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Living in Communion

AN INTERVIEW WITH FATHER THOMAS HOPKO

Father Thomas Hopko is a priest of the Orthodox Church in America and a teacher of theology and spirituality at Saint Vladimir’s Seminary in Crestwood, New York.

When we asked Father Hopko to speak to PARABOLA about the theme of “Forgiveness,” his response was immediate and enthusiastic. It is a question that has long been of concern to him and one that he places at the center of the Christian way. Father Hopko’s intensity is deeply informed by his devotion to the traditions of his Church. He is a committed man, and speaks with a force that brings his words about the process of forgiveness to a vivid and compelling life.

—Lorraine Kisly

PARABOLA: I think that many people today approach forgiveness from a secular viewpoint. They recognize that there is a value in forgiving and being forgiven, but see it on the human level only. Without a theological dimension, or a higher level, there is no context for forgiveness. Wouldn’t you say that forgiveness is a divine act?

FATHER THOMAS HOPKO: If a person is inspired by the spirit of God, he or she can forgive, certainly. People can forgive. But I’m not so sure you can say that in general there is the feeling that forgiveness is of value. I was a parish priest for twenty years, and I encountered people who would say, “I don’t care. I can go on and live my life—it really doesn’t matter to me. If I’m not bothering you and you aren’t bothering me, why be reconciled?” This is plain indifference.

Another reason why people don’t value forgiveness is that they consider it to be collusion with evil. They feel that if a person has done something really terrible, he or she should be reminded of it until death, and further, that the evil should be avenged. And of course, most of us feel that any offense committed against us is irreparable. Nothing that the other person does can ever cancel it. If you kill my child, for example, there is nothing you can do in reparation, and for me to forgive would simply be to condone the evil. So I’m not sure that most people value forgiveness.

When you look at it from the point of view of justice, there is no reason for forgiveness. Only if God exists and we realize that there is either a world with evil or no world at all, only then can we understand that we are going to have to undergo the trial of evil. But if that is not there, I don’t know why anyone would forgive. Or want to. But I do think that people who are not believers in God, by the fact they are made in God’s image, can have the sense that reconciliation is better than allowing the evil to go on. By definition, forgiveness is breaking the chain of evil, beginning by recognizing that evil really has been done. People tend to think forgiveness means something bad was not really done—that a person didn’t understand the consequences, or whatever. If that were the case, there would be no need for forgiveness; it could be seen simply as a mistake. Forgiveness has to admit, and rage over, and weep over a real evil, and then say, however, “We are going to live in communion one with another. We are going to carry on.” Never forgetting—you can’t, at any rate but carrying on in a spirit of love without letting the evil poison the future relationship. And certainly, from our perspective, that is what happens theologically. The striking thing in the Gospel is that God refuses to let evil destroy the relationship. Even if we kill *him*, he will say, “Forgive them.”

p: Implied in what you say is that relationship is the highest aim, and that an obstacle to relationship is what calls the need for forgiveness.

TH: Yes. I would prefer the word *communion* to *relationship*, but yes. The Orthodox approach is that we are made in the image and likeness of God, and that God is a Trinity of persons in absolute identity of being and of life in perfect communion. Therefore, communion is the given. Anything that breaks that communion destroys the very roots of our existence. That's why forgiveness is essential if there is going to be human life in the image of God. We are all sinners, living with other sinners, and so "seventy—times—seven" times a day we must reestablish the communion—and *want* to do so. The desire is the main thing, and the feeling that it is of value.

The obsession with relationship—the individual in search of relationships—in the modern world shows that there is an ontological crack in our being. There is no such thing as an individual—he was created, probably, in a Western European university. We don't recognize our essential communion. I don't look at you and say, "You are my life."

Contemporary interpretations of the commandment in the Torah reflect this individualistic attitude. The first commandment is that you love God with all your mind, with all your soul, and with all your strength, and the second is that you love your neighbor as yourself. The only way you can prove you love God is by loving your neighbor, and the only way you can love your neighbor in *this* world is by endless forgiveness. So, "love your neighbor as yourself." However, in certain modern editions of the Bible, I have seen this translated as, "you shall love your neighbor as you love yourself." But that's not what it says.

