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FORGIVENESS AS A FORM OF CHRISTIAN MERCY

A b s t r a c t. The article is composed of three parts. The first part raises the subject of forgiveness as a form of God's mercy and thus it places the raised subject in a theological context. Forgiveness as a form of mercy in interpersonal relationships is dealt with in the second part of the article which addresses the horizontal dimension of the idea of mercy. Part three is devoted to modern problems of forgiveness in the context of mercy, and the problems in question include the following: self-forgiveness, forgiveness of God, forgiveness in the context of the so-called intergenerational sins, forgiveness as one of the spiritual works of mercy: new forms and challenges, forgiveness as a form of mercy in the context of the ministry of a confessor and a spiritual leader.

Key words: forgiveness; mercy; Jubilee Year of Mercy.

When analysing Pope Francis' bull *Misericordiae vultus* in the light of the use of some words, we come to an interesting conclusion: this very important document beginning the Year of Mercy, yet not too extensive in its volume of content, uses the word "forgiveness", in very different contexts, as many as nineteen times. If the word "forgiveness" occurs so often in a document about mercy, then it may mean that there exists a permanent, deep and multi-layer connection between mercy and forgiveness. In one sentence the Author of the bull ranks the two concepts alongside each other, stating that "God goes beyond justice with His mercy and forgiveness." It should be admitted that the Pope in his realistic view of the surrounding reality expresses his concern about the two Christian virtues which have been put in some danger, when assessing them both in their proper understanding and practical usage.

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One of the Pope's saddest constataions is the one in which he states that "sad to say, we must admit that the practice of mercy is waning in our culture. In some cases the word forgiveness seems to have dropped out of use" (MV). Equally pessimistic is the Pope's statement that today's world is placing more and more emphasis on justice, on the sense of justice which results from observance of law, but on the other hand it is moving away from searching for mercy, which manifests itself in forgiveness. It should be pointed out here that a distinguished Polish theologian, bishop Alfons Nossol, expressed his views in the same vein as early as in 1989. In his speech during the 8th Week of Spirituality he stated that since the 18th century today's world had been calling: "I desire justice, not mercy." Expanding on this idea, he also said that since the time of *The Communist Manifesto* this calling had become a sort of social-political program of our world, which ideologisation an objectification had gone hand in hand with. Nossol continued his reasoning until it was ascertained that this type of mentality (justice instead of mercy) had led to the most horrible wars of the XXth century and degraded man to a mere number and deprived him of dignity and freedom.¹ Thus, if justice takes the place of mercy, then—as John Paul II stated—"it can even lead to the negation and destruction of itself, if *that deeper power, which is love*, is not allowed to shape human life in its various dimensions. It has been precisely historical experience that, among other things, has led to the formulation of the saying: *summum ius—summa iniuria*"(DiM 12).

It is against this background that the message of the Gospel introduces, as Pope Francis notes, quite a new vision of man and the world. It is deeply personalistic, humanistic, in which the greatest phenomenon is made up of mercy and forgiveness as a new order—not only an internal and spiritual order but also a social one which Pope John Paul II determined as "the civilisation of love." Pope Francis encapsulated the most current view on the issue in a sentence from the above-quoted bull *Misericordiae vultus*: "Faced with a vision of justice as the mere observance of the law that judges people simply by dividing them into two groups—the just and sinners—Jesus is bent on revealing the great gift of mercy that searches out sinners and offers them pardon and salvation (cf. Ps 51[50], 11:16)" (MV). It is worth mentioning that practically in everyday life Christians are formed in this very truth, that

¹ Alfons NOSSOL, "Personalistyczno-humanistyczny aspekt w doznawaniu i w świadczeniu miłosierdzia" [Personalistic and Humanistic Aspect of Experiencing and Giving Mercy], in *Miłosierdzie w postawie ludzkiej* [Mercy in Human Attitude], Homo Meditans 5 (Lublin, 1989), 45.

the forgiveness offered to man by God has its origin in God's mercy, and it takes place whenever the sacrament of penance and reconciliation is administered, when the penitent hears the words of absolution spoken over him: God, the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of his Son has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the Church may God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, it is worth making maximum effort in order to explore the mystery of mercy, which is expressed in forgiveness. This endeavour is to be supported inter alia by all the numerous initiatives related to the Jubilee Year of Mercy.

