



## **A CHRISTIAN MODEL OF FORGIVENESS. AN ANALYSIS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF MODERN PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORIES**

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### *Abstract*

*Numerous psychological studies have shown that forgiveness is a very complex phenomenon. Our study brings face to face reflections and results concerning forgiveness analyzed from the Christian and secular perspectives, looking at the aspects where they can interact and complement each other. The analysis of a perspective of forgiveness in the Eastern Christian tradition indicates similarities with the psychological vision of forgiveness, thus updating an already recognized need for integration. Through the perspective of forgiveness belonging to the Christian Patristic writer of the 4th century AD, John Chrysostom, we retrieve very important aspects that psychological studies have lost sight of and we point out difficulties encountered in the junction of the empirical-scientific and the spiritual-religious approaches.*

Keywords: forgiveness; Christian model; health; coping; integration

### **Introduction**

For three decades, psychologists have recognized the importance of forgiveness for health, and the body of empirical knowledge has grown rapidly (Berry, Worthington, O'Connor, Parrott, & Wade, 2005; Davis, Worthington, Hook, & Hill, 2013; Worthington, Witvliet, Pietrini, & Miller, 2007). Although scientific research on Christian forgiveness points to a certain religion-

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forgiveness discrepancy (Tsang, McCullough, & Hoyt, 2005, p. 786), it brings interesting results showing the following: religious factors are associated with higher tendencies to forgive others (Gorsuch & Hao, 1993; Mullet, Barros, Usaï, Neto, & Rivière Shafighi, 2003); forgiveness from God influences the forgiveness of others differently (Huber, Allemand, & Huber, 2011; Krause & Ellison, 2003; Krause & Ingersoll-Dayton, 2001); there is a negative relationship between the belief in being forgiven by God and six of the classes of psychiatric symptoms (Uecker, Ellison, Flannelly, & Burdette, 2016); psychology and Christianity can be integrated into the study of forgiveness (Shults & Sandage, 2006; Worthington & Worthington, 2003); psychotherapeutic programs can be developed to increase the ability to forgive (Enright & Coyle, 1998).

The scientific examination of the relationships between religion, forgiveness, physical/mental health/well-being has become possible through psychological theories and methods that have progressed a lot lately. Secular researchers, as well as the Christian ones have generally abandoned the link of forgiveness to religious belief and have focused on what is more acceptable to the wider psychological community (Meek & McMinn, 1997). However, there are still authors who take into account the double nature of the concept of forgiveness (a theological concept, as well as a psychological variable, suitable for scientific study): „Perhaps because of these two natures - because forgiveness seems both so common and, at times, so transcendent - people have a difficult time capturing the essence of forgiveness” (McCullough & Worthington, 1999, p. 1142).

We notice within the relevant literature four different approaches in trying to understand forgiveness: the philosophical, the prosocial, the health and the Christian ones (Scobie & Scobie, 1998). Although each perspective emphasizes certain aspects of forgiveness, their delimitation is not rigorous. The philosophical view overlapped up to a point with the health one, insisting on the overcoming resentment (Murphy, 1982), to then focus on forgiveness as a virtue, on its authenticity and its flawed forms (*see* Haber, 1991, pp. 11-27). The prosocial model considers forgiveness an altruistic social behavior, a facilitator for „broken”, tense relationships, allowing individuals to negotiate in the light of rights and duties, in order to achieve reconciliation. Interpersonal forgiveness, the value of relationships and that of the human person (also when making mistakes) are central also for the Christian perspective, and reconciliation has a deeper motivation - the one of love. The prosocial approach overlaps with the health one by paying

attention to self-esteem, threatened to devalue the victim in serious offenses (Scobie & Scobie, 1998).

The health perspective of forgiveness focuses on the effects of negative emotions, and resentment on the individual and the relationships, the contexts specific to forgiveness, the benefits on well-being and quality of life. Interpersonal forgiveness in this perspective is considered an unconditional gift, similar to the Christian one (Brandsma, 1982; Smedes, 1984). The Christian approach is strongly integrated into the Judeo-Christian culture, in which the two forms (our forgiving of others and God's forgiveness) become deeply interconnected in difficult situations of forgiveness: the forgiveness of the „enemy”. Here, interpersonal forgiveness is enhanced and conditioned by the divine one, which complicates the premises of empirical investigation.

The Christian construction of forgiveness, in the perspective we analyze, is a complex one and includes aspects from other perspectives: it is a virtue that goes beyond the support of moral principles, it pursues psycho-spiritual health by tempering difficult and destructive emotions, and thus it can be a socio-spiritual mechanism of the Christian community (there are several Christian “models” of forgiveness in the literature we went through, depending on the specifics of the religious denomination).

Approaching forgiveness separately, from each perspective, inevitably creates „linkage to the model”, but also a unique artificial vision (McCullough & Worthington, 1994), after reviewing the literature on forgiveness, concluded that the most useful approach to forgiveness remains the integration of these perspectives, although the theological, philosophical, and psychological understandings of forgiveness have not been well integrated (p. 3).

