justice from the wrongdoer (*ST* 1–2, q. 46, a. 2).¹² Rather than overreacting to the injury (as is often the case), the wise person seeks to understand clearly, judge fairly, and decide to act constructively. The angry person naturally wants the wrongdoer to receive some kind of appropriate punishment, which he takes to mean the intentional infliction of pain on a wrongdoer against his or her will because of some specific unjust act (*ST* 1–2, q. 46, a. 6).¹³ Because the perpetrator remains a neighbor whom we must love in *caritas*, his or her punishment must be corrective and rehabilitative rather than simply destructive. Justice assigns to the wrongdoer *only* the kind and degree of pain necessary for the victim’s vindication. Aquinas thus sharply distinguishes anger shaped by *caritas* and justice from malice or hatred, which desires the complete eradication of its object (see *ST* 1–2, q. 46, a. 6).¹⁴

Third, Aquinas believes that the angered victim will derive some sense of satisfaction in the thought of the culprit getting his or her just desserts.¹⁵ As Robert Miner explains, anger is “fundamentally rooted in a desire for the good.”¹⁶ Anticipation of this good being accomplished is pleasurable to one who has a right to vindication. Yet

10. For a careful study of Aquinas’s view of Christ’s entirely appropriate “zealous anger,” see Paul Gondreau, *The Passions of Christ’s Soul in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2002), 427–30.

11. The *locus classicus* for Aristotle’s view of anger is *Rhetoric*, 1378a30–32. Aquinas held that anger arises from the work of four other passions: love, desire, hope, and sorrow.

12. Aristotle and Aquinas do not share Martha Nussbaum’s assessment of the desire for vindication as inherently morally problematic. See her *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice* (New York: Oxford University, 2016), 169–210.

13. In *ST* 1–2, q. 46, a. 7 Aquinas also ventures the more dubious claim that we cannot truly say that we display properly human anger at animals (because they are not rational and therefore cannot be blamed and cannot be the proper object of vindication), oneself (because we cannot perceive ourselves as evil to ourselves), or a community (because collectivities are not moral agents). The cogency of Aquinas’s argument for the moral legitimacy of ordered anger does not depend on the validity of these inferences.

14. This is true except for cases of capital punishment, as in *ST* 2–2, q. 64, a.2.

15. See *Nichomachean Ethics* 1369b12–14 (hereafter cited as *NE*). A helpful interpretation of Aristotle on anger is provided by Gregory B. Sadler, “Forgiveness, Anger, and Virtue in Aristotelian Perspective,” *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 82 (2008): 229–47, <https://doi.org/10.5840/acpapro20088217>.

16. Robert Miner, *Thomas Aquinas on the Passions: A Study of Summa Theologiae 1a2ae 22–48* (New York: Cambridge University, 2009), 271.

rather than hell-bent on inflicting pain, the “mild-tempered” person (i.e., the one who gets angry in just the right way) is prone to forgive rather than to seek retribution.

Aquinas knew that anger is an integral part of human nature. Extensive studies by primatologists and other scientists have shown him to be right.¹⁷ Human beings are group-living, cognitively advanced animals; we are not angels. Our proneness to anger when provoked constitutes a central feature of our innate emotional repertoire. Anger evolved because, like other traits subjected to natural selection, it alerts organisms to potential or actual harm and thereby puts them in a position to protect themselves and avoid future injury.¹⁸ Contemporary neuroscientists go well beyond Darwin in their fine-grained analysis of the neural networks involved in both our liability to get angry under various circumstances as well as (thankfully) our capacity to inhibit “reactive aggression.”¹⁹

Anyone can get angry, but only the virtuous person is consistently angry at the right person, for the right reason, to the right degree, and for the right length of time.²⁰ Yet to say that one can cultivate the habit of “mildness” does mean that doing so will be easy, particularly for those who are temperamentally prone to be more impatient, easily agitated, or “hot-blooded” than others. Aquinas agreed with the Fathers that anger, like other strongly negative emotional reactions to problematic situations, can be morally blinding, impulsive, and cruel.

Aquinas’s acknowledgement of appropriate anger has been incorporated into Catholic moral teaching.²¹ His balanced, realistic ethic is particularly helpful in four ways. First, he provides an alternative to the popular preconception that Christians must always be yielding, timid, and “nice.” As Miner puts it, “If [Aquinas’s understanding of] Christ’s assumption of the passion of *ira* were better known, the popular images of Jesus as Mister Rogers (or some other version of the world’s nicest guy) might lose their grip on us.”²² Along these lines, Aquinas’s approach can be used to correct the widespread assumption that anger is acceptable in men but not in women.²³

17. On anger as part of human nature, see *ST* 1–2, q. 46, a. 5. See Frans de Waal, *Mama’s Last Hug: Animal Emotions and What They Tell Us about Ourselves* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019).

18. See Charles Darwin, *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals* (New York: Penguin, 2009 [original date 1872, second ed. 1890]), ch. 10: “Hatred and Anger.” See also Darcia Narvaez, “Triune Ethics: The Neurobiological Roots of Our Multiple Moralities,” *New Ideas in Psychology* 26 (2008): 95–119, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.newideapsych.2007.07.008>.