I. FORGIVENESS AS A FORM OF DIVINE MERCY

When discussing the issue of forgiveness as a form of Christian mercy, it is impossible to circumvent Divine Mercy and forgiveness, which is a form of this particular mercy.

Theological grounding is necessary here because all the virtues which are related to human life have an indirect or direct anchoring in God's life, they do not constitute abstract human features, which by definition are a part of human nature. Thus, first, one should ask about the mercy and forgiveness which God exposed in Revelation. Furthermore, as it follows from what St. Faustina Kowalska conveyed, it is mercy that constitutes God's greatest attribute (Acts 180). On the other hand, in the context of the Christian spiritual life, when considering the question: "Whether mercy is the greatest of virtues," St. Thomas wrote in *The Summa Theologica*:

A virtue may take precedence of others in two ways: first, in itself; secondly, in comparison with its subject. In itself, mercy takes precedence of other virtues, for it belongs to mercy to be bountiful to others, and, what is more, to succour others in their wants, which pertains chiefly to one who stands above. Hence mercy is accounted as being proper to God: and therein His omnipotence is declared to be chiefly manifested. On the other hand, with regard to its subject, mercy is not the greatest virtue, unless that subject be greater than all others, surpassed by none and excelling all: since for him that has anyone above him it is better to be united to that which is above than to supply the defect of that which is beneath. Hence, as regards man, who has God above him, charity which unites him to God, is greater than mercy, whereby he supplies the defects of his neighbour. But of all the virtues which relate to our neighbour, mercy is the greatest, even as its act

surpasses all others, since it belongs to one who is higher and better to supply the defect of another, in so far as the latter is deficient (S. th. II-a II-ae, q. 30. a. 4).

When analysing the Church's extensive teaching on Divine Mercy, which manifests itself in forgiveness, one should recognise the context of this teaching at the very beginning. The fact of the matter is that the Church places God's Mercy on the foundation of His omnipotence. The Catechism of the Catholic Church—by stating first that “nothing is impossible for God” (cf. Gen 18:14; Lk 1:37; Mt 19) and by quoting Job's words: “I know that you can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted” (Job 42:2) (CCC 275)—shows that God can do anything unless He sets for Himself some limits for action, e.g., with regard to free creatures which He does not want to force through His omnipotence to do what is good. Firstly, a manifestation of the omnipotence is creation from nothingness, but also Providence and the work of redemption and sanctification of man, because “if we do not believe that God's love is almighty, how can we believe that the Father could create us, the Son redeem us and the Holy Spirit sanctify us?” (CCC 278). Therefore, in order to understand the significance of the issue under discussion, firstly, one should emphasise that both mercy and forgiveness as its form stem from God's omnipotence, as well as from the fact that He approaches man not so much to better his life on earth or to improve his well-being, but to sanctify and save him. Thus, mercy (which is best expressed in forgiveness) is His way of reaching man. The omnipotence is best expressed in mercy, however, mercy has so many forms and shades that it can be assumed that forgiveness is not the only form of God's mercy towards man. As the reflection in the Church on God's mercy towards man continues to deepen, there emerge more and more aspects of human life and God's actions which could be called a form of mercy. It is worth stopping for a while to reflect on the mutual relationship between widely understood man's “misery” and God's mercy.

If mercy is the response of love to the cry of misery and poverty, then it may be argued that nothingness in misery and poverty goes further than any miseries and poverty of existing beings and for this reason “nothingness” is the loudest cry towards God's merciful love, and the work of the creation of man is one of special examples of the response and the physical presence of the merciful love of God. In this sense, the existence of man and the existence of any creature are incomprehensible without God's merciful love.²

² Walerian SŁOMKA, “Miłosierdzie w chrześcijańskiej wizji człowieka” [Mercy in the

That results not only from the essence of God, but also from the human condition. Man, having been brought into existence from nothing, does not represent a fulfilled world, but an entity capable of self-determination and self-improvement, a potential entity. Man brought into existence from the gift of merciful love can be fulfilled in his capabilities only through experiencing the gift of merciful love. While being a potential and dependent entity, man continues to be a cry, an appeal to the merciful love of God the Creator and other people, without whom he cannot become a man to the extent of his ability, he cannot become perfect to the extent which he is called to aspire to by the perfection of the Creator, but in his development and call to perfection there is something that man needs from God most of all, it is His forgiveness. In this sense, experiencing merciful love is a condition for the human entity to come into being: "For the creation without the Creator ceases to exist."³ However, after man's coming into existence, in all of his development and call to perfection there is something that man needs from God above all: it is His forgiveness. Therefore, if the original form of the merciful love of God is the creation of man, then forgiveness could be considered as its final form, which leads man until the last day of his life spent on earth, which accompanies him in his daily ups and downs, so that at the end of his life, at his own request for all the instances of unfaithfulness committed by him in his lifetime to be forgiven, he can hear from God: "today you will be with me in paradise" (cf. Lk 23:43).

