

## **A Reflection on Forgiveness**

### **Introduction**

I feel privileged and deeply humbled to offer this reflection on forgiveness as your NSW State Chaplain for the Knights of the Southern Cross. This isn't an academic exercise or a lofty theological discourse—it's simply the heartfelt thoughts of a parish priest, living amid a very secular world, trying to walk alongside you in faith. Yet, I am consoled and strengthened by the fact that we are united in this beautiful call to discipleship, graced to be members of the one true, holy, Catholic, and apostolic Church founded by Christ Himself. It is within this Church—the fullness of truth—that we encounter forgiveness, not just as an idea but as a living reality that transforms lives and heals hearts.

Forgiveness is not mechanical or transactional; it's a divine gift requiring cooperation with God's grace and grounded in truth. It's often messy, slow, and deeply personal—a journey of the heart that begins battered and bruised but moves toward healing and freedom. Sometimes forgiveness comes quickly, but more often, it takes time. Healing must happen first, especially when the hurt runs deep. There are moments when we might not feel ready to forgive, and that's okay. In those times, our prayer might simply be: "Lord, help me to want to forgive." Forgiveness isn't about ignoring pain or pretending everything is fine—it's about opening our hearts to God's grace so that healing can begin.

## **Forgiveness in Scripture: From Genesis to Revelation**

The story of forgiveness runs through Scripture like a golden thread. In Genesis, we meet Joseph—a young man betrayed by his own brothers, sold into slavery, and left for dead (Genesis 45:1-15). Years later, when those same brothers come to him seeking help during a famine, Joseph has every reason to seek revenge. But instead, he forgives them. His words are unforgettable: “Do not be afraid... What you intended for harm, God intended for good.” Joseph’s forgiveness wasn’t instant—it was part of his journey with God.

In the Psalms, David pleads for God’s mercy after his grave sins with Bathsheba: “Create in me a clean heart” (Psalm 51). David shows us that forgiveness begins with humility—a recognition of our need for God’s grace.

Jesus brings forgiveness into full focus in the New Testament. Think about the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15). The son wastes everything his father gave him and comes crawling back home in shame. What does his father do? He runs out to meet him with open arms and throws a party! That’s how God forgives us—not grudgingly but joyfully.

And then there’s Jesus on the cross—the ultimate example of forgiveness. As He hangs there in agony, betrayed by His friends and mocked by His enemies, He prays: “Father, forgive them; they don’t know what they’re doing” (Luke 23:34). Forgiveness doesn’t get more real or more powerful than that.

Finally, Revelation gives us a glimpse of forgiveness fulfilled in heaven—every tear wiped away; every sin forgiven (Revelation 21:4). Forgiveness isn't just for this life—it prepares us for eternity with God.

### **Greek Thought on Forgiveness: Syngnome**

To deepen our understanding of forgiveness further, let us consider Greek philosophy—particularly Aristotle's concept of "*syngnome*" [συγγνώμη]. Found in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, *syngnome* refers to "judging kindly" or granting pardon when wrongdoing was involuntary or caused by ignorance (NE 1110a23-26). Aristotle believed forgiveness should be grounded in fairness and reason—if someone acted without knowledge or under extreme pressure, they deserved pardon.

This perspective aligns with Aristotle's broader virtue ethics. Forgiveness isn't blind; it requires discernment about causes and circumstances. His emphasis on cause and intent connects beautifully with Catholic teaching on the principle of double effect.

## **The Principle of Double Effect**

The “Principle of Double Effect” is a helpful way to understand forgiveness, especially when it involves both good and potentially difficult consequences. Forgiveness is central to living a life of faith, reflecting God’s love and mercy, but it can sometimes feel complicated when unintended challenges arise. This principle helps ensure that forgiveness is approached in a way that aligns with God’s call to love, justice, and truth.

The principle of double effect gives us guidance by focusing on four key ideas:

### **1. Good Intention**

Forgiveness must come from a sincere desire to love as God loves—not from selfish motives or manipulation. When we forgive, it should be because we want to let go of anger and resentment and open the door to healing and reconciliation. Jesus teaches us to forgive others as He forgives us (Matthew 6:14-15). A good intention means forgiving out of mercy and compassion, not for personal gain or control.

### **2. Good Means**

The way forgiveness is offered must also be morally good or neutral. It cannot involve actions that are harmful or unjust. For example, forgiving someone should never mean ignoring the truth or compromising your dignity. True forgiveness follows Jesus’ example—offered with humility and love but never at the expense of what is right.

### **3. Good End**

The goal of forgiveness should always be something good, such as restoring relationships, fostering inner peace, or creating an opportunity for growth and healing. Forgiveness is about repairing what has been broken and trusting that God can bring good even from painful situations.

### **4. Proportionality**

While forgiveness can lead to incredibly good, it may also involve risks—such as emotional vulnerability or the chance that someone might take advantage of your kindness. The principle of proportionality reminds us that these risks are acceptable if they are unintended side effects and not greater than the potential good that forgiveness can achieve. Trusting God's grace helps us face these challenges with courage.

### **Navigating Challenges in Forgiveness**

Sometimes forgiving someone might seem to enable harmful behaviour if they don't change their ways. However, forgiveness is not about excusing sin—it's about freeing yourself from anger while still holding others accountable for their actions. If negative consequences arise after forgiving someone, it doesn't mean the act of forgiveness was wrong; it simply highlights the need for continued prayer and discernment.