19. For example, see R. Blair, “Considering Anger from a Cognitive Neuroscientific Perspective,” *WIRE’s Cognitive Science* 3 (2012): 65–74, <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcs.154>. In these kinds of cases, when things go well, our higher, prefrontal cortical areas overrule our lower neural systems. See Joseph LeDoux, *The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998).

20. See *NE* 1126a9–12.

21. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2302, http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s2c2a5.htm.

22. Miner, *Thomas Aquinas on the Passions*, 285 n. 9.

23. This is often coupled with the suggestion that women, not men, ought to regard their suffering as Christlike. See Ivone Gebara, *Out of the Depths: Women’s Experience of Evil and Salvation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2002).

As a natural “passion” that orients us to some aspect of the human good, anger has a legitimate place in the emotional lives of both men and women.

Second, the Thomistic strand of the Christian tradition allows us to acknowledge the right of victims of sexual abuse, and all those who take their cause as their own, to feel angry, to express disapproval vehemently, and to insist on proper vindication.²⁴ It calls attention to the fact that harm done to victims of sexual assault, and particularly the most vulnerable, involves not only physical and emotional damage but also a profound contempt (*despectio*) for them (*ST* 1–2, q. 47, a. 2).

Third, Thomistic ethics also legitimates the anger people feel toward authorities who protect, cover-up, and facilitate the wrongdoers’ pattern of injurious conduct. What Aquinas says about the case of oppressive government—when the state harms us, the state is properly regarded as an individual (see *ST* 1–2, q. 46, a. 7, ad 2)—also applies to the church when it functions as an institution that ignores or mistreats victims of clerical sexual abuse. Widespread anger puts pressure on institutions to change, so commentators have rightly called upon Catholics to express their anger in public ways for the good of the church.²⁵

Fourth, Aquinas’s ethic appreciates the moral legitimacy of ordered anger, but it also offers moral leverage against the disordered anger that runs throughout our public moral discourse within both the church and American politics—if indeed one can refer to wild accusations, rants, and invective as “discourse.” Public expressions of anger, indignation, and resentment are increasingly crowding out empathy, mutual respect, and self-awareness. Cultural conservatives are furious that increased social tolerance is replacing traditional family values, liberals are outraged at the rise of ethno-nationalism, and economic populists are angry at those who they perceive as having abandoned them to the forces of globalization. Journalist Jeffrey Kluger reports that “America’s anger is out of control.”²⁶ The same can be said of significant streams of Catholic culture, particularly those exploiting social media and the blogosphere. Anger-fueled polarization in both domains is corrosive, destabilizing, and counter-productive.²⁷ Aquinas is helpful here too in his insistence that anger can only be good if ordered to other virtues, particularly justice, patience, and practical wisdom. We need to attend to patristic and Thomistic warnings about what happens to us morally, socially, and spiritually when anger gets out of control.

Virtue ethics alters us to an array of intellectual and moral vices that can ensue when we allow anger or hostility to cloud our perspectives and twist our wills. We see

24. Indeed, Aquinas suggests that under some conditions someone can be morally culpable for failing to get sufficiently angry at injustice (*ST* 2–2, q. 158, a. 8).

25. For example, James Martin, “The Virtues of Catholic Anger,” *New York Times*, August 15, 2018, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/15/opinion/the-virtues-of-catholic-anger.html>.

26. *Time Magazine*, June 1, 2016, at <http://time.com/4353606/anger-america-enough-already/>.

27. Cathleen Kaveny, *Prophecy without Contempt: Religious Discourse in the Public Square* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2016) argues that, properly conducted as an aspect of civil discourse, engagement in prophetic indictment can contribute to reasonable forms of practical moral deliberation that can promote rather than undermine reconciliation.

this at play when overly eager critics lash out at all priests as pedophiles, express contempt for all bishops as facilitators of abuse, or scapegoat gays as the cause of the scandal. These thoughtless, emotionally imbalanced, and unjust accusations and attitudes would also come under Aquinas's opprobrium.

Aquinas reminds us that justified anger seeks to target real perpetrators with just retribution rather than leveling indiscriminate punishment on whole classes of people. The latter category includes priests and religious eventually found to have been unjustly accused but who were subsequently neither publicly exonerated by the church nor able to return to active ministry. If we are concerned for the good name and well-being of upstanding priests and religious, we ought to be angry when they have been treated unjustly in misguided attempts to protect the image of the church or to avoid expensive litigation. These kinds of cases call to mind the Fathers' warnings about how prolonged and vehement anger can turn into hatred that seriously clouds our perception, impairs our reason, and distorts our judgment such that we take injustice to be the legitimate expression of righteous indignation and view revenge as proper vindication. Indulging in an irrational lust for revenge is not just wrong—it points to the influence of wrath, one of the seven deadly sins.

Anger is properly expressed not only for ourselves and those we love, but also on account of all those to whom we are bound by some kind of affinity. But it is only justified when it flows from an ordered love. Our broadest human affinity lies in the fact that every human being is our neighbor. To this connection Christians add the ecclesial bond which joins all members of the Body of Christ and which leads us to see that damage to one part is also damage to the whole (1 Cor 12). In recent years, this ecclesial unity, the fellowship it inspires, and the reconciliation it requires have not been at the forefront of every Catholic's mind. We now turn to the topic of forgiveness.

