

## **A Spiritual Conference on Forgiveness for the Knights of the Southern Cross (NSW).**

Let's begin with a story that echoes the heart of Scripture.

A young boy, Tom, once broke his mother's favourite vase. The sound of shattering porcelain filled the house, and Tom's heart raced with dread. He tried to hide the evidence, but his mother soon found the pieces. Instead of anger, she knelt beside him, gathered the broken pieces, and embraced him. "We'll fix this together," she said. In that moment, Tom learned what our noble Catholic faith teaches again and again: forgiveness is a love that stoops down, meets us in our weakness, and gives us a new beginning-just as God does for us.

A parishioner relatively recent, a few weeks back, told me that Pope Francis has expressed a sentiment very close to our story, "The only time you look down at another is if you are helping them up."

How often do we find ourselves clutching the broken pieces of our own mistakes, wondering if we can be forgiven? How many times have we been asked to open our arms to someone who hurt us, even as our hearts still ache?

### **The Winding Road of Forgiveness**

Forgiveness is never a cold transaction. It's not just saying "I forgive you" and moving on as if nothing happened. Forgiveness is a journey-a slow, sometimes painful walking from hurt to healing. It's like daybreak after a sleepless night: at

first, only a faint glow on the horizon, but with time, the sun rises, and the world is made new.

Consider Joseph in Genesis, betrayed by his brothers, sold into slavery, left for dead. Years later, when famine brings those same brothers to his doorstep, Joseph has every reason to seek revenge. Instead, he forgives: “Do not be afraid... What you intended for harm, God intended for good” (Genesis 50:19-20). Joseph’s forgiveness wasn’t instant. It was shaped by suffering, prayer, and the mysterious ways of God.

Is there a wound in your life that still waits for the dawn? What would it look like to begin the journey toward forgiveness, even if only in prayer?

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

The story of forgiveness runs through Scripture like a golden thread. In the Psalms, David pleads for God’s mercy after his grave sins: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me” (Psalm 51:10). 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 15:11-32). 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 and mocked, He prays: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are 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).

Which biblical story of forgiveness speaks to your heart today? Where do you find yourself in that story?

### **Forgiveness: More Than a Feeling**

Forgiveness is not a feeling we wait for, but a decision we make-often before our emotions catch up. Sometimes, the best we can do is whisper, "Lord, help me to want to forgive." This humble prayer is enough to open the door to grace.

Jesus teaches, "If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matthew 6:14-15). Forgiveness is not optional for the Christian; it is the very air we breathe.

Have you ever feared that forgiveness means pretending the hurt didn't matter? What would it mean to bring even your reluctance to God?

## **The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant**

Peter once asked Jesus, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?” Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times” (Matthew 18:21-22). Jesus then tells the story of a servant forgiven an enormous debt by his master, who then refuses to forgive a small debt owed to him by a fellow servant. The master is furious: “Should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?” (Matthew 18:33).

This parable reminds us: God’s forgiveness is extravagant, and He calls us to reflect that same mercy. If we close our hearts to forgiveness, we close our hearts to God’s mercy.

Is there someone in your life you are struggling to forgive? What would it look like to offer them the same mercy God has shown you?

## **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: “If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them. Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive them” (Luke 17:3-4).

Think about Zacchaeus, the tax collector (Luke 19). After meeting Jesus, he doesn't just say sorry-he makes amends, restoring what he has stolen. Forgiveness and accountability go hand in hand.

Is there someone you need to forgive, but also to invite to change? How might mercy and truth walk together in your life?

### **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. "Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Colossians 3:13).

A wise teacher once said, "To forgive is to set a prisoner free, and discover the prisoner was you." Is there a grudge that has kept you captive? What would it feel like to let it go?

### **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.

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). 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.

### **The Gift of Confession**

In the sacrament of confession, we meet the mercy of God face to face. We bring our brokenness, our shame, our fears-and we hear the words, “I absolve you.” There is no sin too great, no wound too deep, that cannot be healed by His love. “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace” (Ephesians 1:7).

