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LEARNING TO FORGIVE

STEPS TO RECONCILIATION

BY FATHER EAMON TOBIN

When we choose not to forgive, we cheat ourselves of the joy of living.
Prayer helps us tap into God's assistance to forgive and reconcile our hurts.



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Following Jesus' command to forgive life's hurts and injustices is surely one of life's greatest challenges. Many people believe that it's *impossible*, if not foolish or even stupid, to forgive someone who has deeply offended us or done us a grave injustice. Why should anyone forgive such people?

When we choose not to forgive, we knowingly or unknowingly choose to cheat ourselves of the joy of living. When we harbor resentment in our hearts, our resentment becomes the lens through which we see reality. We see others not as they are but how our resentment wants us to see.

PRAY TO FORGIVE LIFE'S HURTS

Prayer can be a helpful spiritual resource when we're struggling to forgive and reconcile a hurt. Prayer can help us forgive another person—living or deceased, God, the Church, and ourselves. Prayer helps us tap into God's assistance.

Before we begin to pray for the grace to forgive, it's important to give expression to the feelings around the hurt or wrong done to us—rage, a desire to punish or get even, anger, or a sense of betrayal. We may use a journal to safely vent our feelings. Naming, owning, and giving expression to our real feelings is an important first step when it comes to dealing with life's hurts and injustices.*

PRAYER OF RAGE: When we've been deeply hurt, we likely feel anger, rage, and hate. We want to get even and punish our offender. Our first prayer needs to give expression to our rage. Many of us may never have prayed a prayer of rage and may feel it's wrong to say such things to God. Yet, consider what Jeremiah said to God about his enemies: "Why

does the way of the wicked prosper, why do all the treacherous live in contentment? Pick them out like sheep for the butcher, set them apart for the day of slaughter" (Jeremiah 12:1, 3). We may not think this is over the top if we've experienced some terrible injustice or wrong.

When preaching about prayer, Martin Luther said, "Don't lie to God." Real prayer must express what we truly feel. Many psalms are wonderful examples of honesty with God in time of rage or depression. Consider an Israelite exile's words when he experienced oppression in Babylon: "Blessed the one who pays you back what you have done us! Blessed the one who seizes your children and smashes them against the rock" (Psalm 137:8–9).

Expressing what we have judged to be unspeakable hurts can be a wonderful and freeing experience. Our reaction might be: "I said it and I already feel better."

PRAYER FOR THE DESIRE TO FORGIVE: Having expressed our rage to God and our disgust about our offender, we'll want to ask the Lord for help to move past our anger and outrage. We may need to pray this prayer fervently *many* times before we notice any desire to work through our hurt and anger. Just as physical therapy takes time, so it is with *spiritual* therapy. We have to stretch ourselves emotionally and spiritually if we want God to melt our hardened hearts. This may be the toughest step in the entire process. Millions of people choose not to even pray for the desire to forgive. If we are stuck at this stage, we might wish to see a counselor or a spiritual guide.

PRAYER OF REPENTANCE: While there may be a rare situation in which we're totally innocent and all the wrong is with the offending party, usually we've done something wrong too. Since the offense, we may have talked in an unchristian way about our offender. We may have slandered his or her good name. We may have exaggerated our account of what happened. If *we* have done wrong, then *we* need to seek the Lord's forgiveness.



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This is very challenging but also very helpful. It's challenging because it asks us to move away from focusing on the sin or wrongdoing of our offender to focusing on *our* sin or wrongdoing. This step demands humility and self-knowledge. As long as we keep the focus on what our offender did wrong, we won't be able to forgive. But once we begin to focus on *our* need for forgiveness and mercy, we become much less self-righteous and condemning. This step will, most likely, soften our hardened hearts. Becoming deeply aware of our own need for mercy should ready our hearts to show mercy to those who hurt us.

PRAYER FOR THE OFFENDER: *Can we pray for the person who hurt us?* If our response is "no," we still have a ways to go. The thought of praying for one who deeply hurt us is repulsive to many people. It's like wishing them well when all we may want to do is wish them evil.

The decision to pray for an offender can be very helpful and leads to a softening of heart. As we stretch ourselves to do what we may find repulsive, God will create in us new hearts, hearts more like his, hearts more open to forgiving what seems unforgivable. At this stage, we begin to experience the miracle of forgiveness—the miracle of wanting to let go of something that we'd previously held on to as if it were a precious jewel. If we fervently pray for our offender, we'll likely discover that God is creating new hearts in us.

FROM FORGIVENESS TO RECONCILIATION

While Jesus calls us to forgive every hurt and wrong done to us, he doesn't call us to be *reconciled* with everyone who offends us. Reconciliation isn't possible if our offender isn't sorry for his wrongdoing and has no desire to be reconciled with us. Also, if we had little or no relationship prior to the offense, we won't need to develop a relationship after we've forgiven him.

