

Sacrament of Reconciliation

The Sacrament of Reconciliation, along with that of the Anointing of the Sick, is one of the sacraments of healing. God forgives us whenever we turn to God with true contrition in our hearts...that is, with true sorrow for having sinned and a determination to do one's best to keep from the same sins in the future. Jesus teaches us that, to receive God's forgiveness, we must be forgiving of others. In the Lord's Prayer he taught us to ask, "Forgive us our sins **as** we forgive those who sin against us." and in Matthew 6:14-15, he says, "If you forgive others their transgressions, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, neither will your heavenly Father forgive your transgressions."

The following are examples of people who have taken Jesus' words to heart and have forgiven others who have offended them. They are examples for us to follow.

Maria Teresa Goretti born October 16, 1890 in Italy, third out of six children. Her family was poor. Her father Luigi died from malaria when she was just 9 years old. While her brothers, mother, and sister worked in the fields, Maria would cook, sew, watch her infant sister, and keep the house clean.

On July 5, 1902, a 19 year old neighbor, Alessandro Serenelli, came by and found eleven-year-old Maria alone sewing. He tried to rape her, but she fought him off. Alessandro choked and then stabbed her several times before running away. Maria's little sister Teresa woke up and started screaming. Neighbors came in and found Maria and rushed her to the nearest hospital. She died the next day, but was alert enough to express forgiveness for her murderer and that she wanted him to be able to go to heaven.

Alessandro Serenelli was captured shortly after Maria's death and sentenced to 30 years in prison. He remained unrepentant for three years until a local bishop Giovanni Blandini visited him in jail. Serenelli repented and told of a dream in which Maria Goretti had appeared to him and given him lilies, which burned in his hands." ¹After his release, Alessandro Serenelli visited Maria's still-living mother, Assunta, and begged her forgiveness. She forgave him, saying that if Maria had forgiven him on her deathbed then she could not do less. They attended Mass together the next day, receiving Communion side by side. Alessandro reportedly prayed every day to Maria Goretti for the rest of his life and was present at the Vatican in 1950 when she was canonization as a Saint of the Church. He later became a lay Franciscan brother, living in a monastery until his death in 1970.

Pope John Paul II - Mehmet Ali Agca

On Wednesday May 13, 1981, Pope John Paul II was in an open-air vehicle blessing the crowds in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican when some shots rang out. Mehmet Ali Agca had fired four shots into the pope at close range. Pope John Paul II was critically wounded and bleeding severely, but recovered. Agca was captured and imprisoned. Two years later, the pope went to meet with the prisoner and forgave him, later asking the authorities to set him free.

Rwandan Genocide 1994

After centuries of ethnic competition and tensions between the minority Tutsi, who had controlled power, and the majority Hutu peoples, the Hutu gained control in a rebellion in 1962 and overthrew the Tutsi monarchy. In 1990, a Tutsi rebel group invaded northern Rwanda, heightening ethnic tensions and plunging the country into civil war. After centuries of intermarriage, many people were really both Tutsi and Hutu, but their official ID's indicated one or the other. Moreover, people of both groups lived as neighbors in every city and village. Those in power told the people that the Tutsi intended to enslave the Hutu and must be resisted at all costs. When the Hutu leader was killed in April 1994, a genocide began, supported and coordinated by the national government as well as by local military and civil officials and mass media. Over the course of 100 days, an estimated 800,000 people were killed...many by their very neighbors who were caught up in the hatred and fear.

After all the violence, is it possible to heal the scars...is it possible to forgive?

In 2010, a Catholic Relief Services representative in Rwanda, Lane Hartill, spoke with one woman who has taken forgiveness to a new level.

Nicholas and Innocent used to be buddies. Innocent, a fisherman, would bring Nicholas fresh fish that he caught. They'd share beers and sit and chat in the shade of banana trees. With the government propaganda, however, Innocent, a Hutu, began to change and developed a hatred for Tutsis.

In the early months of 1994, that hatred started to peak throughout Rwanda. Radio stations denounced Tutsis. Their Hutu neighbors, with whom they had lived peacefully for years, gathered at Nicholas' home and dragged his wife Jeanne and her 11 children out of the house, threatening them. Jeanne ran into the forest with 9 of the children. Innocent took a large knife and killed the two oldest sons...Nicholas was killed on his way home from work that afternoon.

