



Forgiveness: Where Healing Begins

By María de Lourdes Ruiz Scaperlanda

At a climax in *The New York Times* bestseller novel “The Shack,” the protagonist Mackenzie argues with God about the impossibility of forgiving the man who killed his youngest daughter.

God simply responds: My grace is “the only way true forgiveness is ever possible. Don’t let the anger and pain and loss you feel prevent you from forgiving him and removing your hands from around his neck.”

“We can never forgive on our own,” agrees Austin Bishop Gregory M. Aymond. “It’s always God moving our hearts that enables us to forgive.”

Forgiveness is not about forgetting.

The phrase “forgive and forget,” observes Bishop Aymond, is “very naïve, foolish and inaccurate. [It] is to pretend that it never happened,” he says. “People often say that God erases our sin. But to erase is to pretend it never existed. God remembers our sins and lovingly forgives us.” Much in the same way, “God calls us to remember the sins of others and to lovingly forgive them.”

Forgiveness does not excuse the wrong or let the accuser off the hook.

“All actions have consequences and God calls us to make right the wrong we have done in this world or in the next. Forgiveness doesn’t mean that I’m not holding them responsible. When we have hurt another person, justice would require that they make up for the wrong that has been done,” notes Bishop Aymond, former chair of the Bishops’ Committee for Protection of Children and Young People.



Bishop Gregory M. Aymond,
diocese of Austin, TX



United States Conference of Catholic Bishops
Office of Child and Youth Protection | www.usccb.org/ocyp

To truly forgive someone, he said, one must face the hurt, the grief, the anger, and the reality of their actions – and bring the depth of that pain to God. And ask God to touch the brokenness and, ultimately, for the sake of oneself and the other person, to choose to let go and forgive.

But since “God not only works directly through prayer, but also through others,” Bishop Aymond adds, seeking professional help is fundamental. “Forgiveness is really saying, ‘I don’t like what happened to me. It was not fair. It was not just. I have been deeply hurt, but I’m willing to let go of the revenge.’”

Forgiveness is essential to the forgiver. “It takes a great deal of negative energy to hold onto a grudge, to live with that level of anger and depression,” says Bishop Aymond. “It gives the other person far too much power, more power than they would ever deserve.”

Forgiveness allows the forgiver to declare, “I am worthwhile and I’m not going to let you have any more power over me. It’s a way of putting that person’s actions in perspective.”

According to Bishop Aymond, the stages of grief outlined by Dr. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross for the dying can accurately be applied to forgiveness in sexual abuse. “Sexual abuse kills a part of the spirit of the person that never fully comes back to life. There is a death that has taken place, a death of innocence, of purity, of looking toward the other person as a caring person.”

It is therefore imperative not to push someone into forgiveness before they’re ready, Bishop Aymond says. “It’s important that they go through denial, anger, bargaining, and are able to identify those feelings. It certainly involves depression and eventually, resignation. Those are all very natural and understandable feelings. Unless we do that, we probably never get to forgiveness.”

To those who argue that some things are simply unforgivable, Bishop Aymond responds, “I think Jesus would disagree with that. Jesus forgives me and has never given up on me, and asks me to forgive others. Forgiveness can take months, it can take years,



it can take a lifetime. But I don't think there is anything that is unforgivable. Forgiveness is always possible, and always something that God calls us to try to embrace.”

Ultimately, “simply the desire to forgive is forgiveness,” Aymond emphasizes. “Forgiveness actually happens the very moment the person says to God, ‘I still hurt. I still feel revenge. But I would like to forgive.’ I think that is forgiveness in itself.”