Another way to understand forgiveness is given by the secular (Berry et al., 2005; Enright & North, 1998) and religious vision of forgiveness (Adams, 1991; DiBlasio & Benda, 1991; Enright & Zell, 1989; Krause & Ingersoll-Dayton, 2001; Pingleton, 1989; Scobie & Scobie, 1998). They provide a fragmented picture of the topic, creating the impression that there are two different forms of forgiveness, with limited connections between them. We believe that here only the disconnected sides of a single complex process appear. The motivation and the manner in which forgiveness is practiced differs significantly between the two perspectives (secular-religious), so that sometimes the feeling of two ways to forgive is very well justified. The actual stages of the forgiveness process are indicated in both directions (for the secular one, *see* Enright, Freedman, & Rique,

1998); for the Jewish religion, *see* Frankel (1998), but they are no longer found in the Christian “model” of forgiveness (Scobie & Scobie, 1998). Why? Because here things get complicated.

There has been a tendency to avoid these complications, from the early stages of the scientific research of forgiveness, by decoupling the definitions of forgiveness from religion, which has obviously created great tensions between researchers and theologians (Smedes, 1984). The two reasons for this separation, the fact that major religions had different definitions of forgiveness (Rye et al., 2001) and that there was a limited use of forgiveness as a therapeutic intervention, were considered sufficient and without major risks only by religious researchers/ psychotherapists (Aten, 2012, p. 276). Gradually, forgiveness became a construct that could be studied scientifically (McCullough & Worthington, 1999, p. 1142), independent of any religious connotation. However, the scientific research of Christian forgiveness through empirical methods reminds us of this „rupture” and continues to raise many difficulties and associated risks. For example, scientific reductionism has led to an impoverishment of Christian forgiveness of its theological-experiential content, and the overgeneralization of some aspects has created a too theoretical and general “model” that says nothing new. Christian “models” of forgiveness, although useful for discussions and psychological analysis, the latter may simplify this complex experience for purely methodological reasons.

In this sense, we support the need for an approach of integration/reintegration of the scientific results of forgiveness with its religious basis (*i.e.*, an approach that is the reverse of the one mentioned above). We believe that rediscovering the Christian tradition, through its body of writings and spiritual experiences, can considerably enrich the connection of the modern psychology results with the religious ones on forgiveness. Therefore, our study reviews the Christian foundations of forgiveness in an actual perspective and relates them to scientific results, an exploratory approach necessary for the current research on forgiveness.

In the Christian model discussed by psychological studies, forgiveness is considered a gift from the offended one, which does not require any effort or action from the offender (not even his presence), it is „automatic” (Scobie & Scobie, 1998) or implicitly „constrained” by the verse „Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matthew 6,12). This way of talking about Christian forgiveness is only the „first layer” or one of its facets, which should be extended.

The Christian “models” of forgiveness are considered to be „specialized” in the fiery test of forgiveness: forgiving your „enemy”, forgiving the one who seriously/ very seriously sinned/ psycho-emotionally hurt another person. Forgiveness strategies, depending on the severity of the offense, received attention in secular psychological studies and less so in religious ones, where the emphasis is less on the psychological aspects. Sometimes, it seems that the psychological dimension of forgiveness belongs more to health models than religious ones.

The purpose of this paper is to bring together data, results about forgiveness from a Christian and psychological perspective, attempting a psychological exploration of religious teachings and experiences in the Eastern Christian space. We believe that Orthodox Christianity can continue to make important contributions to the subject of forgiveness, and its resources can be usefully corroborated with psychological ones. We try to analyze an actual Christian model of forgiveness, that of the writings of John Chrysostom (The Golden Mouth) which can provide a more nuanced perception of the subject and the retrieval of specific aspects. Currently, there is a small number of exploratory psychological studies on the theme of Christian forgiveness, concerned with bringing together and interacting results from both perspectives (psychological and theological-Christian), in order not to lose anything of what they, together, can offer to knowledge.

### **Forgiveness of the „enemy” in the writings of John Chrysostom**

John Chrysostom was Archbishop of Constantinople (b. 347, Antioch - d. 407) and one of the most important Fathers of the Christian Church in the 4th century, also called the golden age of the Church. Unmatched in the art of word guidance (hence the name „The Golden Mouth”), we have preserved from him the oldest complete commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, called *Homilies on Matthew*, a reference work for Christian literature. The preacher from Antioch, through his homilies, identifies difficulties, apparent contradictions in the Gospel texts, which he comments on and clarifies in an astonishing way, bringing numerous inspired solutions. His homilies are speeches that preserve the close and living relationship between the speaker and his audience, and reflect how his qualities as a speaker are put at the service of initiation into the practice of the Christian life and virtues, including forgiveness.

A Christian perspective of forgiveness, such as that illustrated by John Chrysostom, helps us to better grasp the complexity of the phenomenon of forgiveness, located at the intersection of Christian teachings and experiences of God's presence in people's lives. The divine „component” can change the dynamics of human relationships and their evolution over time, especially when they go through a difficult process of forgiveness. The relevant aspects of forgiveness introduced by John Chrysostom bring practical indications, valuable for forgiveness in conditions of maximum hostility. We have extracted from the texts of this author the following aspects that we have organized and analyzed in the subchapters below.