When was the last time you let yourself be forgiven? What holds you back from receiving this gift?

### **Forgiveness and Self-Image**

The psalmist sings, “As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us” (Psalm 103:12). God’s forgiveness is total and complete. It’s not just about erasing guilt, but about being made new. “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow” (Isaiah 1:18).

What do you see when you look in the mirror-your flaws or your forgiveness? What would change if you believed you were truly forgiven?

## **Forgiveness in the Family**

The parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) is one of Jesus' most famous teachings. It shows us that God's forgiveness is always available to us. There is nothing we can do to separate ourselves from God's lavish grace. The father's embrace is a reminder that forgiveness is not just for the deserving, but for all who return home.

What relationships in your life need the healing that only forgiveness can bring?  
Can you forgive even if the other never says "I'm sorry"?

## **The Cross: Where Forgiveness Triumphs**

At the heart of our faith is the cross. Jesus, in His agony, forgives those who betray, abandon, and crucify Him. He shows us that forgiveness is not weakness, but the greatest strength. "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). It is the power to break the cycle of hurt and begin again.

What cross are you carrying today? Can you ask Jesus to help you forgive, as He forgave?

## **Forgiveness and Reconciliation**

Forgiveness is the beginning of reconciliation, but not always its end. "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:18). Sometimes reconciliation is not possible, but forgiveness always is. It is the first step toward peace in our hearts and, when possible, peace with others.

Is there someone you need to be reconciled with? What would it look like to take the first step?

## **Mercy as the Greatest Virtue**

"Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (Ephesians 4:32). St. Thomas Aquinas taught that mercy is the greatest virtue because it most closely reflects God Himself. Mercy perfects justice - it does not erase it. Mercy involves relieving another's suffering out of one's abundance-a reflection of divine generosity.

How might you show mercy today, even in a small way?

## **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. "Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven" (Luke 6:37).

How can you balance justice and mercy in your own life?

## **Forgiveness and the Future**

Forgiveness is not just for the past; it is the shape of our future. To forgive is to live the life of heaven now, to let the new creation begin in us. "Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered" (Psalm 32:1).

What would your life look like if forgiveness was your default setting, not your last resort?

## **Stories from the Saints and the Everyday**

St. Maria Goretti forgave her attacker as she lay dying, planting the seed of his conversion.

St. Peter, after denying Jesus, was not shamed, but given the chance to declare his love three times (John 21:15-17), turning his greatest failure into a new beginning.

A parishioner, after decades of estrangement from the brother, finally wrote a letter of forgiveness. The reconciliation that followed brought healing not just to them, but to their entire family.

What story of forgiveness-ancient or modern-gives you hope?

### **Questions for the Heart**

- Who do I need to forgive, and what is stopping me?
- Where do I need to ask for forgiveness?
- How has God's mercy changed my life?
- What small step can I take today toward healing and peace?
- Is there someone I need to forgive, but also to invite to change?
- What would it look like to forgive while still seeking what is right?
- Is there a grudge that has kept me captive? What would it feel like to let it go?
- What relationships in my life need the healing that only forgiveness can bring?
- Can I forgive even if the other never says "I'm sorry"?
- What does it mean to me that my sins are "remembered no more" (Hebrews 8:12)?
- How can I balance justice and mercy in my own life?
- What would my life look like if forgiveness was my default setting?

## **A Final Blessing**

May you know the gentle strength of God's mercy. May you find the courage to forgive, the humility to seek forgiveness, and the joy that comes from hearts made new. And may the peace of Christ, who forgave us from the cross, fill your days with hope.

Forgiveness is not a single act, but a journey-a thousand small steps, a hundred new beginnings. Sometimes, the story doesn't end the way we hope. But every time we forgive, we step a little closer to the freedom and joy that forgiveness brings, for ourselves and for the world.

Blessings and Peace

Fr Julian Belich