

“Clearly, faithfully, and engagingly presents a Catholic approach to the beautiful blessing of forgiveness.”

— From the Foreword by Cardinal Donald Wuerl

FORGIVENESS

A CATHOLIC APPROACH



R. SCOTT HURD

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By R. Scott Hurd

Foreword by
Cardinal Donald Wuerl



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Foreword

“**C**ourage, child, your sins are forgiven” (Mt 9:2). These powerful, consoling, healing, and restoring words addressed to the paralytic in Matthew’s Gospel are directed also to each of us.

The sacrament of Reconciliation is the story of God’s love that never turns away from us. God’s love endures even our shortsightedness and selfishness. Like the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son, God awaits and watches and hopes for our return every time we walk away. Like the son in the same parable, all we need to do to make our way to our Father is to recognize our wrong, our need, and God’s love.

But we are called to even more than the passive reception of God’s mercy. Jesus asks us to be instruments of forgiveness. “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us” (Mt 6:12). We who so generously receive the gift of God’s mercy and forgiveness are expected to share as graciously with those who have offended us. In all of the petitions of the Lord’s Prayer, this is the only one that carries with it a

condition. We should expect our forgiveness to be measured by the gauge of our own mercy.

In *Forgiveness: A Catholic Approach*, Father R. Scott Hurd writes of the spiritual, psychological, physical, and social benefits of learning how to forgive and find peace. Drawing from his pastoral experience, in twenty-four short chapters, Father Hurd examines how human weakness affects such things as our ability to forgive and reconcile, our capacity to trust, and how we cope when a plea for forgiveness is rejected by a person we have wronged. We learn that through these very experiences, we find in Jesus Christ and the sacraments a way to move forward toward healing.

The first question Father Hurd addresses is one that perplexes many people, “Why forgive?” Here we learn that forgiveness is essential for human growth and flourishing. Forgiveness is not only a human experience, it is also an expression of God’s love and mercy. Forgiveness is at once deeply personal and an opportunity for sharing the Good News. As participants in the New Evangelization, our acts of forgiveness and reconciliation offer people an experience of God’s love. Father Hurd writes, “forgiveness from our hearts can turn others’ hearts toward God” (see p. 20).

All of us know that there is more to forgiveness than simply saying “I’m sorry.” In the section entitled, “Hallmarks of Forgiveness,” Father Hurd deftly outlines seven such marks of forgiveness that reflect the teaching and example of Our Lord. In Jesus, we learn how to forgive others as God has forgiven us. Forgiveness is a decision, a process, and a gift (see p. 6).

Equally challenging today is the question of how to forgive. In *Forgiveness: A Catholic Approach* we find an entire section on this topic. With priestly wisdom, Father Hurd examines a wide variety of experiences of forgiveness and reconciliation. With examples from Scripture, Church tradition, literature, and his own ministry, he offers a useful ten-step process to aid people ready to make the decision to forgive.

As we seek to grow deeper in our understanding of the meaning of forgiveness in the Catholic tradition, this book is a welcome companion for both meditation and prayer. I am pleased to recommend *Forgiveness: A Catholic Approach* for readers looking for help in taking the first step toward forgiveness or seeking support in moving from forgiveness to reconciliation. This book is a sure guide because it so clearly, faithfully, and engagingly presents a Catholic approach to the beautiful blessing of forgiveness.

CARDINAL DONALD WUERL
Archbishop of Washington

PART I

WHY FORGIVE?

CHAPTER I

A Lovely Idea?

“Everyone says that forgiveness is a lovely idea,” wrote C. S. Lewis, “until they have something to forgive.” How true that is! When we’ve been hurt, forgiving the one who has hurt us may be the last thing we want to do. We’re angry. Forgiveness doesn’t seem fair. We don’t think the ones who have hurt us deserve it. We fear that forgiving them would “let them off the hook.” In our pain, being told we need to forgive can seem offensive. Maybe we’ve been hurt often and we’re just plain tired of forgiving. And that’s somewhat understandable: forgiving can be a difficult and painful process that requires large doses of humility and grace. It can seem easier to stay mad or get even rather than let go and move on.

We may even conclude that forgiveness is impossible or just plain foolish. Or perhaps we’ve decided there are some things that never can nor should be forgiven. For instance, over half of those who responded to one survey

said they would never forgive an armed robber, a rapist, or a murderer.¹ When we think this way, forgiveness is anything but a “lovely idea.” It’s a monstrous one!

