

The Gift of Reconciliation



Christopher News Notes

ESTRANGED FAMILY MEMBERS.

Broken friendships. Bitter fights with strangers. These situations can be all too common, resulting in feelings of regret—and a longing for reconciliation. For the Christian, reconciliation is a central tenet of our faith, modeled by Jesus. It recognizes God's order above the damage caused by human sinfulness. What's most powerful about reconciliation is that it takes both sides in a dispute to set aside hurts, ego, and being 'right,' to restore what was lost.

In addition, one of our tasks as Christians is to bring reconciliation into the world by modeling it ourselves through giving and accepting forgiveness, offering our own repentance, and seeking healing to bring about God's kingdom.

As priest and theologian Henri Nouwen once wrote, "You're sent into this world to be a people of reconciliation. You are sent to heal, to break down the walls between you and your neighbors, locally, nationally, and globally. Before all distinctions, the separations, and the walls built on foundations of fear, there was a unity in the mind and heart of God. Out of that unity, you are sent into this world for a little while to claim that you and every other human being belongs to the same God of Love who lives from eternity to eternity."

Reconciliation in the Bible

Perhaps the most memorable reconciliation story in the Bible is the parable of the prodigal son. A young man demands his inheritance early and quickly wastes it on immoral living. Realizing the error of his ways, he comes home, not seeking to be restored to his former state, but hoping his father can summon enough mercy to hire him as a servant.

His father, however, sees him coming down the road and runs to meet him, instructing that a fine robe be put on him and a great feast be held to celebrate his return. In this parable, father and son are reconciled, and we see how God extends His mercy to all of us.

The Catholic sacrament of reconciliation—or confession—is based on this understanding. Only by owning up to our faults can we begin the process of restoration. As the author C.S. Lewis once wrote, "A Christian is not a man who never goes wrong, but a man who is enabled to repent and pick himself up and begin over again after each stumble—because the Christ-life is inside him, repairing him all the time, enabling him to repeat (in some degree) the kind of voluntary death which Christ Himself carried out."

A Drunk Driver's Repentance

One night in 1992, Joe Avila was driving drunk on the freeway in Fresno, California, when he caused a crash that killed teenager Amy Wall. Joe fled the scene but was eventually captured and arrested. Joe felt suicidal after the crash, prompting him to check himself into a sobriety program before his trial for Amy's death. It was there, Joe explained, that God "put some people in my life who made me understand what reconciliation was and forgiveness was."

As shared on *PrisonFellowship.org*, a website dedicated to prison ministry, Joe pleaded guilty and was sentenced to 12 years in prison. There, he turned his life around. Joe served the prison's hospice patients, he kept up his relationship with his two daughters, and he deepened his commitment to becoming a better Christian. In 1999, after serving more than seven years, Joe was released.

Not long afterward, he heard that Amy's brother, Derek, wanted to meet with him. For years, Joe had prayed that God would help him reconcile with Amy's family. At that first meeting, Derek told Joe about all the things he and Amy used to do together, how much he loved her, and that he had thought Joe was a monster who should get the electric chair. But then Derek explained that his family had been following Joe's progress behind bars. They knew he was trying to make amends and improve his life. Joe told Derek something he had long wanted to say: "I'm really sorry for what I've done, and I hope that someday you can forgive me." Derek did forgive him. Joe's prayers for reconciliation were answered.

Joe admits it was painful to seek forgiveness from the Walls. He watched several hours of home video footage of Amy, sent by the family, so he could understand how special she was to them and what a tragedy it was when he took her life. He met with Amy's parents to express his remorse, and his relationship with the Wall family continued to grow.