A Christian Account of Forgiveness

Christians typically regard forgiveness as the paradigmatic Christlike response of victims to their wrongdoers. Applied to the sex abuse scandal, Christian ethics seems to suggest that every victim ought to simply forgive his or her perpetrator and "move on." Apologies have come from a variety of quarters in the church. To apologize is to take personal responsibility for one's deliberate wrongdoing—both those due to moral negligence ("sins of omission") as well as those due to direct action ("sins of commission").²⁸ Apologies for clerical sexual abuse have come from abusers themselves, from those who exercised direct institutional responsibility for them, and from church authorities who failed to take the problem of clerical sexual abuse seriously enough; lay people have some answering to do for their own complicity as well. The global

28. Philosophers and theologians are divided over whether Christian ethics holds that repentance precedes forgiveness or vice versa. For the former, see Anthony Bash, *Just Forgiveness* (London: SPCK, 2111). For the latter, see L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Exploration* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995) and Robert Schreiter, *The Ministry of Reconciliation: Spirituality and Strategies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998).

scope of the abuse has discredited the attempt to pin the blame on a few “bad apples” or wayward “sons and daughters of the church.”²⁹

In general, particular reparative acts like expressing remorse, repenting, and apologizing make it easier for victims to forgive. Apologies usually, though not always, function as a plea for forgiveness. In the last few years, some of these have taken place in the context of dramatic acts of public penance. The Christian ethic of forgiveness can be easily manipulated by perpetrators and their allies. Apologies make matters worse when they are formulaic, incomplete, half-hearted, or self-centered rather than victim-centered. Offenders at times apologize for less than the best motives: to elicit sympathy for themselves, clear their own consciences, appease angry victims, qualify their culpability, have their punishment reduced, or rehabilitate themselves in the public eye. Apologies are particularly offensive when they are intended to pressure victims into excusing, pardoning, or forgiving their wrongdoers.³⁰

The scandal raises a number of questions about why, when, and how Christians ought to forgive.³¹ Perverse moral appeals to mercy have generated a certain skepticism about forgiveness for the guilty. Some clergy and lay people advised victims of sexual abuse to “forgive and forget” what happened to them or reminded them that *agape* “does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful” (1 Cor 13:5). Perpetrators have been known to try to turn the moral tables, suggesting that victims themselves are to blame for what happened to them and that they are the ones who need to repent, apologize, and make amends.

As Christians we are often reminded to forgive our offenders because God has forgiven us (Col 3:13). Paul advises the Ephesians, “be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you” (4:32). Yet while Scripture

29. John Paul II’s *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*: “although she is holy because of her incorporation into Christ . . . she always acknowledges as her own her sinful sons and daughters” (#33), at https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19941110_tertio-millennio-adveniente.html. The International Theological Commission, section 1.3, also refers to sins of the church’s “sons and daughters” weighed in on the sins against Jews in “Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past,” available at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000307_memory-reconc-itc_en.html. For a helpful discussion of this issue, see Brian P. Flanagan, *Stumbling in Holiness: Sin and Sanctity in the Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2018). Thanks to Richard Gaillardetz for directing us to these resources.

30. This is pointed out by Margaret Urban Walker, *Moral Repair: Reconstructing Moral Relations After Wrongdoing* (New York: Cambridge University, 2006), 178–79.

31. An important methodological question concerns how a theology of divine forgiveness ought to influence one’s conception of the ethics of forgiveness. For an Augustinian theological grounding, see Jesse Couenhoven, “Forgiveness and Restoration: A Theological Exploration,” *Journal of Religion* 90 (April 2010): 148–70, <https://doi.org/10.1086/649846>.

urges us to forgive, it does not explain what it means to do so. Christian texts provide at least five ways of understanding what it means to forgive.

One approach regards forgiveness as release from guilt and a pardoning or remitting of punishment would normally be imposed upon the wrongdoer. This behavioral construal of forgiveness seems to be the most straightforward expression of *agape* toward one's wrongdoers. As Jesus puts it, forgive us our debts as we forgive those in debt to us (Matt 6:12; see also Luke 11:4, Mark 11:23, and Matt 18:22–35, the parable of the unforgiving servant).

But simply releasing the wrongdoer from the punitive consequences of what he or she has done does not seem to capture the full meaning of forgiveness. Debt cancellation properly addresses neither the victim's right to vindication nor his or her right to reparation. One can, after all, still feel hostile to a wrongdoer whose debt one has remitted. A victim can decide to cancel a debt for a variety of motives, including lack of self-respect (or what philosophers call "servility"), fear of retaliation, social pressure, or self-interested Machiavellian calculation.

A second account construes forgiveness primarily as a change in one's feelings toward his or her wrongdoer, and especially as cessation of angry feeling toward him or her. This account resonates with ordinary experience, as when we hear a victim described as no longer mad at her offender or as having decided to "let it go." We associate forgiveness with giving up bitterness, hostility, or other negative emotions. Many victims take proactive steps to reduce their anger, not the least because prolonged anger can take its toll on one who harbors it.