I once had a discussion with someone on a Sunday-morning television program about this. We were asked what we thought was most important in Christianity, and part of what I said was that the only way we can find ourselves is to deny ourselves. That's Christ's teaching. If you try to cling to yourself, you will lose yourself. And of course, the unwillingness to forgive is the ultimate act of not wanting to let yourself go. You want to defend yourself, assert yourself, protect yourself, and so on. There is a consistent line through the Gospel—if you want to be the first you must will to be the last, and so on. And the other fellow, who taught the psychology of religion at one of the Protestant seminaries, said, "What you are saying is the source of the neuroses of Western society. What we need is healthy self-love and healthy self-esteem." And then he quoted that line, "you shall love your neighbor as *you love* yourself." He insisted that you must love yourself first and have a sense of dignity. If one has that, however, forgiveness is then either out of the question or an act of condescension toward the poor sinner. It is no longer an identification with the other as a sinner, too. I said that of course if we are made in the image of God it's quite self-affirming, and self-hatred is an evil. But my main point is that there is no self there to be defended except the one that comes into existence by the act of love and self-emptying. It's only by loving the other that myself actually emerges. And forgiveness is at the heart of that.

As we were leaving we saw a very old, venerable rabbi with a shining face. He called us over and asked if he could say something to us. "That line, you know, comes from the Torah, from *Leviticus*," he said, "and it cannot possibly be translated 'love your neighbor as you love yourself.' What it says is 'you shall love your neighbor as *being* your own self.' -Your neighbor *is* your true self. You have no self in yourself.

After I heard this I started reading the Church Fathers in this light, and that's what they all say. They say, "Your brother is your life." I have no self in myself except the one that is fulfilled by loving the other. The Trinitarian character of God is a metaphysical absolute here, so to speak. God's own self is another—his Son, to use Christian evangelical terms. The same thing happens on the human level; so the minute I don't feel deeply that my real self is the other, then I'll have no reason to forgive anyone. But if that is my reality, and my only real self is the other, and my own identity and fulfillment emerges only in the act of loving the other, that gives substance to the idea that we are potentially God-like beings. Now, if you add to that that we are all to some degree faulty, weak, and so on, that act of love will always be an act of forgiveness. That's how I find and fulfill myself as a human being made in God's image. Otherwise, I cannot. So the act of forgiveness is the very act by which our humanity is constituted. Deny that, and we kill ourselves. It's a metaphysical suicide.

P: You are making a very definite distinction here between the individual and the person.

TH: Well, we would say the individual is the person that refuses to love. When a person refuses to identify in being and value with “the least,” even with “the enemy,” then the person becomes an individual. He or she becomes a self-enclosed being trying to have proper relationships—usually on his or her own terms. But again, we would say that the person only comes into existence by going out of oneself into communion with the other. So my task is not to decide whether or not I will be in relationship with you but to realize that I *am* in communion with you: my life is yours, and your life is mine. Without this, there is no way that we are going to be able to carry on.

P: Forgiveness is not an achievement, an act, so much as the development of an understanding of reality?

TH: It is a decision in the sense that you have to will it. You have to choose life. A person can choose death by not forgiving. So there is a sense in which you can destroy yourself by not saying “yes” to the reality that actually exists. That’s the choice: “yes” or “no” to what truly exists. Forgiveness is the great “yes.” So there is a choice. In the Greek patristic tradition, the more a person is a person, the more we realize and will our communion with others in the act of love, the less we choose. So the freer we are, the less choice we have.

That’s almost opposite to the post-Enlightenment, secular Western thought. We tend to think the freer we are, the more choice we have. For example, if you would sin against me and I want to love with the love of God, then I do not have a choice whether or not I should forgive you, I only have a choice whether or not I *will*. And I must, if I want to be alive. If I were truly holy, I wouldn’t even choose—it would be a spontaneous act.

