

How to Forgive the Church



If you've been hurt by someone or something in the Church, forgiveness is probably the last thing on your mind. You may feel as if you have been betrayed. You may feel angry or resentful. You may want to tell anyone who will listen about how horrible the Catholic Church is. You may begin to look for another parish or another faith.

While all of these things may help you blow off steam, none of them will bring resolution to the problem. None of them will give you a sense of closure.

You may not want to believe it, but only forgiveness will ease the pain you are experiencing. Only forgiveness will bring you a healing sense of peace.



**“If we really want to love, we must learn how to forgive.”
- Bl. Teresa of Calcutta**

Why should I forgive?

When you forgive, it doesn't affect the Church as much as it affects you. Forgiveness frees you from anger, resentment, frustration, and pain. It allows you to let the poison drain out of the wound, so it can begin to heal.

Experts agree that forgiveness is good for you. Without forgiveness, bitterness takes control. It hardens your heart. It affects your prayer life, your relationships, your thought processes, and even your health.

In the Gospels, Jesus tells us to forgive. When Peter asked if it is enough to forgive seven times, Jesus tells him to forgive seventy times seven times (Mt.18:22).

Jesus assured us that if we forgive, we will be forgiven our failings (Mt. 6:14). And, on the cross, Jesus gave us an example of forgiveness when he prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Lk. 23:34).

Understanding what happened

Painful things happen because the Church is made up of human beings. We may hold the Church to a higher ideal, but the reality is that people in the Church make mistakes.





❖ **Some hurts stem from misunderstandings.** A comment intended as a joke hurts your feelings. You can't break into a tight-knit parish clique. You feel as if your ideas or efforts are unappreciated. Your pastor doesn't have time to talk. You don't get the kind of help from the Church that you wanted or needed.

❖ **Rules can cause pain.** You are unable to get a letter of recommendation to be a godparent because you don't attend Mass regularly. There is a dispute over music at a wedding or a funeral. An annulment was granted . . . or refused.

❖ **Change creates conflict.** The Diocese closes your parish or school. A new pastor eliminates your favorite Mass. Your idea is rejected. You are opposed to a new fundraising campaign. You are horrified at the plans for remodeling the church. You are disappointed because things didn't turn out the way you expected.

❖ **Tiredness, stress, or illness causes impatience, poor judgment, and altered behavior.** A priest who was up all night with a dying parishioner overreacts to something you say. A sister with diabetes suffers from mood swings. A church employee who is struggling with a family crisis doesn't follow through on something he or she promised to do.

❖ **Some hurts are caused by hypocrisy.** You may be disturbed and disillusioned by things that someone in the Church says. You may feel as if some people in the Church are not living the Gospel message.

❖ **Some situations move beyond human weakness into the realm of sin.** Whenever someone in the Church puts power, pride, or selfish interests ahead of the needs or welfare of others, people suffer. Cases of

physical, sexual, or emotional abuse in the Church are the most insidious examples.

“I am not made or unmade by the things which happen to me but by my reaction to them.”

- St. John of the Cross

Choosing to Forgive

When you forgive, you make a conscious decision to let go of the hurt. The Church, or the person representing the Church, may not deserve your forgiveness. You may not feel like forgiving, but you set aside those negative thoughts, and you make a conscious decision to let go of whatever anger or resentment you have within you.

❖ You don't condone what happened. You don't forget what happened. You try to separate your anger toward the person in the Church who hurt you from the divine side of the Church, which is a constant source of holiness. You choose not to let what happened destroy your relationship with God or the Church.

❖ Forgiveness isn't easy. It requires prayer, persistence, and patience.

❖ Begin by asking God for the generosity to forgive as He forgives.

❖ Write about it. Then, burn the paper and let the smoke become a symbol of giving it to God.



“The truth of peace calls upon everyone to cultivate productive and sincere relationships; it encourages them to seek out and to follow the paths of forgiveness and reconciliation, to be transparent in their dealings with others, and to be faithful to their word.”

