

Resource for Adult Faith Formation
Prepared for the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston



Teaching about God's Gift of Forgiveness



Catechetical Sunday

September 21, 2014

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

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About This Resource

This resource consists of nine teaching tools on the catechetical theme “Teaching About God’s Gift of Forgiveness.” Each of the nine contains a brief teaching, a single reflection question related to that teaching, and references to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults*, and the *Catechetical Framework for Lifelong Faith Formation for the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston*. What follows are three models for how this resource might be used. Parishes are free to adopt or adapt any or all of these models.

Model 1 – Use with existing gatherings of adults

There are many groups of adults that already gather regularly in parishes. These groups include parish councils, finance councils, fraternal organizations, various social outreach groups, and committees of every shape and size. Parishes could provide the leaders of the various groups with copies of the nine teaching tools with the suggestion that they use them during their regularly scheduled meetings. They could be used as a part of an opening or closing prayer.

The brief teaching is designed so that it can be read out loud in about two minutes. Following the reading, a minute could be given to allow each person to reflect individually and personally on the reflection question and then another minute to turn and share with one individual. In this way the use of each tool would take less than five minutes to implement and would not overly burden these groups. Rather, it is hoped that they would find it a useful tool to assist them in their catechetical and spiritual growth.

The included references could be used by the leader for his or her own personal preparation or could be shared with the group for those who might wish to do some additional study and reflection on their own.

It is suggested that groups use one tool each month so that the catechetical theme is developed in an intentional way throughout the year. This monthly use could correspond to the time period of September through May, traditionally the time of year during which parish organizations are most active. Those groups that meet more frequently might choose to complete the series in less time. Those groups that meet less frequently than monthly could either choose to do a subset of the nine tools or, better yet, use more than one tool at each gathering.

Model 2 – Publish in the parish bulletin or newsletters

Permission is given freely to parishes to reproduce this resource in parish bulletins or newsletters. For publications that come out at least monthly, the use of one tool each month is suggested. For those publications that come out less frequently, more than one tool may be published at a time.

Model 3 - Use as a starting point for a series of adult faith formation gatherings

The topics for the nine tools have been developed in a systematic way designed to unfold some aspects of the catechetical theme intentionally throughout the year. Each of the nine aspects could be the topic of an adult faith formation gathering. The teaching tool and reflection question could be an introductory activity at such a gathering and the various references could serve to assist the one preparing the series to gather additional information.

Tool 1: God desires to offer forgiveness and does so freely.

Teaching tool

The Catholic Church teaches that the world exists today in a broken and sinful state and that all people who are born into this world suffer the effects of this sinfulness. While to some this teaching may seem dark and negative, all people must acknowledge that with honest self-evaluation they find within themselves some tendencies toward selfishness, self-satisfaction, envy and pride that at times lead them to be less than the loving and generous people they at depth wish themselves to be. It is *hard* at times to be good and do what we already know to be the right thing. This comes on top of the reality that at times we also struggle to know and recognize what the right thing is.

In the face of this reality, God has responded and responded forcefully. By his own free choice God seeks to save the world from this brokenness. The Father has worked this salvation out over time. The Father's plan for salvation finds its fulfillment in the incarnation of his Word in Jesus Christ, who has become Emmanuel, God-with-us. It is in Jesus Christ that the bonds of sin have finally been broken. Through Jesus Christ, God has given us the gratuitous gift of his own very life. That is to say, through Jesus Christ God invites people to join in the inner life of the Most Holy Trinity. This is what we call sanctifying grace. The Holy Spirit infuses this gift of sanctifying grace on the souls of those who receive it, that they may be healed of sin and made holy. This is, to put it mildly, very, very, good news. And this good news is the source of our authentic joy.

We are in need of forgiveness; God desires to offer it, and does so freely.

Reflection Question

What difference might it make in your life as a Christian disciple if you began each day by intentionally recalling for yourself that we are all in need of forgiveness and that God freely offers that gift of forgiveness to each of us?

Additional References

Catechism of the Catholic Church nos. 416, 417, 723, 744, 2003, 2023

United States Catholic Catechism for Adults pp. 84-87, 91-92

Catechetical Framework for Lifelong Faith Formation MA.1.3.29, MA.3.3.10, MA.3.3.42

Tool 2: God chooses to mediate his graces through the sacraments.

Teaching tool

On the day of Pentecost, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit made the Church visible and manifest to the entire world. Peter's and all the apostles' preaching that brought about the baptism of thousands was the birth of a new age – the age of the Church. In this age of the Church, Christ manifests, makes present, and communicates his work of salvation through his Church's liturgy.

In this age of the Church, Christ lives and acts in and with his Church in a new way appropriate to this new age. He acts through the sacraments in what is called "the sacramental economy." The word economy here does not refer to finances or imports or exports, but the way things have been ordered by God. This sacramental economy, then, is the communication or "dispensation" of the fruits of Christ's Paschal Mystery.

Each sacrament, celebrated by the Church in the name of Christ, is an action of God by which God seeks to pour out his gifts and graces. Each sacrament has effects that are unique to it.