In order for God's mercy, as manifested in forgiveness, to yield desired fruit in man, it still must be accepted. The "acceptance" is referred to as trust, and the more total and more absolute the trust is, the greater spiritual fruit it bears. God revealing Himself as "Rich in mercy" invites every person to trust in this mercy completely. This can be referred to as another commandment: if the most important one is "you shall love...", then in the context of the mercy expressed through forgiveness, one can formulate another important commandment: "you shall trust me, you shall entrust your life to Me." Apart from the clearly formulated commandment of love, there emerges here a sort of "the commandment of hope." Christ walking on water and rescuing Peter tells him: "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" (Mt 14:22-23). Peter, after all, was not an atheist, but his faith was not a trust

Christian Vision of Man], in *Miłosierdzie w postawie ludzkiej* [Mercy in Human Attitude], Homo Meditans 5 (Lublin, 1989), 69.

³ Ibid. Cf. DCC, 36.

yet. He would learn that at a later time. Aren't the words "Jesus, I trust in you", which Jesus commanded St. Faustine to paint, a summary of this trust? Weren't they painted specifically to be carved in the hearts of the people who would gaze at the painting? One can go so far as to say that God gave man His mercy and forgiveness, but at the same time He gave him an instruction on what the first (but not the only) response to this gift should be: the first response is trust.

Many thinkers, philosophers and psychologists⁴ have developed a strong reasoning for the need for forgiveness existing in man. N. Échivard emphasises that the role of every good father involves two elements in particular: *demanding* and *forgiving*. Both of them make up the father's goodness, i.e., the two elements make it possible to talk about someone as being a good or bad father. Without demands "the father's love" cannot truly indicate a direction nor teach how to make a choice. Without demands, there is no true forgiveness either. The authoress claims that it is not enough for a small child to get forgiveness from its mother, but it is necessary for the child to get forgiveness from its father because without the father's forgiveness the world is a morass (in which the child feels insecure) or a ruin (from which the child would like to escape as soon as possible). The good father's forgiveness, however, reconciles the child's heart with the whole world, filling it with new joy and innocence. The father's forgiveness is a strong manifestation of the sense of life, its hidden essence: love and faithfulness. The voice and the hand of the father, the first man met, present—or deform—the image of the God Father as the Source, the Principle, as the Rock, the Way and transforming Forgiveness.⁵ The theology of both the Old and the New Testament leaves no doubt: God as the Father reaches towards man in his great need for forgiveness.

⁴ See, inter alia, Dennis LINN and Matthew LINN, *Uzdrowianie ludzkich zranień poprzez pięć etapów przebaczenia* [Healing Life's Hurts: Healing Memories Through Five Stages of Forgiveness], trans. A. Bożek (Kraków, 1993).

⁵ See Nicole ÉCHIVARD, *Kobieto, kim jesteś?* [Woman, Who Are You?], trans. J. Grosfeld (Poznań, 1987), 156–157.

