

Just as Jesus attended to the spiritual well-being of those he ministered to, these Spiritual Works of Mercy guide us to "help our neighbor in their spiritual needs"

FORGIVE ALL INJURIES

The challenge of forgiving

In our Catholic Christian tradition, we are aware of the frequent call of Jesus to forgive our enemies and of His own prayer of forgiveness for those who crucified Him. In the Lord's Prayer we are clearly challenged to be open to receiving God's loving forgiveness and, in turn, offering that forgiveness to ourselves and to others.

Perhaps because of the sacramental focus of Catholicism, our learning about forgiveness was often limited to the sacrament of reconciliation or confession, as we previously knew it. This sacrament can indeed be a great blessing in our lives, but we have often not learned or understood the difficult steps in the human process of forgiveness that is the everyday challenge to us all.

While we believe God's forgiveness is unconditional, constant and always available to us, and we also need to realize that our own coming to forgiveness involves several stages as we let go and work through hurts, anger, resentments and desire for revenge. However, as we are healed, we are then able to accept God's merciful forgiveness and, in turn, offer such forgiveness to ourselves and others.

In this liturgical year as we listen to the Gospel readings from Matthew, we will be challenged on several occasions to forgive. In Matthew 5:23-24, Jesus insists that we are to make peace with others before we approach the altar of God. Facing this clear command, we may ask, "So, how do I actually forgive?"

We are aware that often when we decide to forgive we still struggle with painful memories and feelings. From this experience we learn that forgiveness is not only a simple act of will, but a process that takes time involving our memories and our feelings. In response to Jesus' command regarding offering our gift, perhaps the best we can do is to take the first step in making peace and then offer our gift.

Forgiving without forgetting

In beginning and all through the process of forgiveness, we are called to prayer. Sometimes, the only prayer we can offer is to ask for the grace to want to forgive. It may take time to be able to pray for the person who hurt us. We can, however, be encouraged in remembering that God is present to us in every step of the forgiveness journey, supporting and challenging us to "love one another as I have loved you." (John 15:12)

One of the factors that can make forgiveness so difficult is our misunderstandings regarding the nature of forgiveness. A common example of such confusion is the frequently repeated maxim, "forgive and forget." This is often taken as a biblical teaching, whereas it is a line from Shakespeare's play, "King Lear." To forget a serious hurt is not possible.

A more accurate biblical injunction is "remember and forgive" --- i.e. remember God's mercy toward you in order that you can forgive someone else. We find this approach in Jesus' parable of the unforgiving debtor (Matthew 18:23-35). The servant who has been forgiven an enormous debt refuses to forgive another servant who owes him a small amount. The unforgiving debtor is punished for not remembering how he has been forgiven and, in turn, for not forgiving his debtor.

Forgiveness distinct from reconciliation

A further obstacle to forgiveness is in thinking that to forgive one must be automatically reconciled with the offender. The ideal is that forgiveness would lead to reconciliation, however, that may not always be possible, and in some circumstances, not even desirable.

Instead, forgiveness on our part is the work we have to do with and for ourselves to be released from the anguish that binds us to the offender. This inner work does not depend on whether the offender acknowledges the offense, seeks reconciliation, or is still alive or not.

In all this work of forgiveness, we remember that we are unconditionally loved by God, as is the one who has hurt us. Trusting in this love we move forward, step by step, held in this merciful love, learning to forgive as we have been forgiven, hoping that, in time, some reconciliation may be possible.

Let Us Pray:

Holy Spirit, as You so generously forgive us, help us to forgive others. If we hurt others give us the strength to apologize. If people hurt us, give us the strength to forgive and to keep away any form of hate, anger or retaliation. Help us to recognize the valuable gift of forgiveness and the power of Your love in our lives. Holy Mother, as I pray this rosary (optional yet encouraged) I ask that you please intercede for me and all the other members of our Parish as we begin to perform these holy actions. Heavenly Father, please hear our prayers because they are asked in Jesus' name. Amen