The wisdom of Lewis’s words was reinforced for me when reading comments posted in response to an Internet article about forgiveness.² Over and over again, hurting individuals expressed strong objections to the idea of forgiveness. One insisted that those who speak of forgiveness are “naïve” and “just don’t get it.” Another confessed that the article “made me sick to my stomach.” A contention was made that those who speak of forgiveness have never truly been hurt themselves. If they had, they’d know that only retribution, and not forgiveness, would bring any real relief to the pain. “As time passes,” the posting concluded, “the revenge factor grows.”

Given the nature of the article and content of the comments, I couldn’t be sure whether or not those who posted were Christian. Nevertheless, even the most committed Christians can be resistant to the idea of forgiveness, as I experienced once on a weekend retreat I led. Most of the participants had signed up for the retreat long before they knew who would be leading it or what the topic would be. Upon their arrival, as they would share with me later, many were disappointed to discover that the retreat would focus on forgiveness. Some didn’t want to hear about forgiveness, because they thought the topic was too “heavy.” Others thought, “This won’t apply to me. I really don’t have any issues with forgiveness.” As the retreat unfolded, however, their attitudes changed. Many were challenged, most were inspired, and everyone learned something. They came to appreciate that perhaps they did have some forgiving to do after all.

A few realized that they needed to forgive themselves. Misconceptions about forgiveness were identified and clarified: forgiveness doesn't involve forgetting, nor does it require reconciliation or making up. Some came to admit that they really didn't know how to forgive or where to start. In the end, just about all the participants left with an understanding that they had some work to do. But they were no longer disappointed. They were grateful.

The truth is, we all have someone to forgive: from the rude driver who cut us off in traffic to the spouse who abandoned us. There's the parent who neglected us or always put us down; the friends who vanished when we needed them most; the confidant we trusted who betrayed our secret; the boss who took credit for our idea; the bully who made our school years miserable; the compassionless priest who snapped at us in the confessional; the contractor who took our money but never finished the job; the teacher who shamed us before our classmates; the back-stabbing coworker; the lover who used us; the gossiping neighbor; the lying or corrupt politician; the greedy business executive whose decisions impacted our livelihood or our environment; the ungrateful child who never calls; the racist or sexist bigot; the hypercritical mother-in-law; a violent criminal; a war-time enemy. . . . Needless to say, this is a very incomplete list.

Without exception, we've all been hurt by others; without exception, our faith invites us to forgive those who hurt us. For whatever they've done. For however many times they've done it. Even if they refuse to apologize or admit that they did anything wrong. Even if we'll never see them again, but especially if we will. We do it

for ourselves. We do it for those around us and for those who've harmed us; and we do it for God, to give him glory and reveal his love to the world.

The forgiveness we're called to offer is a decision, a process, and a gift. It's a *decision* because by forgiving we choose to let go of any desire for revenge or retaliation, and we free ourselves of the bitterness and resentment that harden our hearts. Forgiveness is a *process* because letting go of resentment takes time; we may need to make the decision to forgive over and over again! Finally, forgiveness is a *gift* of love that we give freely, without expectations, exceptions, or limits. It is neither earned nor deserved. When we love the ones we forgive, we wish them happiness, not harm; well, not woe; heaven, not hell.

As always, Jesus shows us the way. He instructs us by his example, challenges us through his teaching, and forgives us from his cross. Like us, Jesus too has been hurt. He still bears the marks of that hurt in his hands, his feet, and his side. Jesus knew the betrayal of a friend and was abandoned by those he loved. He was a victim of prejudice, greed, selfishness, and cowardice. Although completely innocent, he experienced the most extreme injustice by being condemned, tortured, and executed. Yet it is he who calls us to forgive and who gives us the grace to do it. He shows us that forgiveness is not only possible, but that it is a necessity for those who would follow him. Far from being simply a "lovely idea," forgiveness is a requirement of love. Mother Teresa put it well: "If we really want to love, we must learn how to forgive."

CHAPTER 2

Forgive for You

Dick Fiske, an Army veteran who survived the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, tells of his stay in a V.A. hospital after the war.³ He was suffering from severely bleeding ulcers, part of his stomach had been cut out, and his prospects for survival were dim.