P: As an individual in the sense you were speaking of earlier, if someone insults me or offends me or betrays me, it is impossible to forgive them, lacking this understanding of the reality of our interconnectedness. So this understanding is needed.

TH: Otherwise there is no reason to forgive.

P: There is a reason, because one suffers from not being able to forgive.

TH: Yes, but within the categories of what we would call “the fallen world,” there is no reason. Unless communion enters into the picture.

I think that in our culture the willingness to admit there is real evil is difficult for us—it is such a violent and awesome position towards life. Of course, people in tremendous pain—rape victims, incest victims, etc.—have to forgive if they are going to go on living. But the main forgiving that needs doing in everybody’s life, the central act of forgiveness and one that indicates spiritual maturity in every case without exception, is the forgiveness of the parents. We tend either to blame parents or idealize them—both of which cripple life. In order to forgive them, one must first admit the offense, and that may mean enduring incredible pain. Rage and sadness have to be faced in order to forgive. The reason that we can’t forgive is because we don’t want to face the pain and rage, to admit what really happened.

So people try to live without facing all this. Or when that becomes impossible (because if there is a shred of honesty left, it does become impossible), it can mean trying to lose oneself in a cult or other form of collective. You sell your soul so that you don’t have to choose anymore. This wish to escape is what fueled a great deal of what happened in the 60s and since. People wanted to lose themselves; they couldn’t handle the individual freedoms, because they weren’t on a deep enough level. So there was a flight. I think even the feminist movement is a response to this. For example, Karl Stern’s book *The Flight from Woman* examines the writings of Descartes, Tolstoy, Kierkegaard, and others to show that in Western culture there has been an almost pathological flight from the feminine, from woman, which means a flight from communion, a flight from the other. The individualistic, radical, fallen, male values became the values for the culture as a whole, and *that’s* the cause of the Western neuroses.

The burden of freedom is cruel—“how cruel is the love of God.” But that’s what we are called for. The individualistic or the collectivistic solutions will not work. We are persons

made for free and voluntary communion in love and truth in reality with other persons. This means that in the way we experience life, mercy and forgiveness are at the heart of it, beginning in one's own family. That's where it's so, so painful.

Of course, my feeling, being a radical Orthodox Christian, is that God is not removed from the world but rather one who enters into the world and gets nailed to a cross. And unless we accept Christ crucified, which is a scandal to those who want God to be some kind of power figure and total foolishness to those who want it all to fall into place intellectually, within our terms, there's no Gospel. But if Christ crucified is at the heart of the matter, then evil is real and forgiveness is real and freedom is real, and there's no other way to deify life but through an act of mercy.

P: There are some who feel that to understand all is to forgive all. If we could see the entire chain of causality, there would be no reason to forgive, because we would understand.

TH: I wouldn't agree with that at all. Not at all. Actually, when you see things clearly, you can see that certainly we are victimized. Let's take as an example a woman I'm thinking of, a woman who must forgive her father and her uncle for raping her over a period of years when she was a child. Once she begins to see things, she can admit that her father was also a victim, that in very many ways he was conditioned—that's what the Bible means when it says sins visited to the fourth generation. There is such a thing as a tradition of evil. That's why I like to use the expression that forgiveness is breaking the chain of evil. But everyone is given that possibility to break that chain. We are victimized but always somehow willingly victimized. As long as I'm understanding, justifying, explaining, I become just one more link in the chain of evil.

P: Could you please explain what you mean by evil?