*Forgiveness is an improved form of „acquiring yourself and the other”*

The author offers a balanced “definition” of forgiveness in the relationship between self and the other (the neighbor): forgiveness is a good for another, but also a boon for oneself (Ioannes Chrysostomus, 1987, XXVII, VII, pp. 346-347). *The most precious good work*, forgiveness strengthens and preserves love (Ioannes Chrysostomus, 1994, LXXIX, V, pp. 902-903) - „dissolves” resentment and gradually fades the memory of evil. Forgiveness is a *form of love*; it is the highest form of sacrifice that man can make. The attempt to love the one who hurts (us) or hates (us) makes God indebted, Who renounces the honor and service that must be brought to Him (Ioannes Chrysostomus, 1994, XVI, IX, pp. 212-214). Forgiveness is an *act of resistance to evil* („to the wicked”), resistance that is sometimes achieved only in one way: by suffering evil voluntarily, (Ioannes Chrysostomus, 1994, XVIII, I, pp. 233-234). Gentle opposition to evil done by the other is not only intended to do him good, but to make him “healthier”, more human. A repeated good, as proof of forgiveness, can have transformative consequences on the offender or, at least, can teach him to make fewer mistakes in the future.

These “definitions” of forgiveness refer to a form of psycho-spiritual health even when related to suffering, which is an accepted one. Physiological, psychological and spiritual suffering, present in the labor of forgiving deeds perceived as serious, is prevented by a deliberate, premeditated or intentional acceptance, although this may seem inhuman or superhuman, a rare or completely out of the ordinary personal choice. It seems that forgiveness and suffering are closely linked, just as in the psychological process of forgiveness, „release”, assuming „processing” of dysfunctional negative emotions, resentment and painful rumination, is painful. However, it is known that suffering of any kind is

„metabolized” by bearing / standing it, *i.e.*, through another type of suffering, with a healing effect. In fact, the suffering caused by the offender is the rock of stumbling or the blind spot of forgiveness: How can you still forgive when you are already hurt, you suffer injustice and hostility, as well as the other’s lack of feeling (in what, how much, how did he offend you)? In this context, forgiveness is not a moral obligation to respond to God’s command, to forgive anyway, turning a blind eye to the psychological suffering.

This moment, says the patristic author, is an opportunity for both (for the wounded and the one who wounded) to learn to „philosophize” regarding deed, vice, virtue, God, themselves (Ioannes Chrysostomus, 1994, XVIII, III, p. 235). We will return to this aspect in point 3.4. It should be noted here that even in modern psychological therapies the processing of the offended’s suffering is a central aspect of the therapeutic approach.

#### *Can everything be forgiven?*

Even if we do not observe in John Chrysostom a typology of prejudices according to their severity, in order to establish the different levels of forgiveness, we find that there is a continuous insurance that, with God’s help, one can forgive anything. The command to forgive seems to contain the power to do so, even if the offender had committed „all human wickedness” against you (Ioannes Chrysostomus, 1938, XX, p. 189). The prospect of forgiving „seventy times seven”, no matter how exaggerated, oppressive and impossible it may seem, is counterbalanced and normalized by another: „You do not forgive as much as you are forgiven”: „(...) even if you forgave seventy times seven times your brother’s sins every day, you still did not do a great thing, but you are far, far away, from the goodness of God” (Ioannes Chrysostomus, 2005b).

Linking Human Forgiveness to Divine Forgiveness („Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors”) (Matthew 6,12) is the most realistic way to think about human possibilities to effectively achieve forgiveness. Although seventy times seven is far beyond human powers, we do not know exactly what new abilities man receives when he wants to fulfill this divine command.

Why did God condition man’s forgiveness on His forgiveness? Christian theologians and thinkers have answered this question deeply and at length. John The Golden Mouth gives us the most wholesome reason: because the forgiveness of sins from God requires more than daily prayer and repentance, it requires the sacrifice of love for the one who sins against you. (Ioannes Chrysostomus, 2002b).

Thus, Christian forgiveness is more than „letting go” of something hurt in the offended self (emotions, feelings, values, beliefs, etc.), it is a way to bring in the two (involved in the process of forgiveness) forms of divine-human love. The stakes of Christian forgiveness are high: the forgiver becomes like Him, both for him, and for the forgiven: „If you forgive once, twice or three times a day the one who offends you, if the one who upsets you were hard like stone, if he were even wilder than the devils, he shall not be so insensitive to fall into the same sins again, but, wise as a result of frequent forgiveness, he shall become better and gentler; and you, in turn, if you are prepared to ignore the mistakes that others have done to you, accustomed from the first, second, and third forgiveness, you shall not feel the pressure of such a hard thing, and once you are accustomed with forgiveness, you shall not be hurt by the mistakes of your neighbor” (Ioannes Chrysostomus, 2005b).