Both Joe and Derek were asked to participate in a Restorative Justice Council event in front of hundreds of people. The night of the event, Amy's

Christ Calls Us to Reconcile

Catholic spiritual writer Thomas Merton thought that by learning to forgive and ask for forgiveness, we could take part in the continued ministry of Christ. Merton wrote: "God has left sin in the world in order that there may be forgiveness: not only the secret forgiveness by which He Himself cleanses our souls, but the manifest forgiveness by which we have mercy on one another and so give expression to the fact that He is living, by His mercy, in our own hearts."

father, Rick, approached Joe, hugged him, and said, "I love you, Joe." Years later, Rick's actions and words that evening still affect Joe. "I killed his daughter," Joe said, his voice thick with emotion, "and he was able to give me a hug and say, 'I love you.' And that is a true testament to the miracle of reconciliation and why Christ did die on the cross."

Reconciliation Within Marriage

Michael and Michele Stewart met in high school, fell in love, married after a whirlwind romance, and had two sons. Sounds perfect—yet it was anything but. Writing in *Guideposts*, Michele recalled the story of how their marriage fell apart. She was a night owl who wanted to go out frequently, as if she was still single. Michael wanted to stay home. They fought more and, eventually, Michele asked for a divorce.

Fast forward to years later, both Michael and Michele had started going to church, separately. At first, Michele thought she didn't belong in church, but the message of how Christ made a sacrifice for every person on earth hit home. She stopped going out at night and began to read the Bible, reflecting on her past decisions. She regretted pushing Michael away and began to pray for him. One day, when Michael stopped by to pick up the boys, he sheepishly told Michele that his pastor suggested the couple pursue reconciliation.

Michele happily agreed.

They began dating again, praying together and asking one another for forgiveness. They got to know each other better and learned that their love was stronger than their regrets and past decisions. After some time, Michael and Michele remarried and reunited their family.

Reconciliation Within the Family

When Matt Palmer was growing up, his parents took him to church, where he learned the lessons of the Gospel. However, his father often had strained relationships with other family members, which included a nearly 30-year stint of not speaking with one brother.

Writing at *CatholicReview.org*, Matt said, “Dad had one best friend—the grudge.” Eventually that tendency to cut people out of his life extended to Matt and Matt’s siblings. After not hearing from their father for 15 years, they received a call from their uncle, who had recently made amends with his brother, telling Matt and his siblings that their father was dying. Matt and his sister went to visit him in the hospital.

Matt recalled, “I had an anxiety attack in the bathroom of the hospital lobby. I was scared to face his judgment and rejection. Eventually, with the love and encouragement of family, I made it upstairs and took a deep breath as I walked through his door. He recognized my sister right away, but took a minute to register my face given the years and

weight. He looked into my eyes and said, ‘Hey, Matt!’ He then acted like we had just seen one another a few days prior. The past didn’t matter. He just cared that I was there.”

For decades, Matt’s father wouldn’t partake in the sacrament of reconciliation. When a priest visited the hospital and convinced him to try, it was a transformative moment. With tears rolling down his cheek, Matt’s father revealed, “It all came pouring out. I was so scared. But [the priest] just listened to me and didn’t judge me. Things used to be so harsh. I think things are changing...It felt good.”

“In that moment,” wrote Matt, “Dad was my primary educator in the faith, reminding me of the overwhelming mercy available in the sacrament of reconciliation. He died a week later, with my sister and me by his side. He could barely get words out, but prayed along with the priest who anointed him in his final hours.”

The reconciliation with his family had cracked open the door to grace for Matt’s father, allowing him to accept the forgiveness that is offered in the sacrament. Watching his father take that spiritual journey gave Matt one of the greatest educations about the Catholic sacraments that he could ever experience.

Each of us, too, can open the door to grace and reconciliation in our lives by being humble enough to acknowledge our faults—and courageous enough to ask for forgiveness or offer it to someone else. Embarking on this spiritual journey will bring us into a closer union with the God of Love who created us, as well as our fellow human beings. It is a journey worth taking.



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

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President: Mary Ellen Robinson
Editor-in-Chief: Tony Rossi

The Christophers

5 Hanover Square, New York, NY 10004
212-759-4050, ext. 241

mail@christophers.org • www.christophers.org

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“All this is from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ.”

—2 Corinthians 5:18-20