

# FORGIVENESS & HEALING

by Fr. Dave Heney

## *How do Catholics find peace after being hurt by others?*

*Perhaps it is no accident that a central event of our faith is an innocent person being hurt on a cross. Somewhere in that we seek a way to recover from our pain. But forgiveness and healing are different and often misunderstood, which can lead to even more hurt and sorrow. Knowing well how to recover from hurt is important to finding peace.*

Getting hurt is traumatic, and victims can feel many levels of emotional or physical pain. We can understand that *range* of traumatic experience by knowing the (a) the **intensity** of a victim's *experience* of hurt, how violent it was, and what *meaning* the perpetrator had in the victim's life (b) its **frequency**, or how often the hurtful behavior occurred, and (c), its **duration**, or over how many days, weeks, or years it occurred. These three ideas can help us put our pain in perspective. While it is difficult to compare one person's experience of pain with another's, trauma should neither be casually minimized nor dramatically maximized. It is the truth of things that will set us free. Each person should be listened to and treated respectfully as the individual he or she is.

### THE SPECIAL CASE OF PHYSICAL ABUSE:

Victims of any kind of physical abuse often feel especially confused because they face a complex mix of moral, psychological, and even legal issues that both overlap and conflict. Victims might feel an intense sense of shame as a result. They are caught between the legal rights of abusers, the shock of their own trauma, and perhaps even the disbelief of others. All of this makes it difficult for victims to find relief or even speak about the event until sometime later.

Victims can feel great pain but that pain can increase if others react passively to their cries for help. While abusers traumatize specific victims, anyone who covers up these events make victims of everyone. It shocks and hurts us all to know that trusted people would act

in a way that allows such trauma to continue. Only a few years ago, community leaders, mental health professionals, and even the church considered abuse a treatable and curable psychological disorder, in the same manner as alcoholism. Now everyone knows better the difference between treating and curing the several different types of abusers. Prevention remains a goal. Yet even now there is still some debate over a valid and reliable assessment test that a community can trust to find abusers before they strike.

Physical or emotional abuse involves an assault on a victim's dignity against his or her will which can bring intense shame. People feel stigmatized precisely because our sense of personal dignity is closely related to our physical and emotional well-being. Abuse is invasive, deeply demeaning, intensely shameful, and devastating to self-respect. *However, our response to victims should never replicate that same invasion of privacy or ignore the unique dignity of each person.* Every victim should be treated as the unique person he or she is. We have to be careful not to lump victims into stereotypes, or presume we know how they feel, or assume we know the level of trauma experienced. Victims need careful listening without presumption or jumping to conclusions. Children may suffer a lot or suffer very little from either intense or mild abuse. We must learn which it is before acting because responses vary a great deal. Presuming we know their experience once again treats children as we would like and not as they actually need to be treated. Moreover, legal courts require verifiable evidence that is hard to get from a crime that has few wit-

nesses. In early court cases about abuse in the 1980's, the counseling profession as a whole lost a lot of credibility in its race to "recover lost memories" of events that might have been true but could not be verified, as in the famous McMartin trial of 1983. No wonder victims remained silent even longer. Finally, in an effort to, at last, protect the dignity of victims; the courts have made it difficult to get information about cases by "sealing" the files from the view of those not involved in the case. In these sealed cases, the victims "own their own story of abuse" and receive again some personal autonomy. They may reveal the story when they choose to reveal it.

### **Forgiveness & healing are different**

***Forgiveness is not forgetting!*** Forgiveness is not "sweeping under the carpet," or pretending something never happened. Forgiveness still demands justice and accountability for the perpetrator. But forgiveness does not seek retaliation. When we forgive we are only deciding *to not seek revenge*. Forgiveness is a rational decision even in the midst of great emotional pain to break the cycle of retaliation. This is important because *revenge only causes more violence*. Retaliation for the purpose of punishment causes even more criminal or hurtful behavior. No one wants that. Forgiveness demands justice and accountability while avoiding revenge. It is the first step toward healing, recovery, and change for both victim and perpetrator.

Healing is a very different event than forgiveness. Healing is that feeling of peace and well being that comes from a sense of recovery of lost dignity. Healing is more of a feeling and so takes more time. Healing for everyone whether victim or perpetrator usually involves several steps that arise from our natural response to pain. For example, when get

hurt we might shout out a series of demands such as,...

- Stop it! Stop hurting me!
- Why did this happen? Why me?
- Give me back what you have taken!
- Don't ever do it again!"

These are just some of the natural and immediate reactions we might have to being hurt, yet they also reveal the very steps necessary for healing. They accomplish the basic conditions for healing of everyone involved. We can write them in a formal way like this....

- **Restraint:** we need to have the hurt stop, now and forever
- **Revelation:** we need to hear the story of what happened and why
- **Restoration:** we need to have some kind of restoration of what was lost
- **Repentance:** we must know the abuser has remorse and has changed forever
- **Return:** we need to return to living life as fully as possible, and maybe even reconciling with the perpetrator.

There may be other names for these steps but the underlying dynamics are the same. We are lucky if we can satisfy all of them well. Sometimes we may never be able to reconcile or return to a former relationship because the one who hurt us is gone, in jail, deceased, or uninterested in reconciling. We may never know the whole story of what happened either, or get back what was taken, but to the extent we can experience satisfaction in each step the easier and faster healing becomes.

