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While St. Maria Goretti is universally known as the Patroness of Purity, her greatest virtue was her unyielding forgiveness of her attacker even in the midst of horrendous physical suffering. This forgiveness would completely convert him and set him on a path to personal holiness.

As Maria understood so well, forgiveness is something quintessentially Christian. While all major religions offer some value to forgiveness, only Christianity upholds forgiveness as its central tenet. Indeed, it was to share with us the Father's forgiveness that Christ became incarnate and underwent His torture and death. Forgiveness is God's victory, the crown jewel of the Christian faith.

All of us, at one point or another, have been hurt by someone. Sometimes these hurts are so great that they are life changing in a destructive manner. They leave one injured, grieving, and often angry or scared. Long-term, and even permanent, wounding is the result. For example, how does a rape victim come to peace again? How is it that someone whose health has been permanently taken away by another obtain tranquility? How do family members who have had a loved one murdered find comfort?

For many, forgiveness is a barrier that seems insurmountable. For the Christian, however, it is a deeply personal configuration to the one we love: Jesus Christ. It is not only a requirement of Jesus, who commands that we must forgive or forfeit our own forgiveness (Matt 6:14), it is also the way by which we imitate Him who is the mercy and forgiveness of the Father Himself.

What is forgiveness?

• Forgiveness is a decision. It is an act of the will. Nothing more. Nothing less.

We can understand more by looking at what it is not:

• Forgiveness is not saying that the offence or hurt that was done "is o.k." Offenses, especially the most hurtful ones, will never be "o.k." How can a mother who has lost her child to a murder, for example, ever be "o.k." with it?

• Forgiveness is also not saying that the offense is to be forgotten. We often hear the phrase, "Forgive and forget." That might work when the offense was something small, like the stealing of a few dollars. But when the hurt we receive is enormous, it is impossible to forget it.

• Forgiveness is not an emotion. We can still be angry, scared, depressed, or sad, even after genuinely forgiving the one who has hurt us. Our emotions are virtually

impossible to control. Thus, forgiveness has to be something apart from being emotionally stable and "at peace."

Forgiveness is independent of the pain we feel. It is not a state of being pain free or a state of contentment. Just because we are suffering does not mean we cannot forgive. Similarly, because we continue to suffer after forgiving does not mean that we have not genuinely forgiven. And, to complete the scenarios, just because we do not experience suffering following a hurt does not mean there is no need to forgive; the mere fact that there was a violation is sufficient to warrant—in fact, to necessitate—forgiveness.

The first step in forgiving is to acknowledge that there was a violation, that the offender did something hurtful. When the violation occurs the offender takes something that he or she had no right to take; e.g., my peace, my freedom, my childhood, my marriage, my heart, my trust, my child's life, my safety, my virginity, my innocence, my inheritance, my life savings, etc.... Justice demands that when someone takes something that does not belong to him, a debt has been incurred. Whatever was taken is owed back. But, in the greatest hurts we receive the damage done is almost always irreparable and the debt cannot ever be paid back. How can a murderer restore the life he took? How can a rapist restore his victim's integrity? How can a child molester restore his victim back to a state of peace?

Thus, along with acknowledging the debt that is owed, forgiveness is also acknowledging that the offender cannot (or will not) pay back that debt. We have now reached the critical part of forgiveness. In order for forgiveness to be complete, the victim must release the offender of that debt, and turn that debt over to Jesus. The victim then asks Jesus that—instead of the debt—that the offender be given His blessing instead.

Thus, the victim should speak out the words aloud, "Jesus, I release [offender's name] from his debt to me and I give that debt to you. In place of that debt I ask You to give [offender's name] a blessing instead." Jesus, receiving that debt, does exactly that: He removes that debt from the offender, takes it upon Himself, and bestows His blessing on the offender.

Do we have to actually say the words of forgiveness directly to the offender for the forgiveness to be genuine? Saying the words directly to the offender is not always possible nor prudent. For example, it can be that the offender is now dead, or that the offender is a non-personal entity (e.g., a government), or that the offender is dangerous (e.g., an abusive spouse) and pronouncing the words of forgiveness may subject us to more abuse. If it is possible and prudent, the words of forgiveness should be said directly to the offender, either audibly or through written means. Such is the greater and more complete imitation of Jesus who, while suffering on the cross, announced His forgiveness to His attackers in their hearing (Lk 23:34).

It is important to be aware that because the declaration of forgiveness is made does not

mean that all negative feelings and hurt magically disappear. Humans are complex creatures and parts of us are frequently at war with other parts. As already stated above, feelings—especially negative ones—are often beyond our control. The enemy will also manipulate our feelings to make us think that, because of the way we feel, that we have not forgiven. Do not give into this temptation!