TH: Well, in Orthodox theology, we always speak about evil, or sin, as either voluntary or involuntary—conscious or unconscious. We would not define sin as the cold-blooded, freely sovereign and intellectual act whereby I perpetrate evil of some sort—destroy someone's life, for example. It's much more complicated than that. One of the points of the Adam story is that we are not born in Paradise. It is anything but Paradise. A child of a hysterical, drug-addicted parent is going to be born drug-addicted as well. There is a tendency toward "evil" in us, biologically, psychologically, genetically. Father Alexander Schmemmann used to say that the spiritual life consists in how you deal with what you have been dealt. We've all been dealt something. Our theological claim is that where you have a good measure of faith, and love, and forgiveness, you can restore human nature. You can pass on a more healthy, integrated, peaceful, joyful humanity to your progeny. You can be a presence of forgiveness and mercy, but you can also be a presence of the opposite. In order to be a presence of mercy, you must admit tragedy; you can't just explain it away in terms of genetics, or economics.

There is a freedom: what you do with what you have. It's not a sovereign freedom as though I were just emerging as a pristine pure angel. No. But the point is and this is where I disagree with your statement—if you could see the causes and influences, you would come to the conclusion that there is a great deal of victimization, but at the same time, there are opportunities for people to break the chain of evil, to forgive and not to allow it to go on. Sartre says you make a choice every second. A choice about what? A choice about what you are going to do about where you are. At the very heart of that choice is always going to be an act of forgiveness.

You know Karl Stern, whom I mentioned earlier, wrote another book called *The Pillar of Fire*, and what he says there is that what the modern human being cannot accept is forgiveness and grace. We would rather take our punishment, as it were. And the Christian God says, "No. I forgive you whether you like it or not." That's the only fire of hell—this loving forgiveness of God. That's why Jesus says there is only one unforgivable sin—the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. And what is that? It is the unwillingness to be forgiven and to forgive. The proud cannot accept grace.

P: There is a great deal written today about the need to forgive oneself. Does that make any sense in Christian terms?

TH: Oh, of course. Forgiving oneself means accepting forgiveness from God— and from other people. Evagrius of Pontus, a fourth-century writer, wrote about this. He said that there are in us many selves, really, but at base there are two: the real self, which is the Christ-self, and a legion of other selves, which are the Adamic selves. What happens when we hear the word of grace is that we are split down the middle. We don't want grace because of the pain we have to face, the fears and so on. But one of the things that happens—one of the lies of the Devil, so to speak—is the conviction that we are not worth it. It is not for us. We are too bad, worthless. Then there comes a point, as Evagrius said, when the Christ-self needs to be convinced that “yes, I exist, and I am acceptable,” and so to have pity and mercy on those other selves.

P: Do you see a difference between evil or sinful acts and a larger attitude that chooses darkness rather than light? Evil is not outside of us, isn't that so?

TH: For many people evil resides in someone else. But I think your distinction is very good, because our understanding of the Christian view is that we will sin until we die. Even baptism is for the forgiveness of sins “all the days of our life.” Baptism puts us in the context of forgiveness and mercy, which then allows what is called the invisible warfare, the unseen struggle, to go on. You are going to be sinful—that's why Jesus says “seventy-times-seven” — it is inherent in the human life. The sin is to be expected, but the loving of the darkness is not.

P: In the Christian view, we are reconciled, we are forgiven. Paul Tillich, in his sermon in this issue on the parable of the sinful woman and the Pharisee, points out that repentance comes after being forgiven. It is not a payment in order to be forgiven.

TH: Well, it's both. However, it's important from our perspective what the woman in the parable then does. She certainly does not live happily ever after. What she enters into is a life of tremendous struggle.

Chrysostom says you are baptized in order to struggle. Take Mary of Egypt, the classic example of the forgiven harlot: she went into the desert and wept the rest of her life, not to win God by her tears, or to earn forgiveness; not to make reparation; but out of the love of God for being liberated and for the sense of what sin really is and the desire not to fall into it again. I think one problem in both the liberal and the fundamentalist forms of Christianity is the absence of an ongoing ascetic dimension. If you don't have to pay for your sins because Jesus has, this can open the door to a life of profligacy without that ascetic dimension. The more liberal line is: this is the way I am; this is the way God made me. God loves me, God forgives me, and so there's nothing for me to do but carry on with my life.