For two years, Jeanne suffered inner turmoil of anger and fear, hatred and sorrow. She couldn't sleep. Innocent, meanwhile, was in jail. Wracked with guilt, he began sending messages through his wife Dorcella to Jeanne, asking, begging, for forgiveness. Finally, Jeanne came to realize that the only way to have peace in her own heart would be to forgive Innocent. She knew that forgiveness could calm her mind, that it could set her free from those awful thoughts in her head. She forgave Innocent unconditionally. She does not have an ounce of resentment toward him, and now visits him in prison where he is serving a 27-year sentence as often as she can. She brings him sugar and bread to supplement the bland prison food. They have become friends. The past is forgiven.

Another woman said, "Ninety-two people in my family were killed. I try to adapt and be peaceful in my heart, so that if any of the prisoners come to me and say 'I'm sorry,' I will definitely forgive them."

Oshea Israel and Mary Johnson

Back in 1993, Oshea Israel shot Laramiun Byrd just outside of North Memorial Hospital near Minneapolis...not just once but several times, to be sure he was dead. Oshea was caught, convicted and sentenced to prison in Stillwater. Laramiun's mother, Mary Johnson, lived with the pain and hatred for over a decade as Israel sat in prison. She later said, "He was an animal to me and I felt he was where he needed to be. He needed to be caged." But after 17 ½ years in prison for Israel and just months after his release, they're more than friends. Johnson said, "He's like my son." How did their friendship begin? Johnson said with nudges from God, she eventually went to visit Israel in prison five years ago. She said, "That was one of the most profound events of my life. It was life-changing." She said the visit brought her to her knees. She said, "When I stood up, I began to feel something in my feet. And it just began to move all the way up my body and it just went and I knew, I knew that all the anger, all the hatred, all the animosity I had for him, I knew it was over with. It was gone." Both her son and Oshea had been drug dealers and were involved in gangs. Today she and Oshea are working together to promote healing between families of victims and perpetrators, raising funds for a support group Johnson founded called "From Death to Life". As Oshea Israel describes it, "God brought us together."

Jesus on the Cross: Father Forgive them

Jesus gave us the perfect example when, unjustly beaten and put to die on the cross, he forgave those who had called for his death and been instrumental in his suffering. He chose to forgive rather than give in to thoughts of hatred and revenge. In this he won the victory over sin and temptation. That is the victory he shares with us. Jesus beat Satan every time he was tempted. He had a perfect score...1000's to 0. We don't do as well, but through God's grace Jesus keeps turning Satan's score back to zero every time we turn to God with true contrition in our hearts. Such is the way Jesus shares his victory with us through the gift of forgiveness of sin.

JESUS IS THE SACRAMENT OF GOD WE ARE THE SACRAMENT OF JESUS

Remember, however, that we are to forgive others if we want God to forgive us. How many times? Peter asked Jesus, "How often must I forgive my brother who sins against me, seven times?" Seven was a number symbolic of perfection for Jewish people. Peter was asking if he had to forgive perfectly. Jesus upped the ante and said, "No, not seven times. I tell you 70 X 7 times!" That does not mean 490 times or to the extent of human capabilities. It means we need to go beyond our own capabilities and forgive even more perfectly with the help of God's grace...70 X 7.

Sacrament of Reconciliation

In the Catholic Church we celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation to express our sorrow for our sins and receive God's forgiveness. The best word is "reconciliation" since sacraments are about what happens between God and us in the sacrament. "Confession" and "Penance" are things we do, but that falls short of the central point of the sacrament which is what God does for us, and that is "reconciles" us to himself anew.

The priest acts as a representative of both God and the community to receive one's confession and expression of sorrow for sin. He is then God's instrument through whom God forgives sins, as the priest says, "I absolve you of your sins *in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*" As God's instrument the priest has the attitude of Jesus who *wants* to forgive and celebrates..."there is more joy in heaven over one repentant sinner than over 99 who have no need of repentance."

The priest treats everything a person tells him in confession with confidentiality. That means it is so secret that the priest cannot tell anyone or talk with anyone about what someone confessed...not even the person him/herself outside of the confessional. It is that private! If a priest were to divulge what someone told him, he could be barred from ever hearing confessions again. That's confidentiality!