II. FORGIVENESS AS A FORM MERCY IN INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS

At the beginning of the discussion on the value of forgiveness as a form of mercy in interpersonal relations, it is worth mentioning that the evangelical perspective, which constitutes the main strand of the present reflection, is not the only one that exists. Indeed, there are entirely different views, the views which shift common, mostly positive assessments of these human (but also divine) qualities. Fridrich Nietzsche considered the Christian morality to be a degeneration, whereas forgiveness and mercy—in his opinion—constituted a weakness, not a merit, and his “immoralism” assumes the removal of the category of good and evil, harm and forgiveness. In his view, compassion has a “depressing” effect, and he who compassionates, loses his energy. As S. Kowalczyk claims, “his [Nietzsche’s—note of the author, A.R.] negation of God resulted, inter alia, from the German philosopher’s passionate antipathy to the idea of mercy.”⁶ As Nietzsche claimed, the evangelical God of love and mercy had already been “killed” in people’s hearts and one should not try to prove that it was otherwise. His apotheosis of biological vitality, fitness, sensuality of competition went hand in hand with irony directed at anything that might even resemble compassion for someone’s weakness. In his view, it is egoism that is a sign of human health, while the attitude of compassion and mercy constitutes a sign of biological degeneration or a psychological illusion. Consequently, as S. Kowalczyk points out, “aversion to the idea of mercy, visible in all of F. Nietzsche’s writings, led him to an open apology of cruelty.”⁷ Obviously, F. Nietzsche is not the only thinker who did not approve of mercy and forgiveness at all, but he despised them. The two world wars and many social phenomena, as well as the apotheosis of “a tough man” in contemporary culture, the media, film productions of the recent years—all this demonstrates that fascination with war, violence, cruelty and horror, which is the opposite to merciful love that man is called to by God. It also seems that apart from an open contempt for the idea of forgiveness and compassion, in today’s world we are facing a phenomenon which

⁶ Stanisław KOWALCZYK, “Konsekwencja zanegowania miłości i miłosierdzia w postawie ludzkiej” [The Consequences of Negating Love and Mercy in the Human Attitude], in *Miłosierdzie w postawie ludzkiej* [Mercy in the Human Attitude], Homo Meditans 5 (Lublin, 1989), 236.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 238.

is even worse: indifference. The attitude of indifference is related to the perception of the world, but also—which seems important for the spiritual condition of mankind—to the valuation of man and things. Contemporary man often relieves himself from ethical categories, valuation, decision-making. Ethics is replaced by aesthetics: ethical choices and ethical valuation are becoming indifferent (Am I a good man? Are my actions good?) and aesthetics is taking their place (Do I look nice? How do I present myself?). The indifference results in an inner void, because only ethical choices make the man, not his demeanour or appearance.⁸

Moving beyond non-Christian concepts, it should be strongly emphasised that mercy, which God calls man to on the pages of the Bible, is not only a request, a proposal, a suggestion nor an instruction on the part of God. Mercy is a commandment and in a sense *the sine qua non* of salvation. By giving man forgiveness, as a form of mercy, God firmly demands that man should give the same to his brother and sister, because otherwise—just like Jesus Himself described it metaphorically in the parable about this subject, the merciless debtor who did not show mercy to his brother “was turned over to the torturers”, and Jesus added immediately “So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses” (Mt 18:35).

Therefore, forgiveness as a form of mercy is not a proposal, but “a new commandment” which was announced by Christ under certain specific circumstances. Christ utters it several hours before His death, then it is His “last will”, a sort of testament. The last will of a dying man is a sacred thing and it is respected in all cultures of the world. In our culture we also have written testaments, which have legal and binding value and always apply to everyone. The above context is aimed at making one aware of the power and fundamental importance of this new commandment. It becomes not only “the new” but also “the greatest” commandment (Mk 12:31).

By giving the “commandment” of merciful love and its special form, which is forgiveness, God points out to man, as many as seven times, the way to find fulfilment in his call to happiness: “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy” (Mt 5:7). The fruit of mercy shown is joy and peace which constitute an anticipation of eternal joy. Such a strong call to do mercy is not a particular privilege of man, but, in fact, it is his duty. The

⁸ See Maria GOŁĘBIEWSKA, *Demontaż atrakcji* [Disassembly of Attraction] (Gdańsk, 2003), 83–93.

call was clearly formulated by Jesus for those who believed in Him, but the duty is explained by the very nature of the human condition and the human existence and in this sense it is comprehensible for every person of good will. For if we do not exist and we do not come into existence without experiencing merciful love, then we must not deny merciful love towards anybody. This would be not only ingratitude, but also, in a sense, a refusal to get forgiveness in the future. The call to give mercy like the Heavenly Father constitutes a call to man to fulfil his highest capabilities. If God most fully reveals His greatness in mercy, then by analogy man cannot find fulfilment, be perfect and great without giving mercy like God.⁹ Another motive which undoubtedly increases the importance of the duty to give mercy through forgiveness is the fact that Christ, as the Giver of “the greatest commandment”, identifies Himself with everybody who in any way needs mercy. Therefore, the idea of “mercy given” is in its essence not so much anthropocentric as Christocentric. When referring to Christ’s prophecy of the Last Judgement (Mt 25:31–43), we notice that those who are on the right side of Christ are surprised by His words and ask when they saw Him and showed Him merciful love. It is then that they find out about Christ’s identification with every person in need.