FORGIVING GOD

While it's true that God and his ways are perfect, it's also true that his ways may deeply hurt us and cause us to distance ourselves from him. We may wonder why a good and all-powerful God allows terrible things to happen to good people. Coming to terms with unanswered prayer and destruction in our lives or in the lives of our loved ones can be very difficult even for people with deep faith.

The *worst* thing we can do is break our relationship with God or distance ourselves from him. When we do this, we hand Satan a victory. The devil's plan is to use the bad things in life to weaken or destroy our relationship with God.

The *best* thing to do for our relationship with God is to let him know exactly how we feel. This is what the psalmists and other Old Testament figures did. If and when we feel God has abandoned us and allowed evil to triumph, we can express our anger or disappointment. If we sometimes feel like giving God a piece of our minds, we should go ahead and do so. We can be certain he can handle it. We can also be certain that God will be happier with our heartfelt prayer of anger than with our rote prayers that don't express how we truly think and feel.

It may take us some time to work through our anger with God. We must keep relating to God even if it's with anger.

When we feel distant from God, when we're angry with him, we're engaged in spiritual warfare. The powers of darkness are trying to make us believe that God doesn't care about us while the Holy Spirit is trying to help us see God's presence even in the midst of our tribulations.

It is a mystery why a good and loving God allows

so much suffering in our world. But, if we keep our eyes focused on Jesus, we will never conclude that God doesn't care about our pain or other people's pain. We may also seek the help of Mary, our Blessed Mother. She continued to believe in God and his care for her even as he allowed horrific things to happen to her innocent son.

DIG DEEPER

Look: What is the deepest hurt you have forgiven—or need to forgive?

Judge: How difficult is it for you to forgive? Why?

Act: How will you enlist God's help to forgive?



In many cases, we're called to not only *forgive* the person who has offended us, but also to *reconcile* with him. This would obviously be true in the case of family relationships. In a parish setting, it's desirable that all who participate in the Eucharist are in good relationship with one another. But then again, someone in our family or parish circle may have deeply hurt us and have no desire to express contrition or relate to us. In this case, all we can do is try to forgive our offender and, when we meet him, be as Christlike as we can.

A great danger in the forgiveness and reconciliation process is that even though we make the right moves, we do so only *externally* or on the surface. Internally, however, we may be only seeking to look good in our own eyes and in the eyes of our offender by saying all the right words: "I'm sorry. Forgive me. I forgive you." Yet we may continue to harbor resentments and grudges in our hearts. We *say* we are sorry or that we forgive, but deep down, we *aren't* and we *don't*. Because of this, sooner or later, the resentment will show its ugly head in our words and behavior.

WHAT FORGIVENESS ISN'T

Forgiveness doesn't necessarily mean that we must *forget* a hurt or injustice. We often hear the advice "forgive and forget." But some hurts and injustices are too big and painful to totally remove from our memories. We may need to remember some hurts to help us to not allow them to happen again. What we can seek is to let go of the resentments connected with the hurt. If we don't, these resentments will continue to wound us, cloud the way we see reality, and control our actions.

FORGIVENESS DOESN'T MEAN...

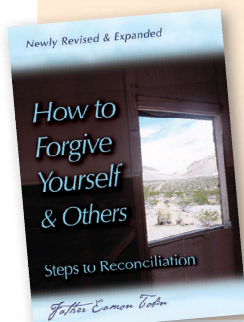
- ...we surrender our right to justice. We shouldn't confuse forgiveness with stupidity. Jesus asks us to forgive, but he doesn't ask us to be stupid in our dealings with others.
- ...we have to relate to or befriend our offender. This is especially true if the offender shows no sorrow or remorse for the wrong he/she did.
- ...we have to put up with intolerable behavior. Forgiveness doesn't ask that we become doormats for nasty people.
- ...excusing, condoning, or minimizing the wrong inflicted on us.
- ...we never have negative feelings toward our offender.
- ...we have to like our offender.

FORGIVENESS IS POSSIBLE

It isn't easy to have an honest and open relationship with God while we *deliberately* and *intentionally* hold on to a grudge and show no desire to forgive. Yet, with the grace of God, *all* things are possible—even forgiving what seems like an unforgivable sin or crime.

Father Eamon Tobin is pastor of Ascension Catholic Church in Melbourne, Florida. He is the author of *How to Forgive Yourself and Others: Steps to Reconciliation* (Liguori Publications) from which this article is taken. See more of his writing at www.ascensioncatholic.net.

KEEP THE FAITH



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