- Pope Benedict XVI

❖ Reflect on Jesus' words from the Sermon on the Mount: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

❖ Talk to a priest or go to confession and say, "I've been angry and hurt for a long time, and I want to let go of this."

❖ Pray for the Church and for the person who caused the pain.

❖ Ask God's forgiveness for the ways you've hurt others.

If anger resurfaces, remind yourself that you have already made the decision to forgive. Ask God's help to keep from slipping back into bitterness or resentment.

A History of Forgiveness

Throughout history, many holy people have suffered because of someone or something in the Church. Their ability to forgive was an important element in putting them on the path to sainthood.

❖ St. John Chrysostom (347-407) was condemned by Church authorities on false charges, removed from office as archbishop, and banished from Constantinople.

❖ St. Francis of Assisi (1181-1226) was rejected by his own followers.

❖ St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) was imprisoned twice by Church authorities for teaching "dangerous doctrines."

❖ St. Joan of Arc (1412-1431) was sentenced to death by a Church tribunal on charges of heresy and witchcraft.





**“I am aware of the n
failed her. Yet I claim
home. A broken hom**

- ❖ St. Bernadette Soubirous (1844-1879), who experienced apparitions of Our Lady at Lourdes, was treated as “a useless person” and “a little fool” by the other sisters in her convent.
- ❖ Ven. Catherine McAuley (1778-1841), founder of the Sisters of Mercy, endured the criticism and persecution of priests for opening a house for the poor in a wealthy Dublin neighborhood.
- ❖ Ven. Catherine de Hueck Doherty (1896-1985), founder of Madonna House, endured the taunts of “good” Catholics, who accused her of being a Communist because of her ministry to African Americans during the 1940’s.

The fact that the Catholic Church has survived 2,000 years, in spite of human weakness, is an indication that the Holy Spirit has kept it alive and growing.

In March 2000, Pope John Paul II publicly apologized for past and present sins committed by Catholics in the name of the Church. Many bishops have asked forgiveness for human failings in their own dioceses.



ways the Church has failed me, and I have
is Church as mine. She is my mother; my
es! Broken because you and I are broken.”

- Sr. Macrina Wiederkehr, OSB

Helping Someone Else to Forgive

❖ Encourage the person to talk to a priest or someone on the parish staff. Talking opens the wound and allows the emotional energy to dissipate.

❖ Help the person to put the problem into perspective. Was it an honest mistake or misunderstanding? Can the situation be clarified by talking to the person who caused the problem? Or is it necessary to go to the next level of authority, such as the pastor or the bishop?

❖ Try to find a way to resolve the problem. What does this person need? An apology? A compromise? A truce? In cases involving abuse, it is imperative that the situation be reported and investigated. Professional counseling may be required.

❖ Encourage the person to stay connected to the spiritual nourishment the Church provides in the Mass and the Sacraments. Suggest that the person find a new parish, if necessary, but encourage him or her not to leave the Church.

St. Paul assures us “that in everything God works for good with those who love him” (Rom. 8:28). When someone is hurt by the Church, it is difficult to imagine how anything good could come from it. It is only by following the path of forgiveness that the pain eventually subsides and a deep peace embraces the soul. This is the essence of spiritual healing. It is the peace the world cannot give. It is a gift of grace from a loving God.



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HOLY FATHER'S PRAYER FOR FORGIVENESS

Let us pray that each one of us, looking to the Lord Jesus, meek and humble of heart, will recognize that even men of the Church, in the name of faith and morals, have sometimes used methods not in keeping with the Gospel in the solemn duty of defending the truth.

Lord, God of all men and women, in certain periods of history Christians have at times given in to intolerance and have not been faithful to the great commandment of love, sullyng in this way the face of the Church, your Spouse. Have mercy on your sinful children and accept our resolve to seek and promote truth in the gentleness of charity, in the firm knowledge that truth can prevail only in virtue of truth itself. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Prayed by Pope John Paul II on March 12, 2000

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