The attitude of forgiving is given particular prominence in the model of Christian spirituality which is presented to us by a great deal of saints, Christian writers, etc.. It follows directly from the commandment of love, and it has its saving, personal and social dimension. The attitude of forgiving and remitting trespasses of others determines at the same time what distinguishes the Christian perfection from any other model of perfection in other religious or cultural traditions. Thus, forgiving enemies as a form of Christian mercy should be referred to as the greatest radicalism of love, the main moral and spiritual attribute of a Christian. It seems that this form of mercy is much more difficult and thus more distinctive of a Christian than, for example, charity-benevolent activities. The radicalism of love visible in forgiveness is also more authentic for persons we go to with the intention of “evangelising” them. And, conversely, any form of revenge, cruelty or unforgiveness disqualifies the evangelizer completely.¹⁰

⁹ W. SŁOMKA, “Miłosierdzie w chrześcijańskiej...” [Mercy in Christian ...], 75–76.

¹⁰ For the authenticity of love, see Hans Urs von BALTHASAR, *Wiarygodna jest tylko miłość* [Authentic is Only Love], trans. E. Piotrowski (Kraków, 1997).

It should also be added that forgiveness as a virtue resulting from mercy is not just one of the virtues, it is not a single act, a behaviour. It is something more than that, it is an overall attitude which involves the whole man and permanently shapes all his relations and actions.

In the definition of “the attitude” we read that it is “a mindset”, “a readiness”, organised by experience and having a targeted or dynamic impact on an individual’s reactions towards everybody (emphasis of the author—A.R) objects or situations, which the condition is related to. It is, as I. Niewiadomska writes, a relatively permanent and consistent organisation of knowledge, feelings and behavioural patterns of an individual, related to a particular object or a class of objects. The permanence of the attitude makes it possible to predict a person’s reactions towards particular situations or objects.¹¹ The significance of the truth that forgiveness is not only a virtue but an attitude, is also emphasised by another definition of the attitude which determines the attitude with respect to the intellectual-cognitive, emotional-evaluative and behavioural aspect, i.e., oriented towards behaviour and actions. Therefore, the attitude is always a dynamic way of being of the subject towards an object. However, the relation between the subject and an object discussed here is not a sort of a single act, but it constitutes a permanent disposition acquired over a long process of experience or transforming repentance. Naturally, this does not mean that the attitude does not evolve, but that as a permanent disposition—the position adopted and constant readiness to act with regard to a particular object—it characterises the personality of a given person to such an extent that it is possible to predict their behaviour in the face of particular objects of their reference.¹²

Forgiveness as a form of mercy, as it is such a multifaceted attitude, requires equally multifaceted and constant efforts then, so as to develop in man’s heart. John Paul II put the dynamic nature of this development very aptly.

¹¹ Iwona NIEWIADOMSKA, “Postawa” [Attitude], in *Leksykon Duchowości Katolickiej* [The Lexicon of Catholic Spirituality], ed. M. Chmielewski (Lublin–Kraków, 2002), 684.

¹² See Stanisław URBAŃSKI, “Ks. prof. dr hab. Walerian Słomka – teolog, uczyony, humanista” [The Reverend Professor Walerian Słomka Ph.D. – theologian, scholar, humanist], in *Bóg jest miłością. Księga Jubileuszowa ku czci Księdza Profesora Waleriana Słomki z okazji pięćdziesięciolecia święceń kapłańskich* [God is Love. The Jubilee Book in Honour of the Reverend Professor Walerian Słomka on the Occasion of the Fiftieth Anniversary of His Being Ordained to the Priesthood], ed. M. Chmielewski (Lublin, 2006), 20–21.