This second approach, though, has several weaknesses of its own. First, it is unclear whether traumatized survivors have much control over their strong negative feelings toward their malefactors. Second, the fact that a victim does not feel as angry toward her perpetrator as she once did does not mean she has forgiven him. Her anger might have declined over time, the harm was not profound, or the violation left the victim feeling guilty, emotionally "numb," or despondent. Third, construing forgiveness primarily as a transformation of the victim's feelings does not address the underlying wrongdoing itself.

A third view defines forgiveness as the decision to renounce revenge, the impulse to hurt those who hurt us.³² The retaliatory urge to "pay back" wrongdoers, not to "let them get away with it," is natural but can easily become harsh, excessive, and inattentive to the long-term negative consequences of their retaliatory conduct. The biblical corrective to vengeance is the *lex talionis*: "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth"

32. This view is held by some philosophers, e.g., Leo Zaibert, "The Paradox of Forgiveness," *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 6(2009):365–93, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004262935_017; and psychologists, e.g., Michael McCullough who defines forgiveness as "a prosocial change in the motivations to avoid or to seek revenge against a transgressor." See his "Forgiveness as Human Strength: Theory, Measurement, and Links to Well-being," *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 19 (2000): 43–55 at 44, <https://doi.org/10.1521/jscp.2000.19.1.4>.

(Exod 21:24).³³ This approach recalls Aquinas's distinction between retributive justice, a component of virtuous anger, and the desire for revenge, which is irrational, unrestrained, and likely to feed a retaliatory cycle. Those who understand forgiveness in this way emphasize the victim's decision to adopt a new attitude to the offender as someone who ought to be punished in a reasonable, proportionate way. This approach attempts to prevent the wronged party from falling prey to the destructive internal dynamics that worried Stoic philosophers and patristic theologians. This account mistakenly assumes that one has forgiven as long as one does not feel vengeful. There is more to forgiveness than being satisfied with retributive justice rather than insisting on unmitigated revenge. One can forgo vengeance—say, from weakness or fear of future retaliation—without truly forgiving one's wrongdoer.

A fourth account, the dominant theory among philosophers today, sees forgiveness as a decision to forswear justifiable resentment toward one's wrongdoer.³⁴ Here forgiveness not only forswears vengeance but also forsakes rightful claims to justice. Scriptural texts speak of not repaying transgressors in accord with their wrongdoing (Ps 103:10), forgetting particular sins (Isa 43:25), pardoning those who have repented (Ps 25:11, 39), and placing sins "out of sight" (Ps 38:17). Paul explicitly describes *agape* as not resentful (1 Cor 13:4) and Bonhoeffer says it "keeps no record of wrongs."³⁵

The previous four accounts describe forgiveness in terms of what we ought *not* to do: feel angry, collect a debt, seek revenge, or exact justice. Yet good will is more than just *not* doing something, including not harboring bad will. We would like to suggest that forgiveness is the resumption of good will toward a wrongdoer. As Margaret Farley points out, to forgive is "above all not to be passive in the face of injury, betrayal, persecution, abuse. Forgiveness may, in fact, be one of the *most active* responses possible in the face of whatever sort of breach occurs in human

33. Modernity drew an even brighter red line between vengeance and retributive justice: "Justice is a legitimate concept in the modern code of civilized behavior. Vengeance is not." Susan Jacoby, *Wild Justice. The Evolution of Revenge* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 1. She goes on to point out that "laws are not designed to weed out the impulse toward revenge but to contain it in a manner consistent with the maintenance of an orderly and humane society" (5).

34. The seminal work is Joseph Butler, "Sermon VIII, IX. Upon Resentment, and Forgiveness of Injuries," in *The Works of Joseph Butler*, vol. 2. ed. W. E. Gladstone (Oxford: Clarendon, 1896), 136–67. Recent proponents of this kind of theory include Jeffrie Murphy, "Forgiveness and Resentment," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 7 (1982): 503–16, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4975.1982.tb00106.x>; and Charles Griswold, *Forgiveness. A Philosophical Exploration* (New York: Cambridge University, 2007), 53–59. Psychologists R. Enright and C. Cole define forgiveness as "a willingness to abandon one's right to resentment, negative judgment and indifferent behavior toward one who unjustly hurt us, while fostering the undeserved qualities of compassion, generosity and even love toward him or her." R. D. Enright and C. T. Coyle, "Researching the Process Model of Forgiveness within Psychological Interventions," in E. L. Worthington, Jr., ed., *Dimensions of Forgiveness* (Radnor, PA: Templeton Foundation; Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1998), 139–61 at 140.

35. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson, eds. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995), 246.

relationships.”³⁶ This active response is nothing less than *caritas*, love of neighbor grounded in the love of God.

Good will includes a positive acknowledgement and promotion of the intrinsic dignity of a person. Forgiveness is an expression of the larger duty of loving the neighbor when directed at one’s wrongdoer. As such it is a paradigmatic application of Paul’s injunction, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom 12:21). If, as Aquinas holds, an act of deliberate and unjustifiable injury inflames in the victim an urge to retaliate, and thereby suspends his or her habitual stance of benevolence, then to forgive is to resume benevolence toward a perpetrator.