*There are several benefits when the offended initiates forgiveness (in severe offenses)*

Contrary to expectations, the offended party is urged to go to the aggressor of his soul for at least two reasons:

- a. This initiative is a form of honoring one’s neighbor, showing that the one who forgives can go beyond his harmful behavior (Ioannes Chrysostomus, 1995, pp. 134-135);
- b. The offender, being “filled with anger and shame”, can postpone asking for forgiveness (Ioannes Chrysostomus, 1994, LXI, V, p. 713).

It seems that St. John Chrysostom knew from practical experience that for the wounded, controlled by anger, paradoxically, it can be easier, as anger passes faster than shame, the former being a visible and „noisy” emotion, and the latter, a hidden one, with a greater destructive potential. His suggestions reflect intuitive knowledge about emotions, which nowadays have been developed in scientific theories about emotions and attachment.

But how exactly should the offended go towards the offender? The author takes care to provide all the practical details that, which in today’s terms, could be called „attitudes/ skills of assertive and non-violent communication”: without blaming him, arguing harshly or holding him accountable, without intending to punish, but to tell him what you have suffered because of him: „When the Lord says: Rebuke him, He says nothing but: Remind him of his mistake; tell him what you suffered because of him. These words, if said properly, form part of his defense



and lead him to reconciliation very quickly” (Ioannes Chrysostomus, 1994, LXI, V, pp. 712-713).

There is also a spiritual reason (not just psychological) in the gesture of taking the first step towards the offender. The state of spiritual “health” or “power” of the two involved in the transgression is different: the offended person can be considered spiritually stronger, „capable” to take the first step towards the „sick” (psycho-spiritual), who offended. The phenomenological dynamics offender-offended is excellently described by John Chrysostom, as if synthesizing the latest results in couple therapy:

- Relationships are seen as a battlefield, where there is a risk of being hurt;
- The offender is much more wounded than the wound he caused to the victim;
- If the offended/victim responds, hurting back in turn, the two fall together into something unbearable and difficult to describe: vicious circles of recrimination, rumination, desire for revenge, accusation etc.
- Mastering anger when you are hurt can benefit both parties in the relationship.

*How to „philosophize” when you are hurt?*

Interestingly, although John Chrysostom insists on the existence of anger in the wounded person’s soul (or „wrath”, an extreme anger), other emotions (such as sadness, fear or bitterness) are not ignored, nor is the desire to revenge. Strategies for overcoming destructive anger or managing it more rationally could be called, in modern terms, cognitive-behavioral restructuring techniques. „Philosophizing”, which anyone can learn, refers to the ways of functional thinking and spiritual reflection, in order to sustain the process of forgiveness from within. The author suggests functional ways of thinking about the offender, the injured self, that set mental and spiritual attitudes that can help the process of forgiveness. We present them below:

*What should the offended think about the offender?*

- „To exonerate him on the basis of the impotence of nature” (Ioannes Chrysostomus, 1987, I, IX, p. 121);
- „It is not the brother who hurts us, but the devil through him” (this thought weakens the anger the most) (Ioannes Chrysostomus, 1994, XVIII, I, p. 233).
- „The brother is stopped from evil through the one who suffers in silence because of the evil he has done” (the one who has sinned may end up repenting and admiring the goodness of the forgiver) (Ioannes Chrysostomus, 1994, XVIII, I, p. 233);

- „Do not look at the one (who sinned) who is a servant just like you, but at God” (Ioannes Chrysostomus, 2007, VI, p. 104).
- „Through forgiveness you touch his soul” (Ioannes Chrysostomus, 1902, XVI, p. 158).
- „By forgiveness you do him good to get him rid of a terrible disease” (Ioannes Chrysostomus, 1994, XVIII, IV, p. 239);
- „Do not slap the man, but slap the evil” (Ioannes Chrysostomus, 1994, XVIII, I, p. 233);
- „Remember the good he once did to you, as well as the evils you have done to others” (Ioannes Chrysostomus, 1994, LXXIX, IV, vol. 23, p. 902);
- „The enemy shall not do you as much harm as you do yourself if you do not reconcile with him, thus breaking God’s laws!” (Ioannes Chrysostomus, 2007, VI, p. 104)
- „As you may have understood, when you forgive your enemy, you receive much more than you give” (Ioannes Chrysostomus, s.a., p. 249).

*What should the wounded person think about himself?*

- „The one that was hit does not consider himself hit, if he is prepared to philosophize like that” (Ioannes Chrysostomus, 1994, XVIII, I, pp. 233-234);
- The one that was hit sets aside the anger, because the other has a wound deeper than his „If we treat each other like this, we shall all be healthy right away” (Ioannes Chrysostomus, 2005a, VIII, pp. 147-148).
- „You resemble God by forgiving wickedness and injustice” (Ioannes Chrysostomus, 1994, XIX, VII, p. 256)
- „Do for the sake of God’s law what time would do on its own” (Ioannes Chrysostomus, 1994, LXXIX, IV, p. 902);
- „Don’t hit back, control yourself, otherwise you shall fall with him” (Ioannes Chrysostomus, 2005a, VIII, p. 147);
- „But if you are awake and philosophizing, evil shall return to him and he shall suffer. If you get upset and assailed, then you hurt yourself, not the other person” (Ioannes Chrysostomus, 1994, LXI, V, p. 713).