God has chosen this way to mediate his grace until Jesus Christ comes again. While in principle God could have chosen differently, we trust in God's provident design and respect this revelation of God.

We can therefore rightly expect that our access to God's gift of forgiveness comes first and foremost through the sacraments.

Reflection Question

Think of one time in which you were part of a sacramental celebration and in which you were powerfully aware of God's grace being poured out in that sacrament. How did you come away from that experience different?

Additional References

Catechism of the Catholic Church nos. 1076, 1110, 1113, 1123, 1129

United States Catholic Catechism for Adults pp. 168-170

Catechetical Framework for Lifelong Faith Formation MA.2.2.1, MA.2.2.5, MA.2.2.5

Tool 3: Baptism is the primordial sacrament of forgiveness.

Teaching tool

Baptism is always the first sacrament that a Christian receives; indeed, it is the sacrament that makes one a Christian. In receiving this sacrament a person is fundamentally, permanently and irrevocably changed. In the language of the Church, it is said that baptism leaves an indelible spiritual mark. There are many effects of this sacrament. These effects include: making one a co-heir with the crucified and risen Christ, a temple of the Holy Spirit, incorporating one into the Church, and making one a participant in Christ's three-fold office of priest, prophet, and king. But among all these effects there is another that stands out. Baptism forgives all sins, both Original and personal, and makes of one a new creation.

It is important to remember that baptism, and the forgiveness it brings, is a grace and gift from God that does not presuppose any human merit. We don't do anything to earn the graces of baptism. This is one of the reasons that the Church has always seen it as legitimate to baptize infants, a practice that goes back to apostolic times when entire households, infants included, were often baptized together.

Because of the Church's practice of infant baptism, and an infant's incapacity to commit a personal sin, people sometimes focus exclusively on the forgiveness of Original Sin and forget that baptism forgives personal sins as well. For adults being baptized as a part of RCIA this is a significant and important point to remember! In the early Church, when the baptism of adults was more common than it is today, they remembered this very well. In fact, there were times when many people delayed baptism until they were near death in order to make sure that all of the personal sins of their entire lifetime were washed away in the waters of baptism. Thankfully, today we recognize other sacramental opportunities for forgiveness so that we do not feel the need to delay baptism until near death.

Baptism is the first, and in many ways, the most important sacramental gift of God's forgiveness.

Reflection Question

Have you ever been witness to the baptism of an adult? If so, have you been able to visually see in them an expression of their experience of being, in that moment, forgiven of both Original Sin and all the personal sins of their entire life? What do you imagine that experience to be like? Knowing that you received the same graces in your own baptism, how does that affect your understanding of yourself as a Christian disciple?

Additional References

Catechism of the Catholic Church nos. 1263, 1265, 1282

United States Catholic Catechism for Adults p. 192

Catechetical Framework for Lifelong Faith Formation MA.2.2.15, MA.2.2.16

Tool 4: The forgiveness offered in the Sacrament of the Eucharist.

Teaching tool

Most Catholics, when they think about the relationship of the Eucharist to the idea of forgiveness, probably think first about the teaching of the Church that in order worthily to approach the sacramental encounter with the Lord in Holy Communion, one is to be in a state of grace. That is to say, one is not normally receive to communion if one is aware of any mortal sins on one's conscience and, in particular, if one is currently living in an objectively sinful state (e.g., living in a marriage not recognized as valid by the Catholic Church). The only exception to this is if there is a serious reason why one desires to receive communion and there is no opportunity to confess; in this case the person must make an act of perfect contrition in which one expresses, out of love for God, heartfelt sorrow and remorse for the wrongdoing, the intention to avoid it in the future, and the resolution of confessing as soon as possible

While this is certainly true and important, and is not to be overlooked, it sometimes leads people to think of communion as the reward for people who have already been forgiven and neglects the forgiveness made open and possible within the Eucharist itself. In the Eucharistic sacramental sacrifice the faithful, already united to Christ through baptism, join in offering themselves together with Christ's one eternal offering of himself on the cross. This serves as an offering for the sins of the living as well as the faithful departed who have died in Christ. This sacrifice also provides spiritual and temporal benefits from God by drawing them closer to Christ.

As a result, communion with the Body and Blood of Christ not only increases one's union with the Lord and one another (as the name itself indicates!) but also forgives venial sins and preserves one from future grave sin.

The Penitential Act at the beginning of Mass, no matter which of the many forms it takes, is a reminder of the mercy of God who in and through the Sacrament of the Eucharist, offers us his gift of forgiveness.

Reflection Question

How have you experienced the offer of forgiveness through participation in the celebration of the Sacrament of the Eucharist? What difference has it made in your life?

Additional References

Catechism of the Catholic Church nos. 1393-1395

United States Catholic Catechism for Adults pp. 224-225

Catechetical Framework for Lifelong Faith Formation G06.2.2.12, MA.2.2.25

Tool 5: The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation and the gift of forgiveness.