Love gives the act of forgiving a gratuitous character—to forgive is to give a gift to someone who has no right to one’s forgiveness.³⁷ Victims might choose to abandon legitimate resentment toward their offenders, and in Christian terms might even have a duty to strive to do so, but under no conditions do offenders have a right to demand forgiveness from their victims. If victims are not ready to forgive, insisting they do so compounds their injury and adds to their suffering. Survivors in fact report that being told that they just need to forgive makes them angry and revictimized. They wonder why they should forgive when the perpetrator bears responsibility to act. Survivors who forgive report experiencing a new way of looking at what has happened to them and as having come to the realization that there is room for softening of their hearts. When all is said and done, any act of authentic forgiveness after such grave harm is nothing less than a grace-filled process that under the right circumstance can lead to a new understanding among everyone affected by the crime.

Willing the good means affirming the fundamental human dignity of the violator. Doing so can be extremely difficult, particularly when it comes to profoundly invasive and violent injury. For this reason, it is helpful to distinguish with Aquinas “beginner’s *caritas*” from more proficient and then fully developed versions of this virtue. Benevolence for the enemy is best conceived as running along a continuum that begins with a deliberate decision neither to act with malice nor to nurture animosity toward one’s wrongdoer (see *ST* 2–2, q. 25, a. 8). But the full meaning of *caritas* is displayed most clearly, Aquinas argues, when someone’s love of God overflows into love of non-reciprocating neighbors the way we love a friend’s children even if they are not friendly toward us (see *ST* 2–2, q. 25, a.8).

36. Margaret A. Farley, “Forgiveness in the Service of Love,” in *Love and Christian Ethics: Tradition, Theory, and Society*, ed. Frederick V. Simmons with Brian C. Sorrells (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 2016), 104; emphasis added.

37. Griswold holds that rather than a gift, forgiveness follows from “the recognition that ... resentment is no longer warranted” (*Forgiveness*, 43, 212). We argue that under some conditions the wrongdoer’s reparative acts never morally oblige the victim to forgive him or her. In our account of Christian ethics, though, the wrongdoer never has a right to demand forgiveness but that the victim, as Christian, ought to strive to forgive, minimally in the sense of trying to resume good will for the offender. This approach accommodates the fact that forgiveness is often a long process that produces at best limited success. Moreover, it can also admit that at times an agent may need to sustain her anger against a wrongdoer in order to fortify her resistance to ongoing injustice.

Understanding the defining core of forgiveness as the resumption of good will for one's wrongdoer provides an important perspective from which to incorporate the insights of the previous four accounts of forgiveness. We suggest that forgiveness is first a matter of volition—choices, decisions, and commitments that have behavioral, affective, and cognitive dimensions. Forgiveness does not morally oblige us to cease feeling angry at our wrongdoers, but as a Christian commitment it does require us to view them fundamentally as neighbors who are loved by God even if we have good reasons for intensely disliking them. Even in depraved moments, the most vicious malefactors are not “monsters.” They continue to be human beings created in the image of God, and therefore appropriate recipients of our good will. This theocentric view of transgressors as “neighbors” provides a wider framework within which to place their injurious motives, intentions, and conduct. It calls attention to how particular harmful acts fit into their lives overall and thereby “humanizes” them. Doing so in some cases enables survivors to experience some degree of empathy for their transgressors, without of course excusing or minimizing their wrongdoing.³⁸

Second, forgiveness as resuming benevolence can accommodate remission of punishment when it is appropriate to do so, but in other cases can also authorize the administration of appropriate punishment for the sake of the wrongdoer (in particular to promote repentance and rehabilitation) and the wider community (especially public safety). Whether or to what extent debt ought to be remitted depends on what serves the good of the victim, the wrongdoer, and other stakeholders. Victims of clerical sex abuse can choose to forgive their perpetrators while also taking satisfaction in the fact that they have received suitable prison sentences.³⁹

Third, forgiveness as a commitment to good will toward a wrongdoer makes sense of the decision to refuse to hate, seek revenge, or want to see the perpetrator suffer for sadistic reasons. It accommodates our recognition of the fact that harming one who has been harmful does not undo the initial harm, but instead simply adds harm to an already evil situation. We can here recall the Thomistic distinction between anger, which seeks to punish for the sake of vindication, and hatred, which seeks to impose suffering on another for its own sake (see *ST* 1–2, q. 46, a. 6). Forgiveness can begin with the renunciation of hatred, but seeks as much as psychologically possible to embrace the other in love.⁴⁰ *Caritas* might be compatible with retributive justice but never with revenge. This view, unlike the radically self-abnegating strain of the Christian tradition mentioned above, regards victims of clerical sexual abuse as entitled to want their victimizers to receive fitting retributive justice from the state but not to crave their suffering or destruction.

38. Extension of empathy is emphasized by Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, *A Human Being Died That Night: A South African Story of Forgiveness* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003).

39. This is true in the abstract. In the concrete, serving a sentence in our current prison system may not actually be good for either perpetrators or the wider community.

