

INTRODUCTION

We all have a natural desire to be happy. But for most people one of the biggest obstacles to attaining happiness is resentment. Even those who seem to have almost everything they need to be happy may be rendered unhappy by a host of resentments that embitter their lives. It's easy to see how widespread this problem is: just look at the critical tone of so many conversations, the anger, the complaints and lamentations, the excuses, negative thoughts, frustrations, the distancing of person from person, family divisions, marriage breakdowns, eagerness for vindication or vengeance, labor disputes, social problems, and even conflicts between nations. We need to face up to this problem, analyze it, and try to find a solution.

Considering how widespread the problem is and how vitally important, it seems surprising that not much has been written about resentment. The subject is seldom discussed in depth. Rarely are the motives behind the many personal and collective conflicts arising from this evil examined. Perhaps this reflects an unconscious reluctance to confront a sad situation in which we all share in some way or another. Lacking a quick fix, we prefer to be silent.

It takes a certain daring to break this resistance and undertake to discuss resentment. Honesty obliges

me to point out that other people have had a hand in this present task, and without them I could not have carried it out. I refer particularly to the various groups that have taken part in the classes, conferences, and seminars I have given on this subject. Their contributions were crucial for correcting certain ideas, enriching others, and adding new ones.

The study of resentment demands that we clarify its nature, since the first step in solving any problem is to understand it. It's also necessary to analyze its manifestations and negative effects. But above all we need to offer specific solutions whose eminently positive focus will help to avoid future resentments while eliminating those one already suffers from. Such solutions, as we shall see, are varied and are based on the human and supernatural strengths that everyone has available: focusing one's intellect, strengthening one's will and character, properly channeling one's emotions, interior dispositions, values, and virtues, and finally relying on the help of God.

Above all, the most important means for resolving the problem of resentment is forgiveness, which in itself includes many complexities. Some people take forgiveness as a sign of weakness; others consider it opposed to reason because it goes against justice. Some think forgiveness must be conditioned on the settling of accounts or, still better, on the aggressor's making amends. Still others insist that they forgive but are not ready to forget; or consider it reasonable

to forgive only up to a certain point, or consider themselves unable to forgive a particular offense, even though they would like to. We shall address these attitudes more closely in what follows.

Difficult as it is to study forgiveness, it is even more difficult to live out this virtue in practice. Yet it is one of the most important resources available to us for the attainment of happiness. It can resolve, in a fundamental way, the principal obstacle to happiness: resentment.

In my view, human reason cannot explain forgiveness from a purely anthropological perspective. Only by turning to the supernatural order, with the help of theology, can one clarify certain facets of a subject which has an aspect of mystery. In the same way, in the practical order there are situations that can only be forgiven with divine help because forgiving them surpasses human strength.

The discussion of forgiveness that follows here aims to offer arguments that make it easier to practice by pointing to the benefits that derive from it as well as the path to happiness that opens up for someone truly disposed to forgive. I make one suggestion to the reader: to get the most out of what you are about to read, try to be sincere with yourself, especially when it comes to matters that touch on your own situation.

THE POISON OF RESENTMENT

The philosopher Max Scheler calls resentment “a self-poisoning of the mind”¹—that is to say, a poisoning of our interior that we do to ourselves. How can we avoid this poison or eliminate the resentments we already have? First, we have to understand their nature: what they are, where they come from, how they act within us.

Resentment usually appears as a reaction to a negative stimulus that wounds our “ego.” It’s usually a response to an offense or aggression. Obviously, not every offense produces resentment; but every resentment is preceded by an offense. Let us begin by analyzing the kinds of injuries we can receive and their characteristics.

The causes of resentment

The offense that causes resentment can be, first of all, someone’s *action* against me: a physical attack, insult, or slander. Secondly, it can take the form of an *omission*—when I don’t receive something I expect, such as an invitation, a thank-you for service rendered, recognition of an effort I’ve made. Third, unlike cases of action or omission, offense can be attributed not to a particular person, but to *circumstances*: thus,

¹ Max Scheler, *Ressentiment* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), p. 45.