This most vitally evangelical process is not only a single spiritual breakthrough but the whole lifestyle, a significant quality of the Christian vocation. It consists in constant discovering and persistent, despite all difficulties of psychological and social nature, embodying of *love as a unifying and at the same time supporting force: merciful love*, which by its nature is creative love. In people's mutual relationships, merciful love never remains an act or a one-sided process. (DiM 14)

The process of growing mature to adopt the attitude of forgiving has been discussed in a very interesting way by one of contemporary spiritual writers, H. Nouwen. He determines the way and the aim of spiritual maturation as a process of moving from identification with the younger and elder son from The Parable of the Prodigal Son to identification with the father. By referring to his own experience, the author writes that it was much easier for him to always identify with one of the sons, rather than with the father. He writes that even his theological and spiritual formation did not prevent him from perceiving God the Father as someone dangerous and appalling. Everything he had learnt about the love of the Father did not allow him to go beyond thinking about the authority that has power over him and that can use it if it wished to do so. Somehow, the love of God was limited by his fear of God's power. He believed it was reasonable to keep a safe distance although he felt a great desire for closeness. Although he felt he was both the elder and the younger son, he could not continue to feel this way as, more and more, he felt internally prompted to be the father because no father and no mother has become who they are without having been a son or a daughter earlier. Every son or a daughter must consciously go beyond their childhood and be a father or a mother for others. It is a fundamental step to complete a spiritual journey towards inner maturity. The author claims that this was precisely Rembrandt's intent while he was working on the painting *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. He did not place the father in the centre of the painting, however, it is he who constitutes the focal point of the presented event. All the light in the painting emanates from the father, all the attention is concentrated on him. Rembrandt, in accordance with the Gospel parable, expected us to focus our attention on the father, whom he considers the central figure, from whom the light is beaming on the other figures.¹³ In his interesting concept, Nouwen builds his vision of spiritual maturing on the

¹³ See Henri J.M. NOUWEN, *Powrót syna marnotrawnego* [The Return of the Prodigal Son] (Poznań, 1992).

basis of growing mature to adopt the attitude of forgiving as a form of mercy. Thus, when growing mature in spiritual matters, a Christian is supposed to become more and more like the father, and most closely the process will be visible through showing mercy and forgiveness towards others. Undoubtedly, it is Nouwen's unique contribution to the understanding of spiritual growth, as over the centuries various authors understood the process in widely differing ways.

III. CONTEMPORARY PROBLEMS RELATED TO FORGIVENESS IN THE CONTEXT OF MERCY

Forgiveness is such a multifaceted attitude that there appear new questions and challenges connected with its shaping and expressing. The new challenges are related to both the development of humanities and certain new phenomena in the Church. It can be said that there are at least a few problems which are, or soon will be, a challenge and a subject of theological, psychological or anthropological reflection: 1. *Self-forgiveness*; 2. *Forgiveness to God*; 3. *Forgiveness in the context of the so-called intergenerational sins*; 4. *Forgiveness as one of the spiritual works of mercy: new forms and challenges*; 5. *Forgiveness as a form of mercy in the context of the ministry of a confessor and a spiritual leader*.

1. *Self-forgiveness*. The problem is indicated by priests who accompany, among others, the persons who have committed the sin of abortion. After they have realised the seriousness of the committed act, during longer conversations or retreats, the persons shall be prepared to experience the sacrament of penance well. However, spiritual leaders point out that in spite of receiving sacramental forgiveness these persons, overwhelmed by the immense sense of guilt, are not able to forgive themselves what they have done. It is an issue which certainly has its psychological dimension, but the spiritual theology may also have a lot to say in this respect: the process of "self-forgiving" may be long, but, as it seems, it proceeds much better if it is accompanied by prayer and deep understanding of the mystery of forgiveness on the part of God. The issue of the ability to self-forgive is of great importance here as it influences the ability to forgive others, and it is, after all, one of the main elements of the Christian morality and spirituality.

2. *Forgiveness to God.* It would be very hard to find in the Bible a character who—subjectively feeling hurt by God—would face the problem of “forgiving God.” However, in the context of Christian forgiveness, it is worth bringing up the issue because it may turn out that it affects many people who, when suffering, feel a sort of anger or resentment towards God, and they consider Him guilty of the sufferings experienced or even their perpetrator. The above feelings create a false image of God, which is not reflected in the attitudes of people of The Old, nor, all the more so, of the New Testament, they are rather depictions of a certain emotional state of a person who is not always responsible for the state of their feelings. However, it is worth discussing the subject both in the context of the psychology of religion and the spiritual theology, because there is a risk here that the feeling of “the anger with God” may shape the whole attitude of man who will finally conclude that God, to a greater or lesser extent, is responsible for the suffering of the world. However, it is worth addressing the subject both in the context of psychology and theology. When addressing this subject, contemporary literature draws here rational lines between theological principles, i.e., that God is the source of all good and He cannot be the source of evil, and emotional states which can be characterised as anger, defiance, anger towards God, and then a way to “forgiveness to God” as a method of reforming the relationship with God.¹⁴