40. See Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996).

Finally, forgiveness as recommitting to benevolence provides a perspective for appreciating why in some circumstances a victim might or might not want to renounce justified resentment toward their wrongdoers. When confronted with emotionally and morally complicated situations, we rely on whatever practical wisdom we can muster to decide how best to apply Christian standards. In some cases, proper self-regard, or willing the good for the self, may make it necessary for one to will the good to the offender while also acknowledging the legitimacy of one's own resentment. We correctly empathize with the parent who feels bitter resentment toward a priest who has raped their child and we would admire whatever degree of good will they could manage to muster for such a person. Those who move toward forgiveness for profound wrongdoers do so through a long, difficult, and often unpredictable journey that takes different people varied amounts of time. The process of forgiveness certainly does not run like a train schedule. In extreme cases, even trying to apply the Golden Rule can be a major moral achievement.

More generally, it is concretely possible to will what is best for a perpetrator while still continuing properly to resent his or her criminal act. Allowing the possibility that one has firmly decided to forgive an offender while continuing to bear some degree of resentment toward his behavior seems to fit the complexity of human experience better than insisting that one has to choose between one or the other (as the fourth account insists).

Psychologist Everett Worthington distinguishes "decisional forgiveness" from "emotional forgiveness." In the former, a victim deliberately chooses to treat an offender justly rather than seek vengeance. In the latter, the survivor undergoes a process through which his or her negative emotions like resentment or hostility are replaced with positive emotions such as compassion or love. This psychological distinction honors the struggle of a victim who desires to forgive but continues to feel angry toward his or her abuser. What might begin with a decision not to permit negative emotions to control one's behavior can feed into a process that transforms one's deeper dispositional emotions.

Aquinas's "beginners' *caritas*" starts with something like Worthington's "decisional forgiveness" and might be able to grow into proficient *caritas*' emotional forgiveness. *Caritas* strives, if and when concretely possible, to grow in benevolence toward particular offenders. The intrinsically generous dynamic of *caritas* strives for what St. Ignatius of Loyola called the *magis*, to do whatever will give greater glory to God.⁴¹ Aspiring to forgive can certainly constitute a commitment to this kind of Christ-inspired generosity.

Emotional forgiveness can be facilitated by offenders who take responsibility for what they have done, expressed remorse, foresworn future wrongdoing, and taken concrete steps to make amends. Since, other things being equal, we are more prone to forgive a repentant than an unrepentant offender, the Gospel's stern warnings to those

41. From the "Call of the King" meditation in St. Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*, in *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, ed. Louis J. Puhl, SJ (Chicago: Loyola University, 1952), 43–45.

who refuse even to forgive a repentant sinner are aiming at the most hard-hearted listeners. Prayer, mediation, spiritual reading, retreats, Twelve-Step programs, sacraments of reconciliation and the Eucharist, deep conversation, psychotherapy, and other practices can facilitate one's capacity for "emotional forgiveness."

Forgiveness can and perhaps usually is exercised unilaterally, but it reaches its proper fulfillment in reconciliation. A loving person who responds to evil with good tacitly invites the wrongdoer to repentance and transformation. Like Christ, Maximus the Confessor says, the monk must put up with injustices done to him, suffer for the good of his enemies, "if occasion requires, in order that it may even make them friends if possible."⁴² Concrete good deeds of true agape can lead an enemy to become a friend. Agape can be envisioned in terms of the cross, but it is also captured in the Last Supper, the Eucharist, and the heavenly banquet.

The Gospel envisions a strong connection between forgiveness and reconciliation. Greg Jones, for example, writes, "the purpose of forgiveness is the restoration of communion, the reconciliation of brokenness."⁴³ Jones is correct to see restoration of broken relationships as a step beyond forgiveness. But victims of clerical sexual abuse who choose to forgive their perpetrators should in no way feel pressured to resume a relationship with them; they are certainly entitled to forgive their assailants without wanting to resume a close relationship with them. Indeed, victims can even decide for their own sake to forgive their abusers privately without being able (or willing) to communicate that decision to them.

Forgiveness is a lofty aspiration that perhaps many victims of grave harm cannot manage to attain perfectly. At times, the most one can do is desire to stop hating one's malefactor. The demanding nature of the Christian ethic of forgiveness underscores our need to be formed by communities of conscience. If victims of grave harm develop an ability to forgive their enemies, they are most likely going to learn how to do so by participating in concrete communities dedicated to *caritas*. Such communities have a responsibility to help their members grow in attitudes that are at odds with the punitive and vengeful ethos of our wider society. We now consider how practices of restorative justice might provide a way of promoting the Christian vision of the common good.

Restorative Justice as a Creative Way of Addressing Unjust Harm

The restorative justice movement seeks to redress unjust harm done to victims in ways that promote healing of damaged relationships and persons. As the movement has grown in geographical scale, moral stature, and practical relevance, Catholics have joined people of other faith traditions or none in applying its principles to a variety of

42. "Chapters," 1.71.

43. L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness. A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 5.

settings.⁴⁴ Some efforts have been made to apply restorative justice to cases of clerical sex abuse and cover-up, but much more could be done.⁴⁵

Restorative justice practices seek to address harm through a number of interactive processes.⁴⁶ They promote vindication by giving perpetrators an opportunity to take responsibility for their wrongdoing, to acknowledge the injustice of what they have done to their victims, and to express their contrition for it. Those processes include victim–offender dialogues, healing circles, community conferences, and family group conferences. The pillars of a restorative justice process include identifying who has been harmed (including indirect as well as direct victims), understanding the role of the community, holding offenders accountable, and determining appropriate means of reparation for victims.