One day a burly, cigar-chomping military doctor strolled into his room and demanded, “Sarge, what in the hell is eating at you?” “I don’t know,” Fiske replied, “but I think a truck ran over me.” The doctor looked directly at Fiske, pointed to his gut, and said, “I can cure that, but”—as he pointed to his head—“I can’t cure that.” “What do you mean?” asked Fiske. “I went through your record,” explained the doctor. “Good God, Sarge, who do you hate?”

It was then that the tormented veteran realized that for years he had been consumed by hate—hatred of the killing, hatred of his wartime enemies. And it was

literally eating away at him, killing him from the inside out. He was living proof of the truth of an old Chinese proverb: “If you’re not willing to forgive, you’d better get ready to dig two graves.”

It’s ironic that in refusing to forgive others, we are the ones who often wind up hurt—just as Sergeant Dick Fiske learned the hard way. But when we do forgive, we’re filled with God’s healing grace. Thankfully, Dick Fiske learned this lesson too. After talking with the doctor for about an hour, Fiske says that although he was bawling like a baby, it felt as if a 500-pound weight had been taken off his shoulders, and he could breathe once again. He had begun to forgive, and pain was replaced with peace. It was as Pope John Paul II wrote: “The liberating encounter with forgiveness can be experienced even by a wounded heart, thanks to the healing power of God, who is love.”

Recent scientific studies confirm the healing power of forgiveness. They conclude that people who forgive live longer, healthier, and happier lives. One experiment measured the heart rate, blood pressure, and stress levels of adults who were asked to think about people who had lied to, insulted, or rejected them. Then they were given a choice. They could either imagine holding a grudge, or they could think about forgiving their offender. The results? Those who imagined forgiveness had lower heart rates and blood pressure while feeling calmer and more in control. On the other hand, those who held grudges were physically stressed, and they experienced greater feelings of anger and sadness.⁴ Other studies suggest that, by not forgiving, we weaken our immune systems and place ourselves at risk for

depression, a heart attack, chronic back pain, and cancer. Even our memory and the ability to think straight are compromised.⁵

Failing to forgive can ruin not only our health, but also our relationships. When we fail to forgive a hurt, we can become fearful of being hurt again. So we retreat into a shell and keep others at a distance, because we have a hard time trusting them. We wind up feeling not only angry, but also very much alone. At the same time, misery usually loves company. We want to share our bitterness with others. Our resentment spreads, affecting more and more people within our sphere of relationships, making us difficult to love. We drive people away. Or, if they can't get away, we drive them crazy.

Our misery may even come to define us; our identity will become one with our hurt. We'll be known as the cheated spouse, the unappreciated child, the wronged employee, the victim to be pitied. At one level, we might even like this, because it allows us to get sympathy by playing the martyr. We may become proud, self-righteous, and holier-than-thou, because we feel morally superior to the person who hurt us. What's more, we may enjoy looking good at their expense: we're the "good guy," and they're the "bad guy." And to make sure that others know this, we gossip, slandering the one who has harmed us far and wide.

When we forgive, we shed this identity. We may fear losing it, because we've become so comfortable with it. If so, we need to take a step back and look at who we've become. Is that really who we want to be? Is that really a person others would want to be with? In both cases, the answer is probably "No!"

It's certainly not who God wants us to be. God wants us to be healthy, happy people. Jesus came that we might have life—and have life in abundance! By failing to forgive, we deny ourselves the abundant life Jesus invites us to share. We also deny ourselves God's forgiveness. Think about what we pray in the Our Father: "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." God's forgiveness cannot enter an unforgiving heart. A priest friend of mine says, only half-jokingly, that when we meet Jesus face to face at the end of our lives, he'll appear as our worst enemy. Why? Because our enemy is the measure of our forgiveness. If we're not willing to forgive an enemy, how can we expect Jesus to forgive us?

When we've been offended, we suffer. By not forgiving, we only add to our suffering; we rub salt into our own wound. Not forgiving hurts us physically, relationally, and spiritually. We become miserable; we make others miserable; we push God away. We may even, like Sergeant Dick Fiske, quite literally be killing ourselves.

As Charles Dickens wrote, "Without a willingness to forgive those who have hurt us, it is not likely that our lives can go on in any meaningful manner." But we all want to live meaningful lives. We all want to be healed of our pain. We want to be happy, and we want to be loved instead of pitied. We want to be close to God. That's why forgiving is so essential for us.