

Forgiving Others and Ourselves



Christopher News Notes

**“FORGIVE US OUR TRESPASSES,
AS WE FORGIVE THOSE WHO
TRESPASS AGAINST US.”** We pray
these words at every Mass and
whenever we recite the Lord’s Prayer,
but how often do we really
understand their deep meaning? Even
the Catechism of the Catholic Church
calls this petition “astonishing.”

Is our own partaking in God’s mercy
truly dependent on how willing we
are to show mercy to others?
If so, forgiveness is something
we need to be practicing every
day of our lives, no matter
how challenging it is.

Forgiveness Takes Practice

"If we really want to love we must learn how to forgive."
—St. Teresa of Calcutta

The Catechism explains: "In refusing to forgive our brothers and sisters, our hearts are closed and their hardness makes them impervious to the Father's merciful love." So how do we open our hearts and let go of our grudges? There is wisdom in the stories of those who have found a way.

AJ Santiago can't remember a time when he and his father didn't clash. AJ felt like everything he said or did was wrong in his dad's eyes. Eventually, AJ stopped communicating with his father entirely.

As a young adult, AJ recognized that his broken relationship with his father was damaging his relationships with others. With the help of his mom, he found a class on forgiveness. Yes, a class! ESPERE, a movement to teach the skills of forgiveness and reconciliation, was founded by Colombian priest Fr. Leonel Narvaez, who believes better relationships lead to a more peaceful world.

AJ was surprised to find that forgiveness really could be learned. In a blog for the youth group Life Teen, he observed, "Forgiveness takes time, and it is a continuous way of life. Be patient with yourself and others. We mess up, we're human. Let's love others the way Christ loves us, through our messiness and deepest wrongdoings!"

As for AJ and his father, they are rebuilding their relationship with mutual respect. "I do know forgiveness began when I changed the way I treated him, and sometimes actions speak louder than words," noted AJ. "I am day by day growing closer and closer to him...which sprouted from me pulling the cancerous anger from inside and forgiving him in my heart."

Learning to forgive begins with a choice not to let small wounds and irritations fester in anger and bitterness. The choice does not depend on receiving an apology or a request for forgiveness; it is a gift we make not only to the one who has wronged us, but to ourselves.

Four Steps to Forgiving Ourselves

Writing in *Psychology Today*, Dr. Matthew James suggests this four-step process for forgiving ourselves. It works for forgiving others, too.

- 1. Identify and let go of the emotion associated with what we can't forgive.** "If we try to forgive ourselves for something without releasing the underlying emotion or belief we've attached to it, the forgiveness just doesn't take." Acknowledge feelings of guilt or shame, anger or hurt.
- 2. Release the hold the past has on us.** "Retain what you learned from the event but release everything else."
- 3. Be honest.** "In order to forgive ourselves, we first have to *admit* to ourselves that we blew it. We have to *take ownership* and acknowledge the flaw or mistake."
- 4. Come from a position of love.** "Many of us are much more critical of ourselves than we are of others. We'll give other people the benefit of the doubt, but won't give ourselves any slack at all." We need to grow in loving ourselves and others as God loves us.

Forgiving the Unforgivable

"He who knows how to forgive prepares for himself many graces from God. As often as I look upon the cross, so often will I forgive with all my heart."
—St. Faustina Kowalska

What about those sins and hurts that appear utterly unforgivable? What are we to do when a perpetrator is not in the least sorry, or when the act is so unspeakable it seems that even God would have trouble forgiving? There are models for this kind of radical forgiveness.

Immaculée Ilibagiza was 22 years old when her life in Rwanda became a nightmare. Overnight, neighbors and friends—caught up in genocidal intertribal violence—became assassins. Along with a group of young women, Immaculée spent 91 days hiding in a small bathroom, hearing the voices of people she knew calling for her to be slaughtered, as members of her family were, by machete-wielding mobs.

