

**W**hen we think of all the things that need forgiving, we begin to appreciate how vital the spirit of forgiveness is to keep each of us, and all of us together, intact. Forgiveness is not just a thing nice people do. It's not a tactic we might consider for personal improvement or to tidy up our spiritual lives. As the world we live in spirals toward greater feats of injustice, greed, violence, and bigotry, the reasons to forgive mount astronomically. The cost of unforgiveness, too, becomes ever more apparent. Forgiveness reveals itself to be not just one possible option for the future but the only viable chance we've got to have a future.

The human race must learn to forgive, to practice forgiveness, to choose it, to seek it, to value it, and to want it. That means each of us individually must do the same, because the world begins in the human heart.





# THE FORGIVENESS BOOK

A Catholic Approach

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PUBLICATIONS

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## This Business of Forgiveness

*Nobody ever forgets where he buried a hatchet.  
— Kin Hubbard, American humorist*

Most of us are not crazy about the forgiveness business. Why forgive? When we get mad at someone, after all, we've got reasons for it. That person has "trespassed against us," as the saying goes—literally, he or she has crossed a line that shouldn't be crossed. That leaves us hurt, offended, or tried beyond the breaking point of our patience. If we should entertain that anger for more than a day, it's likely to go into cold storage for a season or longer, in the interior vault marked "resentment." There the original outrage and our response to it becomes part of us, a possession as real and solid as any treasure.

When it comes to storing offenses however, such “treasure” is not valued or welcome. Emotionally speaking, it’s radioactive, the sort of thing that requires a special team in hazmat suits to go in and extract. But where will that special team come from to relieve us of the hazardous material of our resentment? Who can bring relief and healing, and restore wholeness to our relationships?

✦ **Forgiveness has to be chosen,  
and we have to choose it,  
or the healing won’t begin.**

The work of forgiveness may seem like an ugly job, but somebody’s got to do it. Truth is, the alternative to forgiveness is far uglier: hardened hearts, broken relationships, memories full of shrapnel, and families or communities paralyzed and divided.

The territory of unforgiveness is also perilous, fraught with insecurity and danger: just ask citizens of Northern Ireland, the Middle East, Africa, or the fractured neighborhoods of any modern city close to home. The interior landscape of unforgiveness in the human heart is just as unlivable as the one outside. If there’s a way out of this personal horror of resentment and hatred, many people would love to find it.

Forgiveness is the way, and it is possible. But it isn’t, strictly speaking, natural; that is, it isn’t according to our nature. Forgiveness has to be chosen, and we have to choose it, or the healing won’t begin. This is the flipside of free will that we don’t always consider. Being free to do what we want means living with the consequences of what we choose. We need to make thoughtful choices to avoid the pre-set defaults of human nature, and a soured, bitter, vindictive heart is the default result of a life lived without deliberate acts of forgiveness.

Recently the two of us writing this book attended a workshop on forgiveness at a parish in a nearby town. Unfamiliar with



the church grounds, we wandered around for a while looking for an open door. Finally, we spotted a priest hurrying by with his arms full of materials. “Is this the way to the workshop?” one of us called out.

“Forgiveness? Over there,” the priest replied, directing us to the adjacent parish hall. And then mischievously he added, “And condemnation? Over there!” pointing back to the church. We all laughed ruefully, acknowledging that sometimes we do experience our relationship to the church as a likely encounter with disapproval.

What’s even more rueful is that, even when the divergent paths of forgiveness and condemnation are clearly pointed out to us, all too often we go down the path of condemnation anyway. Why would we do that? Perhaps it’s because condemnation is the more familiar route. Have you ever taken a wrong turn on a strange road, only to repeat the error each time you come to that same spot? Once reinforced, a pattern establishes itself and gets harder to break the longer we pursue it. If condemnation is the way we habitually go—if it’s the rule under which we were raised and is repeated in subsequent relationships—it will be that much more difficult to take a fresh route to a forgiving future.

If forgiveness is so unnatural, unpracticed, and hard to do, then why should we forgive? The best reason is because it is the only road to freedom. Every other way—condemnation, blaming, open hostility, self-righteousness, hidden resentment, cold anger, cynicism, frozen emotions, pretense—entraps us in the pain that originally caused the breach of relationship. Without forgiveness, we can only multiply enemies and isolation. In time, those who cannot forgive will find the avenue of love less available as the boulevard of self-defense and self-justification grows ever wider.

Our world is full of heartache, much of it unavoidable. But the special brand of anguish that comes from the unwillingness to forgive is something we don't have to live with. Whether you are seeking forgiveness for yourself or hope to find the capacity to forgive someone else, it's time to forge a new way.

This book is subtitled *A Catholic Approach*. We did so for two reasons. One is that we both come from the Roman Catholic tradition. We are a religious educator and a pastor.

This approach is also "catholic" in the sense that it is universally applicable. Catholics don't have a lock on the forgiveness process. Forgiveness is an ideal shared by all religious traditions and people of good will. Because the authors are pastoral ministers, we've seen the damage that unforgiveness causes in marriages, families, and whole communities, not to mention what it does to the individuals who struggle with the pain of unhealed past injuries. We're convinced that forgiveness is the only sure route to healing, and the only way for followers of Jesus to put their faith into practice. No one can believe in the God of mercy and deny that same mercy to others. People can't receive the free and full amnesty of grace for their own sinfulness and still demand that those around them pay for their offenses.

We may not be experts in forgiveness, but we are among the grateful recipients of God's generous gift of it. Out of trust in God's mercy, in the hope of our own healing, for the love of Jesus, we dare to offer some words about the wonder of forgiveness and how it is ultimately the last best lifestyle for this world...and the next.

May the peace of Christ heal and claim your heart!

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