P: What do you mean by the ascetic dimension?

TH: It is making nothing an end in itself except God, that is, ordering the natural passions to their proper end, which is God himself, and love itself. The passions are part of our nature— desire, anger, zeal—but they must be directed in the service of love, love meaning the good of the other, the affirmation of the other. This nature must affirm the truth, that is, the reality of things the way they are. The metaphysical base is a communion of love and being and truth for which we have been created. To say “yes” to that is the deified life. But to say “yes” to that, in the fallen world, means that you must, as Saint Paul says, crucify the flesh with its passions and desires. You must kill the ego. The “old Adam” has to die, and he always dies kicking and screaming. The multiplicity of these false selves must be exposed, and that is not easy. The evil of other people has to be named and forgiven, which is also not easy.

This is what you find in the wonderful short stories of Flannery O'Connor. The moment of grace is usually a violent moment, as, for example, in the story of the old lady in “A Good Man is Hard to Find.” After he shoots her, the killer comments, “She would of been a good woman if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.” To see things clearly, to realize, as O'Connor says, that even the virtues will be burnt up, very often requires an incredibly violent act. We often need to be shaken into that realization. It seems to me that that's the meaning in the scriptures of the trials and sufferings and afflictions and so

on—to have people realize what and who they are, really. That’s the ascetic dimension, because the minute a person says, “I will work to show mercy,” every devil in hell will work to try to stop him.

P: You spoke of the division in us between the Christ-self and the legion of other selves—so there are really two natures at war within us. Is it that one nature has ultimately to be transformed? You also spoke earlier about a person who is free and yet has no choice—this is a totally transformed being, isn’t it? All the energies of the passions, all of the forces of the other nature, have been somehow changed?

TH: We would say there’s a human nature that when it is truly itself is full of the grace of God and in communion with God and is, therefore, deified and becomes one with the divine nature. On the other hand, there is the human nature that is broken, fragmented, estranged from its real foundation and in need of salvation, of some transforming power. The transforming power of grace is there. But in a sense, it takes all of time to be deified. There are no miracles on this level. The degree of suffering that has to take place is very great.

P: It’s an incarnated struggle on this level.

TH: Yes, and I believe it can’t be done alone. You need a community.

P: Our culture today places a great emphasis on improving oneself. There is a difference between improving yourself and being made whole, being brought to your true nature.

TH: The saints speak about spiritual hedonism, where you want peace and joy, but you don’t want reality. That’s why Saint Paul says that you can give your body to be burned but if you have not love, you are nothing. Not only does it profit you nothing, you *are* nothing. Without God I am nothing. I’m brought out of nothing and without God become nothing. And I can even become enamored of that nothingness.

P: What of those who feel they love God and yet hate life?

TH: They may love religion, they may love the Jesus Prayer, they may spend their whole life searching for pure prayer and miss the mark. I once met someone who had gone to Mount Athos and met a monk there who was in a very bad state, very dark, very bitter, very angry. When asked what was the matter, he said, “Look at me; I’ve been here for thirty-eight years, and I have not yet attained pure prayer.” And this fellow was saying how sad he thought this was. Another man present said, “It’s a sad story all right, but the sadness consists in the fact that after thirty-eight years in a monastery he’s still interested in pure prayer.” You can make pure prayer an idol, too. Those are the worst forms of idolatry.

A person must be helped to want joy, to see that it is possible. And then what is difficult is that all of these other things have to be acknowledged for what they really are, together with all the pain that has to be experienced. The other day a woman said to me, “It’s not enough for me to say I have to forgive my father. I can’t do that until I experience the rage and the sadness and the anger over how my childhood was. And that’s what I have been afraid to do.” Just because you know with your head that someone has offended you, that you ought to forgive them—that’s not forgiveness. But how do you achieve the actual reconciliation where you are really at peace with the other? One must experience in full the pain of the actual harm that was done. That’s the hardest part of forgiveness. That’s the block for most people. It has to be gone through again and again, and layer after layer has to come up.