### **Discussions and relations with psychological research**

In this part, we will attempt to discuss the essential aspects of forgiveness in the vision of John Chrysostom and to relate them to hypotheses and results provided by the scientific research of forgiveness.

*Forgiveness - a double beneficial dependence*

We observe in this model that Christian forgiveness, a human-divine cooperation, involves a dependence in both directions: a) the measure of forgiveness of human sins (by God) depends on the measure of forgiveness of the mistakes of others (making clear that sin is not equivalent to error, as not even ten thousand talents are equivalent to a hundred dinars); and that b). the real possibility of forgiving your „enemy” depends on the divine help requested, help that does not occur automatically. The measure of forgiveness of the offender dictates the measure of forgiveness by God: „... we decide the measure of our forgiveness” (Ioannes Chrysostomus, 2006, VII, p. 123-124), this being a form of „delicate conditioning” of the good He wants for us.

*Forgiveness of the „enemy”: the stakes and profound aspect of Christian forgiveness*

Of course, forgiveness can be given without the offender knowing or being aware of his deed, and sometimes just praying for the offender is enough (Baumeister, Exline, & Sommer, 1998). But this form of Christian forgiveness does not address the serious facts or the therapeutic, profound aspect of forgiveness. The introduced Christian “model” insists on mutual healing, especially in the case of severe offenses, when the other is perceived as the „enemy”. Krumrei, Mahoney, and Pargament (2008) also showed that people can turn to God in order to forgive in case of serious and difficult transgressions. The healing of the two involved in a transgression takes place on different levels and with different implications, a fact well emphasized by John the Golden Mouth. In the same way, Meek and McMinn (1997) see Christian forgiveness as a therapeutic progression of a profound healing that transcends the personal healing of the forgiver.

How could you determine the offender to feel remorse and apologize? Delicately, indirectly, without focusing on the negative effects of the offensive act, through (psycho-spiritual) behaviors of acceptance, reframing, compassion, love, tolerance, imitation and altruism that come from prayer, meditation, spiritual advice, communion and liturgical service. This way, what Baumeister et al. (1998) call „empty forgiveness”, when victims say they have forgiven a transgressor, but they still experience deep resentment and anger, is avoided.

*„The enemy” must be forgiven as soon as possible*

The patristic thinker insists with great care on the condition of the wounded, emphasizing what should be done with feelings of anger, bitterness, sadness, desire for revenge, pain, etc., and recommends „not to keep the wound open in the soul” for more than a day. Why? Because feelings grow, they control and subjugate the mind and the emotional part, turning forgiveness into something impossible to achieve. „And if we have enemies, let our enmity last only for a day” (Ioannes Chrysostomus, 2002a, p. 63). The warning not to allow the slightest postponement, in order to remove the enmity from the souls of both is strong: „(...) for if the night comes with you being like that, the next day shall not be enough to extinguish the evil already magnified during the night, as even if you were able to cut off part of it, yet you shall not be able to cut it off completely, and in the next night, still full of anger, you shall light a greater fire” (Ioannes Chrysostomus, 1902, XIV, p. 138). The quick release of anger is not a simple recommendation for the forgiver, but it is the only way to stop the „destructive emotional wave” for both, which perpetuates unforgiveness. This level of awareness that the forgiver can receive through „philosophizing” (a process similar to cognitive restructuring strategies) and through the experience of spiritual struggles, is consistently described by St. John.

Psychological studies dedicated to forgiveness also described the element of hostility, which refers to resentment and the desire to punish, to seek revenge for the offenders. People with high religious involvement (personal, not institutional) were less likely to invoke resentment and the desire to see evil from a transgressor, as reasons not to forgive (Gorsuch & Hao, 1993). When people forgive, the depressive, anxious, vengeful, angry noise usually decreases and they are no longer as obsessed with past transgression (Berry et al., 2005). Research indicates that chronic rumination (*e.g.*, repeated resurrection of an evil) may be associated with greater psychological distress (Roberts, Gilboa, & Gotlib, 1998).

*Repentance is not required, the guilt of the offender is not emphasized*

The idea that the offender shall ask the offended for repentance in order to be forgiven does not seem to exist in the analyzed texts. Repentance is allowed to occur naturally, and not by a certain pressure. But Krause and Ellison (2003) consider that the victim can request the offender’s repentance, because repeated forgiveness can become a harmful form of forgiveness. In addition, asking the

transgressors to perform acts of repentance is constantly associated with greater psychological suffering (depression) and decreased feeling of well-being (of the victim).