3. *Forgiveness in the context of the so-called intergenerational sins.*¹⁵ Recently, there has appeared a new form of administering the sacrament of penance in the form of the so-called ‘gate locking’ confession. The essence of this confession consists in locking “the gates” which the sin (personal or “intergenerational”) opened for Satan, giving him some control over man. A characteristic feature of “the gate locking confession” is a very extended examination of conscience and a prayer for deliverance, which sometimes takes the form of a ceremonial exorcism. An important issue in practising the gate locking confession is an examination through a very comprehensive list of questions, at as many as three levels (the penitent, his family and ancestors), aimed at determining whether the sins committed in the past are still opened “gates” for an evil ghost, which should be locked. In this context, the

¹⁴ See, e.g., Piotr GAŚSIOROWSKI, *Wybaczyć Bogu [To Forgive God]* (Kraków, 2014).

¹⁵ For more information, see: Robert De GRANDIS and Linda SCHUBERT, *Uzdrowienie międzypokoleniowe [Intergenerational Healing]*, trans. B. Włodarczyk (Łódź, 2012).

sins not committed by the penitent also become the subject of forgiveness on the part of God. It is implied here, in fact, that descendants suffer the consequences of the sins committed by ancestors, which would be a reference to the belief of the Old Testament on the collective responsibility. It is reflected in the old saying in the form of a proverb: “The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on the edge” (Jer 31:29, Ezra 18:2). The Theological Commission of the Catholic University of Lublin pointed out in a special statement that the prophets who quoted it, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, however, unanimously claimed that the principle of collective responsibility was wrong and it should not be applied (Jer 31:30; Ezra 18:3–4). After all, nobody is held responsible for the trespasses of their ancestors. While the story of people, the entire nation, is the story of sin, it is the attitude of every single person in a given situation that decides in matters concerning death or spiritual life (cf. Deut 24:16), because responsibility or sin is not collective.¹⁶ In the spirit of individual responsibility, everyone is personally responsible for their own actions before God. It is fully confirmed by the New Testament, in which we do not come across a case of someone referring to the sinful past of their ancestors, in order to justify their current bad behaviour. At the end of its statement, the Theological Commission formulated the following guidelines on the matter: “Therefore, instead of locking Satan out of *the gates*, one should make even more efforts to open the penitent to Christ, and in Him to the newness of Christian life, so that *God’s seed* (the Word of God, grace, the Holy Spirit) could remain in him, because such a person cannot keep on sinning (cf. 1 Jn 3:9).” Forgiveness as a form of mercy also towards this phenomenon must be understood in the biblical and ecclesial spirit and the issues will probably be addressed by new research.

4. *Forgiveness as one of the spiritual works of mercy: new forms and challenges.* In the bull *Misericordiae vultus*, Pope Francis wrote: “It is my burning desire that, during this Jubilee, the Christian people may reflect on the *corporal and spiritual works of mercy*. It will be a way to reawaken our conscience, too often grown dull in the face of poverty. And let us enter more deeply into the heart of the Gospel where the poor have a special experience of God’s mercy. Jesus introduces us to these works of mercy in his preaching so that we can know whether or not we are living as his disciples.

¹⁶ <http://niedziela.pl/artikul/14691/Komisja-Teologiczna-KUL-w-sprawie-tzw> [21.12.2015]

Let us rediscover these *corporal works of mercy*: [...]. And let us not forget the *spiritual works of mercy*: to counsel the doubtful, instruct the ignorant, admonish sinners, comfort the afflicted, forgive offences, bear patiently those who do us ill, and pray for the living and the dead.” (MV). Forgiveness as a form of mercy may—as it seems—refer to both “forgive offences” and “bear patiently those who do us ill.” Therefore, the attitude of forgiving is consistent with all of the works of mercy and it should be further emphasised because the very term “work” implies a sort of material and visible gesture, whereas forgiveness is, first, an inner act. The importance of the works of mercy will probably be explored in the Jubilee Year of Mercy, therefore, there are grounds for hoping that the two works, which refer to forgiveness, will find their more and more important place in the reflection on and practice of the Christian life.