Analysis of a situation involving either clergy abuse or church cover-ups must first address the concerns of the actual victim of the abuse. In this context, the preferential option for the poor requires a preferential option for victims of sexual abuse. Unless a survivor wants to participate, a restorative process should not and cannot be initiated. Many victims, understandably, have no interest in interacting with their offenders or anyone else who has been guilty of such an offense. Their decision must obviously be respected. Even when victims do want to participate in a restorative justice workshop they are in no way required to forgive their offenders. Occasions in which survivors do extend forgiveness to their perpetrators constitute nothing less than a sign of divine grace as well as radiant human generosity.

Despite legitimate suspicions, survivors often seek a path forward. Most restorative justice processes begin by giving the victim an opportunity to describe the impact of the crime on his or her life. Offenders might be able to contribute to the victims' healing process when they genuinely listen to their victims and honestly come to understand—at least to some extent—the kind of damage done to them and their loved ones. In due time, offenders are given the opportunity, after hearing about the impact of their assault(s), to tell something of their own stories about what they did and to

44. Trudy D. Conway, David Matzko McCarthy, and Vicki Schieber, *Redemption and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Restorative Justice* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2017), and Stephen J. Pope, "The Role of Forgiveness in Reconciliation and Restorative Justice: A Christian Theological Perspective," in *Restorative Justice, Reconciliation, and Peacebuilding*, ed. Jennifer J. Llewellyn and Daniel Philpott (New York: Oxford University, 2014), 174–96.

45. See T. Gavrielides, "Clergy Child Sexual Abuse and the Restorative Justice Dialogue," *Journal of Church and State* 55 (2012): 617–39, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcs/css041>; Douglas E. Noll, "Restorative Mediation: The Application of Restorative Justice Practice and Philosophy to Clergy Sexual Abuse Cases," *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* 17 (2008): 377–96, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10538710802330021>; Janine Geske, "Restorative Justice and the Sexual Abuse Scandal in the Catholic Church," *Cardozo Journal of Conflict Resolution* 8 (Spring 2007): 651–58.

46. See Howard Zehr, *Changing Lenses: A New Focus for Crime and Justice* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1990), and Mark Umbreit, *The Handbook of Victim Offender Mediation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001).

communicate their newfound understanding of the breadth and depth of the harm they have done to their victims.

At the same time, restorative justice processes require offenders to apologize for their wrongdoing and to commit themselves to making amends to their victims. A survivor can decide—for his or her own sake—unilaterally to forgive an unrepentant or even self-exonerating perpetrator, but restorative justice can only take place if the wrongdoer already admits his or her guilt and wants to take responsibility for the crime.

Those who want to participate in a victim–offender dialogue have a right to determine how much of their lives and suffering they want to disclose to their offenders. In preparation for a dialogue, a facilitator will talk to the survivor about any other secondary victims who also have been harmed. People in the survivor’s sphere—parents, family members, friends, mentors, and so on—can also be deeply wounded by the abuse. Whether some of those individuals should be included in the process will depend on the particular victim and the particular offender.

Although different survivors will describe a variety of reactions to their particular victimization, they very often experience the impact of their sexual violence as deep, devastating, and life-changing. They describe violations of their sense of the goodness of their bodies, theft of their innocence, and damage to their capacity for intimacy and interpersonal trust. Sexual violence changes both the victim’s relationship with others and his or her ability to move forward with personal dreams and aspirations. In a Catholic context, the psychological pain of such people can be intensified by the church’s affirmation of the goodness of the human body, the spiritual dimension of sex, and the sacramental value of marriage.

What harm might a survivor want an offender to understand? Most victims will describe their lives in two parts—life before and after the assault. During a joint meeting, a victim may want to communicate some of what has happened to him or her. These typically include a lack of trust, fear of intimacy, depression (sometimes including suicidal ideation), loss of confidence, severe damage to their religious faith, and so on. Victims often feel utterly powerless, lacking in self-worth, and permanently marred by such intimate betrayal. Victims often say that there is no such thing as “closure” after a sexual assault and that there is no complete recovery from this violation. To tell a victim that he or she “just needs to forgive and forget” is both insulting and asking the impossible.

The offender’s accountability begins when he or she accepts responsibility for having caused grave harm. A trained facilitator designs the process, prepares the parties, and oversees any dialogue among the parties. This is an important aspect of the accountability requirement of restorative justice.⁴⁷ The offender also has responsibility to make amends. In the Catholic context, this includes the responsibility of supervisory members of the hierarchy to make amends for their failure to protect victims from predatory clergy.

47. This calls into question Bash’s description of restorative justice as “morally neutral both about a criminal’s acts and about a victim’s responses to those acts” (*Just Forgiveness*, 123).

Restorative justice principles encourage us not to allow the payment of financial debt to eclipse the importance of people and relationships in need of respect and healing.⁴⁸ Making amends should not be reduced to making financial payments. Some members of the hierarchy do not understand that monetary compensation (however costly) is a *necessary but not sufficient* means to restoration and healing. A more expansive and Christlike commitment to *caritas* would help some bishops move beyond an overriding and morally blinding preoccupation with legal and financial liability.