Belief in Jesus Christ demands that we are concerned for the soul and well being of both victim *and* perpetrator. We want both to recover what was lost; the victim to recover personal dignity and the perpetrator to re-

cover respect for other people. We believe punishment can never be used *for the purpose* of revenge or retaliation, or *for the purpose* of inflicting pain. However, punishment may be used as a means to help accomplish any or all of these steps listed above, e.g. jail time is often a motivation to repent. Our dignity is not dependent on the response of others even though that response is welcome if possible. If the one who hurt us is dead or unavailable, healing is still possible because the ultimate source of recovery is the relationship we have with the Lord. No person can provide that for us.

### **Recovering from suffering**

When suffering occurs we cry out, "Why!" We have a natural need to understand unexplained hurtful behavior, and naturally feel it strange that someone would hurt us for no good reason. That desire for knowledge is the beginning of recovery. Knowledge is power, and good solid information slowly reverses the powerlessness that comes from victimization. Learning about sin, the motives of hurtful people, our own coping mechanisms, and our own feelings help answer "why" questions. Knowledge helps restore our self-esteem and sense of worth.

Knowledge helps us find some *meaning* to the event too. When we relate an event to a larger context we give it meaning. We set the event inside a larger perspective from which we can see its larger significance. For example, if we suffer long hours at work we can bear it more readily when we understand this hardship provides care and comfort for our family. The larger the context the more hardship we can bear. If our wounds or pain come from actually *saving* another's life then we can experience the most profound meaning. In our faith, we acknowledge the power of "offering it up". This means we offer our suffering for some good effect in others through

the Lord. We might offer it for the souls in purgatory, or a friend's conversion, or any person's benefit. While we can see the effects of our hard work when it provides for our family we often don't see the spiritual effects of offering suffering for others. Nonetheless, it is a part of our faith. Knowing that our pain may have some good helps alleviate its effect. It takes on meaning. The worse pain of all is that pain that is suffered for no reason. It is meaningless.

No suffering is ever wanted. Even Jesus wished, "May this cup pass from me" when he anticipated His crucifixion in the Garden of Gethsemane. We never wish for suffering or ever call suffering "good." However, if it comes our way, we know what to do because of the example of Jesus: act with intelligence to face it, overcome it, change it, and find a deeper meaning and wisdom from it. It is no accident that a central image of our faith is an innocent person being hurt on a cross. Our *response* to suffering is central to our faith and the message of Jesus.

The passage of time also brings healing but not from the "forgetfulness" of years. Time heals because we slowly regain self-esteem as we continue living our life and working at our job and accomplishing things. Personal accomplishment reveals the sense of worthlessness that might come from being hurt is a lie. With time, we slowly realize we are a capable person with dignity after all. That dignity is from the Lord and is irrevocable.

Two stories reveal something of this dignity.

Several people worked together at a job where soon there was great anxiety. There was a new owner arriving and there would be some layoffs. Everyone took out his or her frustration on the youngest and most recently hired person. The employees gossiped,

lied, insulted, tricked, and hurt the youngest worker in many cruel and hurtful ways. Yet throughout it all the young worker was calm and peaceful. He never sought revenge. When asked if he was upset at such harassment, he calmly replied, "Not really..., you see..., *I'm the son of the new owner!*"

Well, when you have a special relationship with the boss, it doesn't matter what the others do; your job is secure. When we have a strong relationship with God, it doesn't matter how others insult us either. Our dignity and self-esteem are secure. We know we are loved and treasured by the God of the universe. Only God can tell us who we are and He thinks we are worthy of laying down His life for us! (John 3:16)

An elementary school teacher with an abusive spouse hears offensive insults all day long at home. Every comment is an insult and deeply disrespectful. She responds passively with a quiet and building resentment. At school there are young students who sometimes say hurtful things too. Yet the same teacher *doesn't take personally* the insults of young students at school precisely because the children are clearly immature and ignorant.

Well, so is anyone who insults us. If children really knew the value of their teacher they wouldn't do it. Neither would any adult. While dying Jesus looked at his executioners and said, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they are doing (...they are all ignorant children)." (Luke 23:34) This helps us understand the meaning of "turning the other cheek." (Matthew 5:38-48). Turning the other cheek does not mean passively accepting violence to ourselves. We are never allowed to do that unless our acceptance of violence might inspire the perpetrator to stop. That was the approach of Gandhi and Dr. Martin

Luther King. That takes a lot of wisdom, self-discipline, and an absolutely correct appraisal of the perpetrator. "Turning the right cheek" refers to something else. Slapping someone on the right cheek with your own right hand is necessarily a "backhand" slap which is a gesture of insult or disrespect. It is a strike at our *dignity*. But our dignity comes only from God and no one can ever take that away, so the first slap is pointless and not experienced as an actual physical attack. There is no need to seek revenge.

Avoiding revenge brings a wonderful side benefit. Avoiding the revenge cycle frees us to calmly discern even in the midst of criticism from others any kernel of truth that might be embedded in their attack and from which we can learn and change for the better. We are free to experience calmly and judge objectively the hurtful actions of others to ourselves. We stay the master of our reactions to the world around us, and we discover and remain at peace.

Forgiveness and healing both are about hope because they affirm that life can change and change for the better. If we could never get over a hurt or a sinner could never repent then there would be no reason for Jesus to come to earth. His presence affirms a bedrock of our faith; that we can change and change for the better. If we have hurt others, we know now the steps for healing. Confession is our step for forgiveness and healing with God. Confession is His sacrament that affirms our new life with God, ourselves, and others. God's forgiveness and healing grace in Confession affirm that whatever has been our past; our future can be better, more peaceful, and more joyful. We believe the way of the Lord provides that peace and joy and it sometimes includes the powerful events of forgiveness and healing.

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