In such moments, simply direct your attention to those feelings and address them directly: "I do not want you. I have already rejected you. You are not welcome in me. I choose the peace and tranquility that comes through imitating Jesus." And then renew your act of forgiveness once again by repeating to Jesus, "I release [offender's name] from his debt to me and I give that debt to you Jesus. I ask you to give him a blessing instead." Even if the negative feelings come forth multiple times each day—even, say 43 times—then renew your act of forgiveness 43 times. In time, the negative feeling will subside because you are not offering a home to them, nor are allowing them to be nurtured, but are being proactive against them. Peace will follow as a result and those feeling will gradually cease.

Summary of the Steps

1. Acknowledge that there was a violation. It is useful to name what the violation is.
2. Identify the debt owed by the offender.
3. Speak out the words, "Jesus, I release [offender's name] from his debt to me and I give that debt to you. I ask you to give [offender's name] a blessing instead."
4. When the pain, bitterness, anger, or any other negativity rises up against the offender, we turn and speak to that negativity as if it were a person, saying. "I do not want you [anger ... or bitterness ... or resentments, etc.]. I have already rejected you. You are not welcome in me. I choose the peace and tranquility that comes through imitating Jesus." And then renew the act of forgiveness once again by repeating to Jesus what you have already said in step 3.

The Effects of Forgiveness

The blessings and effects of forgiveness are incalculable. They include the following:

- The offender becomes free of the debt, a debt which he cannot (or will not) pay, and he receives a new presence of God inside him. God will be at work within him in a new way. St. Maria Goretti's forgiveness of her murderer while he was in prison is a fine example of this. Her forgiveness brought with it the Holy Spirit who subsequently changed him completely.
- We are rid of the powerlessness that comes with victimhood and become empowered to free ourselves from the loss and perpetual injustice of the offense. Again, we are not saying that the offense is forgotten, or that it is "o.k.", or that we are no longer in pain, or that we do not feel gripped by intense anger or some

other emotion. We are inviting Jesus into the situation and we are choosing to give Him ultimate control of it.

- We have configured ourselves to Jesus, who is the mercy and forgiveness of the Father. We have allowed Him and His sovereignty to become incarnate within us in a deeper way.

We have gladdened the heart of the Father who rejoices in our mercy and moves to bestow on us new grace, the grace He gives to His sons and daughters. We have robbed the enemy of a victory!

Thus, although forgiveness is a sacrifice, it procures—both for heaven and earth—a tremendous victory. While refusing to forgive has appeal in terms of the power and energy that bitterness appears to offer, in the end it merely leaves us stuck in a cycle of perpetual loss and distress and holds us in permanent victimhood. Indeed, for a person to not forgive is equivalent to his drinking poison, but desiring someone else to die of it. It is completely irrational.

The Importance of Self-Forgiveness

One of the most painful things a person has to face is himself when he has been the cause of suffering in another. When a person becomes aware that another has suffered for his actions, encountering himself is always an agony.

I am convinced that the reason why many criminals keep committing crime, and keep committing worse and worse crime, is because of the inner hatred they hold against themselves for the evil they have committed. Forgiveness is a basic human need. When we are not given it then we experience depravity; we become worse human beings. That depravity invariably produces more depravity.

In my years as a priest, I have noticed that people find it much easier to forgive someone who has hurt them than to forgive themselves. Even in the case of those who have suffered terribly at the hands of another, such as children who have suffered sexual abuse or the victims of rape, I have seen them, after extensive therapy and healing, come to forgive their abusers. However, almost all find it more difficult to forgive themselves.

Why would a victim need to forgive himself? I have noticed a pattern: A victim always hates himself. The experience of suffering and abuse makes a victim encounter his own limits and ultimate powerlessness—his weakness—and that encounter can produce a hatred. I once worked with a victim who experienced terrible sexual abuse as a child. That victim's life had been permanently affected by the abuse. After working extensively with her, and gradually getting her to invite Jesus into the situations when she was abused in the past, as well as into her heart now, she was able to come to a forgiveness of her abuser. Then I asked her a question: Are you willing to forgive yourself for being abused? I continued with a series of questions in succession:

Are you willing to forgive yourself for being powerless against your abuser?

Do you forgive yourself for being created as a sexual person who became a target of a predator?

Do you forgive yourself for not being lovable enough to keep from being a target of abuse?

Do you forgive yourself for not being able to assist yourself and finding a way to end the abuse?

Do you forgive yourself for any way in which you may have compromised with your abuser and cooperated with the abuse (background: as a way to stop the pain many victims stop resisting attempts at abuse; later this often causes increased mental anguish).

The victim by this time was a sobbing mess. And to these questions she responded with a resounding, "NO!" To non-victims, such a reluctance to forgive seems irrational. The experience of being a victim can very subtly produce within the soul a hatred of the self. That self-hatred is especially dangerous because it often hovers at a level just below the surface of the victim's awareness.

Our Lord's commandment was to forgive. That prescription also includes ourselves. When we choose not to forgive ourselves where are choosing to hate someone that God loves. We have set ourselves in opposition to the will of God.

A victim's healing can never be complete without this self-forgiveness.