Social-scientific research on restorative justice practices urges us not to homogenize victims, perpetrators, or restorative practices. While restorative justice practices are not always conducted as effectively as possible, some research has found that survivors who participate in them report “experienced psychological benefits such as decreased fear and anxiety about a new victimization, decreased anger, increased sympathy towards the offender ... and in some cases, even a decrease in post-traumatic stress symptoms.”⁴⁹ Some participants, moreover, have reported experiencing “positive changes in their physical health, in addition to positive psychological changes.”⁵⁰ These changes were less likely to occur when offenders were perceived as insincere, insufficiently contrite, or failing to follow through on their declared commitment to make amends.

Anthony Bash rightly notes that restorative justice is “not designed to bring about forgiveness,”⁵¹ but these practices can facilitate forgiveness when they show survivors that their offenders have accepted responsibility for their actions and made efforts to ensure that they will not repeat their crimes. Forgiveness is often described as a journey that proceeds by taking two steps forward and then another step backwards. Most victims describe their experience of forgiveness as coming to view the past in a new light and turning to the future with renewed hope. Reflecting on the terrible wounds inflicted by the apartheid regime, Desmond Tutu describes healing as facilitated by processes through which “our dignity is restored and we are able to move forward in our lives.”⁵² Even still, particular survivors may or may not want to share their deepest suffering and feelings of shame with anyone, let alone with their offender.

48. See Kate Gleason, “The Money Problem: Reparation and Restorative Justice in the Catholic Church’s Toward Healing Program,” *Current Issues in Criminal Justice* 26 (2015): 317–32, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10345329.2015.12036024>.

49. Jane Evans, Susan McDonald, and Richard Gill, “Restorative Justice: The Experiences of Victims and Survivors,” *Victims of Crimes Research Digest* 11, May 24, 2018, at <https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/cj-jp/victim/rd11-rr11/p5.html>.

50. Evans, McDonald, and Gill, “Restorative Justice.” These positive reports do not gainsay the negative experiences of other participants. See Jung Jin Choi, Gordan Brazemore, and Michael J. Gilbert, “Review of Research on Victims’ Experiences in Restorative Justice: Implications for Youth Justice,” *Children and Youth Services Review* 34 (2012): 35–42, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2011.08.011>.

51. Bash, *Just Forgiveness*, 123.

52. See Desmond Tutu, *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World* (San Francisco: Harper One, 2015).

It should be clear by now that restorative justice neither renders punitive consequences (including incarceration) inappropriate nor creates moral equivalence between survivors and their perpetrators. The practice fails when offenders offer apologies that are insincere, superficial, or half-hearted. We see this, for example, when church leaders proclaim that they are sorry that a member of the clergy hurt someone but then attempt to minimize their own responsibility for allowing the abuse to take place in the first place. In order to move toward healing in a restorative process, an offender must understand what harm he has caused and how he can move in the direction of some type of restoration. This process can be undermined by participants who insist on defining the process in terms of the Christian paradigm of the repentant sinner because it places primary focus on the spiritual reform of perpetrators rather than on the harm done to survivors and their need for healing.⁵³

Restorative justice, properly construed, seeks to restore right relations for all parties but gives primary concern to victims. The healing of victims of clerical sexual abuse can at times be facilitated by knowing that a similar offense will not reoccur (either by this particular offender or by others like him or her). Survivors also want to be assured that church leaders will no longer ignore warning signs of abuse, fail to implement norms adopted to safeguard minors, or delay reporting credible accusations to the criminal justice authorities.⁵⁴ For this to happen, the church must have mechanisms in place that will hold bishops accountable. Pope Francis has recently taken a step in the right direction by issuing new norms requiring clergy and religious to report any suspicions of sexual abuse or cover-up.⁵⁵

Conclusion

This article has tried to show that the Catholic tradition provides resources for understanding morally legitimate anger as ordered to the good of the agent and the wider community. It also provides a way of conceiving of forgiveness as a *caritas*-inspired decision to willing what is authentically good for an offender, including just retributive measures. These conceptions enable us to acknowledge the suitability of anger toward both perpetrators of clerical sexual abuse and their enablers and their rightful claims to vindication and reparations.

Finally, these ways of understanding anger and forgiveness can, at least in some cases, be successfully complemented by practices of restorative justice. Well-done restorative justice practices help survivors to receive some degree of vindication.


53. See Kate Gleason and Aleardo Zanghellini, "Graceful Remedies: Understanding Grace in the Catholic Church's Treatment of Clerical Child Sexual Abuse," *Australian Feminist Law Journal* 41 (2015): 219–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13200968.2015.1077551>.

54. See USCCB, "The Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People," at <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/child-and-youth-protection/charter.cfm>.

55. See the *Motu Proprio, Vos Estis Lux Mundi*, May 7, 2019, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio-20190507_vos-estis-lux-mundi.html.

While giving primacy to the needs of victims, restorative justice practices also provide perpetrators a way to take some responsibility for their wrongdoing and facilitate the healing of the bonds within wider communities they have badly damaged. We conclude, in short, that on theological, moral, and practical grounds, the Christian community, laity and clergy alike, ought to make a serious commitment to employing restorative justice practices into the church's response to the scandal of clerical sexual abuse and its ecclesial cover-up.

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