John Chrysostom problematizes a number of complicated situations of forgiveness: when the one who has offended becomes the „enemy” and it is difficult for him - for various reasons - to admit his mistake and ask for forgiveness. What the offended person is going to do during this time is crucial. The time elapsed until the moment the offender comes to ask for forgiveness can be destructive both for the two and for the relationship. Therefore, the Christian theologian places special emphasis on the initiative of the offended in the act of forgiveness, and not on showing guilt and bringing the offender to repentance. Scientific research shows that feeling the guilt is more prevalent in people with an intrinsic religiosity, so they can repent and seek forgiveness more easily. This means that the main effect of religion in the case of forgiving a specific transgression could be on the transgressor rather than the forgiver (Meek, Albright, & McMinn, 1995). However, „stimulating” guilt to obtain repentance and to force forgiveness can have unexpected consequences.

*When „philosophizing” turns into spiritual coping strategies for forgiveness*

Through „philosophizing”, the one who wants to forgive can cope with natural emotional reactivity, which is neither denied nor suppressed in any way in John Chrysostom. Care for the injured ego/self is the focus, as is the restructuring attitude towards the offender and his deed. In the study of Snyder and Yamhure (2000), we find forgiveness defined as adaptive framing to a transgression or ill-treatment. A transgression occurs when a person’s behavior violates expected personal or positive norms. Transgressions create discomfort for both, with discomfort motivating individuals to dissipate their attachment, and the injured individual shall form a negative connection with the source of the transgression. When the individual forgives, the valence of the connection changes from neutral to positive, and the forgiver looks differently at the transgression, its consequences and the transgressor. Also Mauger et al. (1996) discuss the forgiveness of others, using spiritual *coping* resources, although the information is unclear as to the nature of measuring spiritual support.

Although the sample of texts covered from the Christian author on forgiveness is relatively small, the suggestions of adaptive *coping* to a serious offense are diverse and profound. They can activate religious beliefs and

experiences that can cushion the shock of injury, place the event in a broader context, and provide a more appropriate perspective for forgiveness. Also Enright et al. (1989) found that people with stronger religious beliefs tended to think about forgiveness in a more complex way than those with weaker religious beliefs. Betancourt and Blair (1992) found evidence that the offenders' intentions to retaliate against a transgressor were related to their perceptions of the controllability and intentionality of the offender's action, as well as to the feelings of anger, sympathy, and pity for the offender. They argued that the offended' judgments about the offender's actions caused them anger, pity and sympathy, which in turn mediated their desire to retaliate.

Other researchers cite as offense *coping* strategies: providing mitigating circumstances (Zillmann & Cantor, 1976) (cf. 3.4.1); explanations that reduce transgression (Ohbuchi, Kameda, & Agarie, 1989); empathy for the offender in specific transgressions (McCullough et al., 1998). Other studies (Boon & Sulsky, 1997; Kremer & Stephens, 1983) demonstrate that forgiveness is largely shaped by the characteristics of the offense (the degree of harm, if there is an explanation for it, whether confession or apology is offered) and the victim's perceptions on the intentionality of the offender's actions.

*The psychological aspects of Christian forgiveness are implicit*

It is recognized that forgiveness for Christians comes from the motivation to keep the divine commandment, the desire to imitate Him or to be forgiven by God. Even if in Christian texts, the psychological, and personal benefits seem to be somehow secondary, as they are being less highlighted, they are still important and hidden in the commandment of forgiveness. John The Golden Mouth demonstrated it clearly and did not identify the care for the wounded self with forms of selfishness or unhealthy self-love (one of the passions that the Holy Fathers condemn the most). Even if Christian forgiveness is based on fundamental religious motivations, it does not mean that it excludes the psychological ones. The combination between psychological and immaterial/spiritual is implicit in the texts discussed (as in the entire Philocalical and Patristic literature), thus we believe that treating them separately is unnatural. We cannot separate what is psychological from what is religious in the inner „architecture” of the religious man. The central and strong position of spiritual beliefs and experiences influences the cognitive, emotional and behavioral processing of the subjective reality, of the objective one, even in the non-religious areas of life.

We have seen that the perspective on forgiveness presented in point 2 is pro-health and aims at healing personal psycho-spiritual wounds, calming anger and more or less justified resentments, so that the process of „letting go of negative emotions” becomes an intense and difficult one. Emotional and psychological wounds can also be generated by spiritual illnesses or passions that make a person’s relationship with God, with himself and with others suffer even more.

#### *Christian forgiveness and reconciliation*

The act of reconciliation of the relationship may be absent in some Christian models, as suggested by (Krause & Ellison, 2003, p. 266), but, in the model we analyzed, it is present. The deed that hurt and the emotions that accompany it are not overlooked, they are not forgotten through a process of will (by the command of forgiveness), but are expressed. At this point in our discussion, we can also insert some of Krause’s questions (Krause & Ingersoll-Dayton, 2001): Can people let go of the past, of the past wounds through singular acts of will or through the complete release of negative emotions, expressed through direct remedial actions? John Chrysostom argues for the need to combine the will to forgive with the expression of pain, the need for healing with repairing the relationship: „Christ does not want us to limit ourselves to this much, to the forgiveness of our offenders, but to come to the point in which we count them among our best friends” (Chrysostomus, 2002a, p. 68).