## **Forgiveness and Accountability**

Forgiveness does not mean forgetting what happened or ignoring justice—it means letting go of bitterness while still seeking what is right. Jesus teaches us to forgive but also calls sinners to repentance (Luke 17:3-4). True forgiveness often requires accountability from the person who caused harm, such as expressing remorse or making amends. This balance ensures that forgiveness leads to real healing rather than allowing harm to continue unchecked.

## **Unconditional Forgiveness**

Jesus showed us unconditional forgiveness when He prayed for those who crucified Him: “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). As His followers, we are called to imitate this radical mercy. However, unconditional forgiveness does not mean ignoring wisdom or boundaries—it means forgiving from the heart while still seeking justice and protecting against further harm when necessary.

## **The Power of Forgiveness**

Forgiving others is one of the most transformative acts we can perform—for ourselves and others. It frees us from resentment and allows God’s grace to work in our lives. While it may involve risks or challenges, forgiveness ultimately reflects our trust in God’s plan for healing and redemption.

By focusing on good intentions, morally sound actions, positive outcomes, and proportionality, we can approach forgiveness in a way that honours both truth and love. In doing so, we follow Jesus' command to "love your enemies" (Matthew 5:44) and reflect His mercy in our lives. Forgiveness is not just about letting go—it's about opening our hearts to God's grace and allowing Him to bring peace where there was once pain.

### **Forgiveness as a Divine Gift**

Forgiveness is not something we can force or manufacture—it's a divine gift requiring cooperation with God's grace. Sometimes we're ready to forgive immediately; other times we need healing first. When the hurt runs deep, it's okay to say: "Lord, help me want to forgive." Forgiveness often begins as a prayer before it becomes an action.

Healing takes time—especially when trust has been broken—and that's okay too. Forgiveness doesn't mean forgetting or excusing harm; it means letting go of resentment so we can move forward. It's not about pretending everything is fine; it's about opening our hearts to God's grace.

## **Psychological Insights on Forgiveness**

From my limited understanding—and I vaguely recall reading about studies on this—modern psychology seems to suggest that forgiveness is beneficial for our health and overall well-being. Research, I believe, indicates that forgiving others reduces anger, anxiety, and depression while increasing hope and self-esteem. Emotional forgiveness—letting go of resentment—has been shown to improve mental health significantly because it reduces stress-related overthinking.

Self-forgiveness is equally important—it involves acknowledging our mistakes without self-condemnation. This process allows us to move through shame toward growth and inner peace.

Psychologists also note that forgiveness doesn't mean forgetting or excusing harmful behaviours—it means letting go of bitterness so we can heal ourselves first before extending mercy outwardly.

## **St. Thomas Aquinas on Mercy as the Greatest Virtue**

St. Thomas Aquinas taught that mercy is the greatest virtue because it most closely reflects God Himself. In his *Summa Theologiae* (II-II Q.30), Aquinas wrote that mercy “is accounted as being proper to God: and therein His omnipotence is declared to be chiefly manifested.” Mercy takes precedence over other virtues because it involves relieving another person's suffering out of one's abundance—a reflection of divine generosity.

For Aquinas, mercy does not contradict justice but perfects it by going beyond what justice alone requires. He described two forms of mercy: “*affective mercy*”, which involves feeling compassion for another person’s suffering; and “*effective mercy*”, which actively seeks to alleviate their suffering in a way that safeguards justice.

Aquinas also emphasized that forgiveness—an act of mercy—is greater than even the creation of the world because it directly leads souls toward eternal life with God. In this way, mercy becomes central not only to human relationships but also to our ultimate relationship with God.

### **Questions for Reflection**

As we reflect on forgiveness together today, let us ask ourselves:

- Who do I need to forgive? Am I ready? If not yet ready, can I pray for the desire to forgive?
- What hurts am I holding onto? How might letting go free my heart?
- Have I forgiven myself for past mistakes? If not yet ready for self-forgiveness, what steps can I take toward self-compassion?

***There are no absolute "right" or "wrong" answers here—only an invitation to explore where God might be calling us to grow.***

## **Justice and Mercy: Two Sides of Forgiveness**

Forgiveness doesn't erase justice—it works alongside it. Justice holds people accountable; mercy restores relationships and heals wounds.

Think about Zacchaeus (Luke 19). Zacchaeus was a tax collector—a man known for ripping people off—but when he met Jesus, everything changed. He promised to repay anyone he'd cheated fourfold and give half his wealth to the poor. Justice was served because Zacchaeus made amends; mercy was revealed because Jesus welcomed him with love.

Aquinas reminds us that mercy perfects justice because it seeks restoration rather than retribution—healing rather than punishment.

### **Conclusion**

Forgiveness is at the heart of our Catholic faith because it reflects who God is—merciful, loving, and just. It transforms relationships, heals wounds, and brings peace to our souls. It doesn't ignore justice but fulfills it with love.

As Knights of the Southern Cross here in NSW—a state where faith often feels countercultural—we're called to be ambassadors of Christ's mercy wherever we are: at home, at work, or out in our communities. Let us remember Joseph forgiving his brothers; Jesus forgiving His persecutors; and the great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us marked with the sign of faith, the saints, who turning away from sin exemplified what it meant to live the forgiven life—and let us strive to follow their example.

Forgiveness isn't always easy—but it changes lives. And when we forgive others as God forgives us through His Church—the one true Church founded by Christ—we become part of His plan to bring healing into our world.

May we always be instruments of His mercy! Where there is forgiveness grounded in truth, there is freedom—and where there is freedom flowing from Christ's love, there is life eternal!

Blessings and Peace

Fr Julian Belich