



The Sacrament of Reconciliation

Forgiveness is Essential

Each of us probably experiences situations where we have been hurt and need to forgive others. In these circumstances, we can try to forget about the need to forgive, but it becomes obvious that we have not really forgiven a person when we see them and don't want to look at them, or hold back on a conversation. Forgiveness is an extremely important action for our peace of mind, but it is difficult without God's help.

It is noteworthy that when we pray the *Our Father*, we ask God for forgiveness of our sins in the same measure that we forgive others who have sinned against us. We pray, "Forgive us our trespasses **as** we forgive those who trespass against us." When Jesus taught this most perfect of prayers to the Apostles, Jesus places even greater emphasis on this part of the prayer, when He repeats, "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your Heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Mt 6:14-15). Our forgiveness by God is contingent upon our forgiveness of others.

The **as** in the *Our Father* is significant. Jesus made similar comparisons elsewhere: "love one another, even **as** I have loved you" (John 13:34). "Be merciful, even **as** your Father is merciful" (Lk 6:36). In each case, the perfect love between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is the

standard not only for our relationship with God but also with one another. Jesus wants us to really strive to forgive others when they offend us. Jesus tells us: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you" (Lk 6:27-28), **as** Jesus Himself did from His Cross when He said, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Lk 23:34).

It is important to make some distinctions about forgiveness:

1. **Forgiveness** is *not* passive submission to abuse.
2. **Forgiveness** does *not* mean that we must somehow "like" the wrong that is being done to us. Indeed, we can hate the sin that is being committed against us.
3. **Forgiveness** *does* mean that we must pray for the grace to separate the sin from the sinner—"hating" the sin, but praying for God's grace to love the sinner. "Love" means here that we make a choice to pray that this person does not go to hell. We pray that he or she would somehow receive God's grace and come to know Him and go to be with Him in Heaven. "Hating" the sinner would mean that we **desire** that he or she would go to hell—be eternally separated from God. It's important to make the distinction between our **feelings** and what we choose with our **will!** Very often, if we are honest in regard to the negative feelings we experience, no matter how awful and justified they are, we'll have more freedom to choose the good.
4. **Forgiveness** means choosing to

act in a charitable manner toward the offender, but not "setting ourselves up" for future abuse.

Forgiveness is not easy and is something we must work at. We need to consciously decide to let go of negative feelings whether the person deserves it or not. Yet, we cannot do this without the help of God's grace. Jesus gives us the pledge that, whatever we encounter, His grace will be sufficient for us (See 2 Cor 12:9). We need to cooperate with His grace as we receive His strength to forgive others who have hurt us.

Advent is a perfect time to help ourselves by choosing to forgive. This will mean better physical health through reducing levels of anxiety and stress, even improving sleep. And the choice to forgive will mean improved spiritual health as we become strengthened to forgive more quickly. For an examination of conscience, see diolc.org/deeper. Jesus wants to heal us in the Sacrament of Reconciliation from our sins of holding grudges or long-term resentment against others so that He can restore our interior peace and joy. Then we will experience a more joyful Christmas Season, understanding better that Jesus came as our Savior to provide us with the power of His grace to forgive others. Wishes for a Blessed Christmas!

Bv Ann Lankford



Diocese of LA CROSSE