#### *The consequences of unforgiveness*

John Chrysostom draws attention that when the wounded does not adopt any „way of philosophizing”, it will be difficult for him to initiate forgiveness and he will involuntarily add to the initial suffering another suffering, which makes the situation difficult to manage. In other words, if the offended/ victim chooses to think and behave in the ways listed below (in scientific terms, if he chooses a negative  *coping*  strategy), then he only aggravates the already existing situation:

- a. “If you (the hurt one) get upset, you get assailed, then you hurt yourself, the other does not” (Ioannes Chrysostomus, 1994, LXI, V, p. 712);
- b. „So, if we hate others, we punish ourselves” (Ioannes Chrysostomus, 1994, LXI, V, p. 713).
- c. „If, however, he avenges the harm done to him, the exact opposite happens; they both embarrass themselves, they become worse, they ignite more anger” (Ioannes Chrysostomus, 1994, XVIII, I, pp. 233-234);

d. „Wanting to punish him, you torment yourself, as if you made anger your executioner and you would tear your entrails yourself” (Ioannes Chrysostomus, 1938, XX, p. 182).

We note that, in the view of the quoted author, the effects of the offensive/harmful act are not only negative, but are considered an „evil” with spiritual consequences. Why is evil more than harmful behavior with negative effects? Because the immaterial/spiritual level is also involved, where evil has a status recognized as an „active presence” (and not just an absence of good) that can be insinuated into man’s choices or weaknesses. Rapid release does not consider so much the evil as it does consider the anger that causes evil to persist and work in secret, in silence. The one who consciously or unconsciously hurts is considered to be under the influence of an evil that not only ruins a relationship, but affects the psycho-spiritual health of the two. Seeing in a broader, experiential Christian context, what happens between the offended and the offender is based on certain beliefs and spiritual experiences, which create the possibility to separate the different perceptions: „the work of evil”, the helplessness of the offender and his deed, the effects on the victim, the victim’s struggle with these effects, the request for divine help, the divine-human work involved in this process, and the labor of forgiveness with its psychological and spiritual processes in interaction, focusing sometimes on one, sometimes on the other.

#### *Difficulties in the psychological research of Christian forgiveness*

Those few ways of functionally thinking pro-forgiveness, identified by John the Golden Mouth, may not have an impact on the restructuring of the spiritual life or on the spiritual struggle that forgiveness sometimes entails. Here we find one of the most difficult aspects for the empirical research of Christian forgiveness, the one in which the involved psychological processes interfere with the practices and spiritual struggle, with the teachings of faith that every Christian understands and practices in a personal way. The “resistance” of some aspects of Christian forgiveness to quantitative psychological methods and the permeability to qualitative (and sometimes mixed) methods, draws our attention to a cautious attitude when it comes to measuring it.

The increasingly sophisticated statistical analyses present in current studies show us the effort to explain Christian forgiveness, with increasingly clear and rigorous evidence. In this sense, it is worth appreciating the scientific research of topics such as: the perception of forgiveness from God as a transcendent source



of forgiveness (Huber et al., 2011; Walker & Gorsuch, 2002); the strategies to ask for God's help and/or support in forgiving others (Rye & Pargament, 2002); the relationship between forgiving others, forgiveness from God and various health variables (Toussaint, Williams, Musick, & Everson, 2001), etc. Despite their rigorous methodology, the psychological studies about forgiveness can lead to contradictory results. For example, the same study, on different populations, indicates different conclusions. In Toussaint et al. (2001), forgiveness of others tends to have more beneficial effects on psychological stress and life satisfaction than forgiveness from God, and in Krause and Ellison (2003), the same study replicated on elderly adults shows that those who believe that God forgives them are more likely to forgive others more quickly. Forgiveness, as any other psychological variable, remains sensitive to multiple occurring factors that the researchers try to identify and control.

Huber et al. (2011) considered that operationalizing the perception of forgiveness from God in the form of cognitive beliefs or personal experiences changes the results of the research on forgiveness. For the first category, forgiveness from God is a weak source of forgiveness, while, for the second, it is the complete opposite. Huber points out that the religious variables used so far have not been integrated into a comprehensive model of religiosity (understood as a system of personal constructs with two parameters: centrality and religious content). He argues that the study of forgiveness according to the centrality of religion for the individual can greatly change the results.

Regarding the impact of religion on forgiveness, there are important discrepancies between the various theories, self-reported empirical studies and the quasi-experimental ones. These types of difficulties have been broadly discussed by McCullough and Worthington (1999, p. 1151) and clarified later on by Tsang et al. (2005). These valuable contributions confirm the challenge that researchers take on in the scientific approach to religious forgiveness and recognize the need to integrate it with exploratory studies.

