

Forgiveness expert explores religious dimension

by [Francis X. Rocca](#) in the [March 22, 2011](#) issue

For more than a quarter of a century, psychologist Robert D. Enright has been a pioneer in the scientific study of forgiveness—the kind of guy *Time* magazine once dubbed "the forgiveness trailblazer."

Enright

has probed the mental and physical benefits that incest survivors, adult children of alcoholics, cardiac patients and others can enjoy if they choose to show mercy to those who have done them wrong.

His

work has taken him to global hotspots—to a school program of "forgiveness education" for Catholic and Protestant children in Northern Ireland and to a project to promote e-mail dialogue among Jewish, Muslim and Christian children in Israel and Palestine.

But

while forgiveness carries strong associations with religion, at one time Enright supported his claims with empirical data alone, insisting that his method is usable by "theists and nontheists" alike.

The

study of forgiveness has nevertheless ended up nurturing Enright's own faith, ultimately bringing him back to the Roman Catholic Church of his youth. He is now preparing, for the first time, to make that faith explicit in his work.

Enright was not a churchgoer when he embarked on this line of research in 1985, but as he tells it, his discovery of the field that would define his career came in answer to a prayer.

Seeking to help a graduate student in search of a thesis topic, Enright decided while driving one day to ask God for a suggestion. He recalls that "one word came back: forgiveness."

Today, at least 1,000 academic researchers and "countless therapists" specialize in forgiveness studies, Enright said, but in 1985 a library search turned up not a single piece of scholarship on the subject in any of the social sciences.

Enright found himself drawn to the subject and began leading a seminar on forgiveness at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, where he was a tenured professor. Among the assigned readings for the seminar were selections from the scriptures of various religious traditions.

Those texts raised questions that led Enright back to Christianity—first to what he describes as a liberal Methodist church, then to an evangelical Protestant congregation and finally back to Catholicism.

A major turning point in both his spiritual development and his understanding of forgiveness, Enright said, was the death of his wife, Nancy, from kidney cancer in 2002. That ordeal, which left him a single father of two young boys, taught him the power of redemptive suffering.

"Forgiveness as Redemptive Suffering" is the working title of a book that Enright will be writing with his son Kevin, 23, a recent college graduate who plans to pursue graduate studies in philosophy. The book will be Enright's first major statement of how religious faith has informed and expanded his understanding of forgiveness.

"The Catholic Church and only the Catholic Church can tell us what forgiveness really is in the fullest sense: a uniting of your suffering with Christ's suffering, which we bear on behalf of those who have hurt us, for their salvation," he says.

The church has traditionally emphasized the sacramental aspect of forgiveness as something granted by God, Enright said. But over the last three decades, especially under Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI, he's seen a growing emphasis on "person-to-person forgiveness."

That emphasis has inspired a vision that Enright calls "The Church as Forgiving Community," which is also the title of a forthcoming book he is editing, with essays by psychologists, philosophers and theologians.

In making the case for forgiveness—including a February 28 lecture at Rome's Pontifical University of the Holy Cross—Enright recommends measures such as parish-based discussion groups on forgiveness and forgiveness-focused religious education for children.

Enright believes that forgiveness is also an essential part of the church's recovery from the clergy sexual abuse crisis, and he plans to raise that issue when he speaks next year at a eucharistic congress in Ireland, a country where the church has been hit especially hard by pedophilia scandals.

Anticipating passionate reactions from church critics, he stresses that forgiveness "does not mean letting bygones be bygones" or sparing abusive priests their just punishment. "But mercy tempers justice and makes it better," Enright said, even as it helps victims themselves to heal.

Along with its internal benefits to the church, Enright said, an emphasis on person-to-person forgiveness can bring new adherents into the fold. Just as many Westerners have adopted Eastern spiritual practices such as meditation and yoga, non-Catholics who are drawn to the church's methods of forgiveness could find themselves delving more deeply into the faith that spawned them.

"People start forgiving others and they say, 'Hey this is good stuff, it sets

me free and helps my relationships. What's the next step?" Enright said.

In a "pragmatic, show-me-what-works age," forgiveness has powerful evangelical appeal, Enright said. "But this goes way beyond relaxation. It's surgery for the heart." —RNS