Many times when forgiveness is needed, one of the hardest things is to face the fact that the way I handled being harmed wasn’t always the best, that I have a certain responsibility for allowing myself to have been harmed. One does have to admit, very often, that there were choices for one as well. There’s always some form of symbiosis at work. That’s why Chrysostom could write that the world is filled with evil but no one can harm him who does not harm himself.

The great example for Christians would be their martyrs, and Christ himself, who, although they are the greatest victims, have not allowed themselves to be touched by that evil, what Evagrius calls “allowing the devil to rejoice two times.” You are sinned against; the

devil rejoices. You react with vengeance or without forgiveness, and the devil rejoices two times. Never give the second joy.

So forgiveness is not just the healing of the other, it is the healing of yourself, too. If you don't forgive, you allow yourself to be poisoned. That's why Jesus says, "Do not resist the evildoer." The minute that you resist or react in kind, you become part of the evil yourself. That's the radical teaching of the cross.

P: And you *can* be lost and destroyed. That's the other side. Forgiveness and communion are always offered, but "narrow is the way".

TH: I think ultimately it comes to this. We are forgiven whether we like it or not. If we accept it, then we, too, become forgivers, and it's called Paradise. But if we don't accept it, it is hell. In Tillich's language, being is gracious. When you reject the forgiveness, you destroy yourself. You refuse the communion.

P: On my way here to see you I was thinking that forgiveness is not an act. As an "individual" I cannot forgive, but I can be acted upon, I can be forgiven, and I can participate in the current of communion.

TH: Of course you can't grit your teeth and say, "I will forgive."

P: It depends on grace?

TH: Well, grace is given so that we would work. We co-work with God by grace. Grace comes not to do for us what we need to do, grace comes to enable us to do it. There isn't a God and a "me" — over and against each other. There is God, who is God, and then there is me to the measure that I am full of grace. That's why whenever I do good, it is God in me, and really me. It is the Holy Spirit that allows me to be me. According to Saint Paul, when it is evil, it is not really me. It's *sin* in me. That's why devils are always spoken of as enslaving, captivating, whereas the Holy Spirit does not possess, it liberates. That's the great *kenosis* of the Holy Spirit. To use the theology of our tradition, when it is really "me," it is the Holy Spirit and me in a union that is without separation or division, but without fusion either. This union is what gives us the freedom to act in a God-like manner.

Now it is true that there is nothing that we can do to make that happen. It's grace. What I have to do is open myself to it. *Stop* doing things, if you like. As long as you keep thinking you can do it, you can't. The minute you say, "I am helpless but for this grace of God," then it happens. And it's really you. It is the real you. Not the false one that has been standing over and against God in some sort of mad independence.

According to the saints, every time you feel alone, dark, barren, it's always a sign that God is asking you to make another step. It's a spiral process.

P: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Is this simultaneous, or does one depend on the other?

TH: Well, it's simultaneous, but because we are creatures, we always have to pray from our side. Any prayer that we make that we don't believe has already been granted from God's side is not a prayer. We say in the liturgy, "Lord have mercy," because we believe he *is* having mercy. In *Mark* 10, Jesus says that anything you ask in prayer, believing that you have already received it, it is yours. Everything that we need is already given from the side of God. Therefore, when it comes to forgiveness, we have to make an act of faith that the power to forgive has already been given to us. We just have to accept it. But it's there. It is there.

Our very nature includes the presence of God. As Saint Irenaeus said, we are body, soul, and Holy Spirit, or we are body, soul, and evil spirit, but we are never just body and soul. There is no autonomous humanity. There is either the law of the Holy Spirit and life working in our members, or the law of sin and death. There is always one or another law working within us—either the law of grace or the law of death, but we are not autonomous beings between the divine and the abyss who can pick and choose. That doesn't exist. It's either the

real human state, which is full of the grace of God—that's what makes it human—or there is a state in which we reject our own being as rooted in grace and love.