She spent almost all her time praying silently, but realized that the words of the Lord's Prayer rang hollow. Immaculée did not want to forgive. "I'm not strong enough to squash my hatred," she prayed, as recounted in her Christopher Award-winning 2006 memoir *Left to Tell*. "They've

wronged us all so much; my hatred is so heavy that it could crush me. Touch my heart, Lord, and show me how to forgive."

One night during her ordeal, Immaculée had a breakthrough. She realized that her hatred was ruining her trust in God. She began praying for those who had named her their enemy. "Their minds had been infected with the evil that had spread across the country, but their souls weren't evil," she wrote. "Despite their atrocities, they were children of God; I knew that I couldn't ask God to love me if I were unwilling to love His children."

After the violence had ended, Immaculée met with Felicien, the neighbor who had killed her mother and her brother. He was in prison, on trial for genocide. The jailer who arranged the meeting hoped that Immaculée would spit on Felicien. Instead, she forgave him. "Forgiveness," she said, "is all I have to give."

The prison guard who witnessed this was furious at her for doing what she did. His wife and children had been murdered, too, and he told her he planned to devote his life to hating the killers. Immaculée ran into him again one year later, and he told her, "I want to thank you for saving my life. The day you forgave that killer was the first time I even thought there was another possibility

than hatred.” Instead, he started teaching these murderers to be better people. And it was all because of what he saw Immaculée do. That moment taught her that the grace to forgive is available to anybody.

Many will tell you they find this grace and strength by looking at the Cross. There is the example of One most unforgivably betrayed and condemned, who said “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” If we cannot yet bring ourselves personally to forgive the unforgivable, let that, at least, be our prayer. Forgiving allows us to let go of hatred and bitterness, and restore our loving and trusting relationship with God, who is often the Person we really find unforgivable in our deepest pain.

Forgive Yourself, Too

“I think that if God forgives us we must forgive ourselves. Otherwise it is almost like setting up ourselves as a higher tribunal than Him.” —C.S. Lewis

Learning to forgive ourselves can be one of the most difficult lessons in mercy and love. Even when others have offered us forgiveness, even when we have confessed and received absolution for our sins, we may still be burdened by shame and self-hatred. Dr. Robert Stackpole, a theologian who writes on Divine Mercy, points out the importance of healing our memories when learning to forgive ourselves.

He writes, “Sometimes it seems as if our memory is poisoned and needs healing. It’s true...Entrust

that to God, too, every day. Ask Him to heal your memories on your road to heaven. And He will. Sometimes He will do so all at once; sometimes slowly and gradually.”

Self-forgiveness is especially difficult for women who have had an abortion. Writing at Aleteia, counselor Theresa Bonopartis shared the story of Mary, a woman who had confessed and been absolved, but could not “feel forgiven.”

Bonopartis writes, “Feelings and experiences are not reliable guides to the truth. Being forgiven and ‘feeling’ forgiven are two very different things. Part of the problem is that most of us can point to few genuine examples of forgiveness in our personal life. All too often, people dispense forgiveness in grudging, calibrated doses. The right words are said, but the heart nurses its hurt. It can’t let go and be free with acceptance and love.”

If we have few experiences of real forgiveness and reconciliation, Bonopartis says, we find it hard to recognize them from others (and from God) – and to extend them to ourselves. Mary Ellen, another woman counseled by Bonopartis, shares her advice for those who have trouble forgiving themselves.

“It is crucial,” she says, “that they make an act of the will to trust God’s mercy no matter what... Having the support of others—through ministry, professional counseling and/or spiritual direction—is essential in this process. I am learning Mercy, because it is a process and a journey into the kind of deep love and forgiveness of myself—and others—that I can only begin to grasp.”

In the end, forgiveness requires daily practice. But it comes with immeasurable rewards


“It’s better to light one candle than to curse the darkness.”

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“Forgiveness is not a sentiment—it is not ‘feeling good’—on the contrary, mercy is the true force that can save man and the world from the cancer that is sin, bad morality or bad spirituality. Only love fills up the emptiness...that evil opens in hearts and in history.”

—Pope Francis