5. *Forgiveness as a form of mercy in the context of the ministry of a confessor and a spiritual leader.* In the Post-Conciliar Church, in which the call to holiness is more and more strongly emphasised, one can observe the formation of many new lay groups and communities. One of the elements of the formation in these groups is the spiritual leadership, sometimes combined with and sometimes separated from the sacrament of penance and reconciliation. The strong development of spiritual leadership is also connected with a growing interest, among the laity, in Ignatian retreats, which undoubtedly contribute to the understanding of this practice. Among many considerations and requirements related to these issues, there emerges a question about the specific form of this ministry as the ministry of mercy: how can one carry it out without trivialising the idea of mercy down to consolation and unconditional acceptance of everything that the penitent does or does not do, and, on the other hand, how can one carry out the service of a confessor or a spiritual leader, in order for the penitent to be able to experience in it the mercy of the Heavenly Father? The confessor must not be only a dispenser of the sacrament, but he is supposed to be a father, which requires at the same time kindness and courage, determination and subtlety. He is also supposed to be a teacher, which requires knowledge but also openness to dialogue.¹⁷ All the requirements are combined in the ministry of mercy, in which the peni-

¹⁷ See Stanisław MOJEK, “Miłosierdzie Boże w sprawowaniu sakramentu pojednania” [The Divine Mercy in Administering the Sacrament of Reconciliation], in *Miłosierdzie w postawie ludzkiej* [Mercy in Human Attitude], Homo Meditans 5 (Lublin, 1989), 129–134.

tent enters the sphere of the mercy of God Himself and His forgiveness. With the quickly changing mentality of people and the lack of the Christian formation, the requirements are really high and they require reflection and experience. This is where there emerges a demand for multifaceted formation regarding the service of a confessor or a spiritual guide, because in the case of defects in this sphere the faithful may be harmed in their appropriate understanding of the mercy of God Himself.

CONCLUSION

Forgiveness is not only an act or a virtue, but man's overall attitude which can be formed in him as a result of the so-called "mercy experienced" from God, as well as due to his hard work to improve himself. Since forgiving God is the source of this virtue and this attitude, one should constantly strive to enter as far as possible into the mystery of the mercy of the Father. Therefore, by launching the Jubilee Year of Mercy Pope Francis does not first invite to forgive or do works of mercy, but at the very beginning he leads the Church to contemplate on the mercy of the Father: "At times we are called to gaze even more attentively on mercy so that we may become a more effective sign of the Father's action in our lives" (MV). According to the Pope, the current Year of Mercy is this very time. The above study and the reflections contained in it point out to forgiveness as a form of the Christian mercy. The conclusion which can be drawn here is an observation on the complexity of the issues. The common understanding of the Christian forgiveness is, as it seems, oversimplified, and it reduces the complex issues to one simple act. However, in order to understand why Christ with the whole of His attitude and teaching persistently convinced people about forgiving one another, it is necessary to avoid reductionism and try to understand what forgiveness really is and what fruit it bears, both for the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven. Undoubtedly, the issues will be further explored not only by spiritual theologians, but also by psychologists, philosophers, artists and thinkers.

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PRZEBACZENIE JAKO FORMA MIŁOSIERDZIA CHRZEŚCIJAŃSKIEGO

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Artykuł składa się z trzech części. Część pierwsza podejmuje temat przebaczenia jako formy miłosierdzia Bożego; jest więc teologalnym osadzeniem podjętego tematu. Przebaczenie jako forma miłosierdzia w relacjach międzyludzkich to część druga artykułu; ukazuje ona horyzontalny wymiar idei miłosierdzia. Część trzecia poświęcona jest współczesnym problemom związanym z przebaczeniem w kontekście miłosierdzia, a są to takie problemy, jak: przebaczenie samemu sobie, przebaczenie Bogu, przebaczenie w kontekście tzw. grzechów międzypokoleniowych, przebaczenie jako jeden z uczynków miłosierdzia co do duszy: nowe formy i wyzwania, przebaczenie jako forma miłosierdzia w kontekście posługi spowiednika i kierownika duchowego.

Słowa kluczowe: przebaczenie; miłosierdzie; Jubileuszowy Rok Miłosierdzia.