#### *Two "stages" of Christian forgiveness*

Finally, we could say that the process of forgiveness that John Chrysostom develops is a simple one and takes place in two „stages“:

1. To be willing to forgive (*i.e.*, let go of the offense) by practicing “that philosophizing” (*i.e.*, choosing one or more framing strategies presented in 2.4.1-2.4.3);

2. Ask for God's help that will „cast away” these experiences/sufferings that prevents the union of some with others.

We might notice that only the first stage is related to what man can do alone and it is an essential one: man chooses to forgive something serious, understanding the need for God's help in this difficult process. The second stage is one of human-divine cooperation, in which man asks, through prayer, what he has already decided that he wants. The divine commandment to forgive does not force man to practice forgiveness, but rather remains a protective recommendation. The only imperative in this “model” of forgiveness is the urgency to initiate it, shortening the time for the decision to forgive, from a broader perspective of acting beneficially for both, and not just for oneself (Ioannes Chrysostomus, 1994, XVI, IX, pp. 212-214).

### **Conclusions**

The model of forgiveness in John the Golden Mouth is loaded with paradoxes, it forces human limits, and in some places, it seems idealistic or difficult to apply in practice. However, it has much in common with the current hypotheses, results, and questions in the psychological research of forgiveness.

Forgiveness is seen as the most valuable good deed, being an intimate good for oneself, for the others and a response of man to what God expects of him. Forgiveness is a way to generate love in various forms (tolerance, patience, compassion, mercy, gentleness, etc.), in conditions of hostility and negative, destructive psychological reactivity.

The specific features of the Christian models of forgiveness (Krause & Ingersoll-Dayton, 2001, p. 263) are also found in the Eastern Christian model analyzed. They can shorten the path, ease the process of forgiveness, and diminish complications (otherwise, natural, human) by the rapid release of ruminations and „dark” emotions, allowing the individual to focus on the positive and profound aspects of life. Aspects related to anger and vicious emotional, cognitive, and spiritual circles, which unforgiveness can create, are well emphasized by the 4th century Christian writer. It is known that vicious circles of expectations related to remedy (equivalent to the level of suffering perceived by the victim), can create endless cycles of recrimination and revenge. In this sense, the emphasis on the offender transforms the victim in him into an active person who takes the first step towards the offender, replacing the victim status with the one of forgiver. We admit

that this therapeutic solution proposed by John Chrysostom is today the main objective of some psychotherapies dedicated to this issue.

The model discussed shows us that Christian forgiveness is built on another logic, that of a God „Lover of mankind”, in which caring for people, for their psycho-spiritual health, for their relationships and repairing them is a priority. Enmity, hatred, unhealthy anger, fear, bitterness must be removed from the soul, because they pervert not only relationships, but also the human soul. Forgiveness does not involve a “fight” with the offender, but with the evil behind a behavior that produces suffering, an evil deeper than the psychological one, to which one does not react anyway. This evil, when it is not stopped, goes further easily, it makes the two “worse” on the background of anger. The “evil” of not forgiving is greater than the wound suffered by the victim, because it blatantly disregards what God has asked of man. He who „philosophizes” in the suggested ways may be prepared to face an evil greater than the deed of the one who hurt him seriously.

The Christian model analyzed speaks explicitly about managing emotions and resentments. Here, the right to live and express them is not denied, but the tendency to allow them to radically change the perception of the offender (to become the definitive „enemy”) and to inhibit the attitude of compassion, benevolence and love is rejected. Other authors also admit that the forgiver can admit that he has voluntarily abandoned his right to the experienced resentments and can start over, regardless of them (even if they still exist) (North, 1987). In this model, a great truth is expressed, achieved through spiritual practices and therapeutic techniques: the forgiver has the right to experience his resentments, but chooses to give up their expression in words and behaviors that can intensify criticism, revenge, judgment and rejection.

Christian forgiveness paradoxically goes beyond forgiveness: „He did not only say: Forgive him, but do not to have it (the memory of the deed) in mind, nor take it into account” (Ioannes Chrysostomus, 1938, XX, p. 182).

Pargament, Koenig, and Perez (2000) emphasized the importance of considering the interpersonal and intrapersonal facets of forgiveness. John Chrysostom targeted both of them through the suggested „strategies”. The Christian “model” identified by (Scobie & Scobie, 1998) has been enlarged by (Krause & Ellison, 2003) to a variety of other ways that combine religious strategies with secular ones. The obvious similarities between the presented Christian “model” and the results of early psychological researches about forgiveness (from the 1980-1990s) are showing us the possibility of adopting a

joint strategy in approaching forgiveness, especially for the religious clients that also ask for a type of psychotherapy.

After almost 20 years of scientific study, Davis et al. (2012) remarked that there are still major gaps in how religion can help or prevent forgiveness. From Fehr's conclusion that the main effect of religion on forgiveness is quite weak (even in groups of Christians who greatly appreciate forgiveness and believe that they must forgive unconditionally) (Fehr, Gelfand, & Nag, 2011), to the model of relational spirituality and forgiveness, which predicts that spiritual appreciations of a transgression can help or prevent forgiveness (Davis et al., 2012), we notice a significant distance. Our exploratory study also reinforces the idea that religious/spiritual assessments of a serious transgression are important. The analyzed "model" can become useful in the current evolution of forgiveness research, because it enriches it, brings a deeper vision and raises different types of relevant issues.

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