Teaching tool

In many ways the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation is by far the clearest example of God's gift of forgiveness. By Christ's will, the Church possesses the power to forgive the sins of the baptized. This is normally exercised through bishops and priests in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. One who desires to obtain reconciliation with God and with the Church, is obliged to confess to a priest all the unconfessed grave sins they remember after having carefully examined their conscience. This is the only ordinary means by which the Church in the name of Christ can reconcile a person with God and the Church. Because of this, one of the Church's precepts is that, "You shall confess your sins at least once a year."

The regular confession of even venial sins is highly encouraged. It helps to form one's conscience, and lets one be healed by Christ and progress in the life of the Spirit. In response to God's mercy and compassion, true penitence involves a conversion of heart. This authentic conversion entails a sorrow and abhorrence for sins committed, a firm disposition to discontinue sinning, as well as the necessary action to turn from evil and remain united with God.

In whichever form the celebration of the rite takes, the four essential elements of the celebration of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation remain: repenting for the sins committed, confessing sins to the priest, receiving absolution, and doing penance and correcting any wrong that was done.

Celebrating the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation is one of the deepest and most profound ways we can experience God's gift of forgiveness.

Reflection Question

Think about the first time you celebrated the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. In what ways has your experience of this sacrament matured with you over time? Do you experience this sacrament as a joyful celebration designed to assist you to live more fully as a disciple of Jesus Christ?

Additional References

Catechism of the Catholic Church no. 986

United States Catholic Catechism for Adults pp. 233-247

Catechetical Framework for Lifelong Faith Formation MA.2.2.34

Tool 6: The relationship between the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick and Forgiveness.

Teaching tool

There is little doubt that, of all the sacraments, the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick is the least understood by the greatest number of Catholics. Older Catholics may remember it from its commonly used previous name of “Extreme Unction.” From the word “extreme” many take the idea that this is a sacrament that is rarely to be used. Indeed, many Catholics incorrectly equate this sacrament with the idea of “Last Rites” and would presume that it is reserved exclusively for those who are at death’s door. The actual teaching of the Church is very different.

The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* states, “as soon as any one of the faithful begins to be in danger of death from sickness or old age, the fitting time for him to receive this sacrament has certainly already arrived” (no. 73). The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* goes further in stating, “If a sick person who received this anointing recovers his health, he can in the case of another grave illness receive this sacrament again. If during the same illness the person's condition becomes more serious, the sacrament may be repeated. It is fitting to receive the Anointing of the Sick just prior to a serious operation. The same holds for the elderly whose frailty becomes more pronounced” (no. 1515).

The Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick has many effects: the uniting of the person to the Passion of Christ, for one's own good and that of all the Church; the strengthening, peace and courage to endure in a Christian manner the sufferings of illness or old age; the restoration of health, if it is conducive to the salvation of one's soul; and the preparation for passing over to eternal life. Finally, the Church teaches as well that an effect of the sacrament is the forgiveness of sins, if the person was not able to obtain it through the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation.

Thus we see that the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick is another of the sacraments through which God offers his gift of forgiveness.

Reflection Question

Have you yourself ever received this sacrament or been present when another has received it? If so, in what way were you witness to the graces of this sacrament? If you have never been present for the celebration of this sacrament, why do you think that is the case?

Additional References

Catechism of the Catholic Church nos. 1514-1515, 1520-1523, 1532

United States Catholic Catechism for Adults pp. 253-255

Catechetical Framework for Lifelong Faith Formation MA.2.2.40, MA.2.2.41

Tool 7: Forgiveness in the family and the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony.

Teaching tool

Most Catholics probably do not think about forgiveness when they think about the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony, unless they are thinking about the Church's advice that it is good for couples to celebrate the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation shortly before their marriage. But forgiveness is one of the graces that flows from this sacrament as well; just a bit differently than in other sacraments.

The Sacrament of Holy Matrimony is conferred by spouses on each other through their free and uncoerced expression of their promise of permanent, faithful, and unconditional love by means of their wedding vows. God blesses the spouses with the sacramental graces that give them the power to live what they have promised far beyond their natural human abilities. Thus, those who allow these graces to bear fruit in their marriage find that it gives expression in charity, the common work of caring for creation, self-sacrifice, hospitality, patience, forgiveness, tenderness, and the temporal, moral, and spiritual formation of children. Thus, it is not that God offers his gift of forgiveness to a spouse entering into the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony, but that God shares with each spouse the ability to forgive the other.

And this forgiveness of couples, one for the other, becomes the basis of forgiveness in the family that flows from this marriage. The Church teaches that a family is an important expression of the Church and indeed names it the domestic church. The first teachers of children are parents and other members of the family. In the family, one learns endurance and the joy of work, fraternal love, forgiveness, and above all, divine worship in prayer and the offering of one's life.

In the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony, God gives the gift of sharing in forgiveness and teaching others – by living it – how to ask for and bestow forgiveness on one another.

Reflection Question

How did your family of origin first teach you about asking for, receiving, and giving forgiveness? How have you seen in other families the blessing of the ability to give and receive forgiveness? Do you find families that celebrate forgiveness to be joyful?

Additional References

Catechism of the Catholic Church nos. 1641-1642, 1657

United States Catholic Catechism for Adults pp. 376-377

Catechetical Framework for Lifelong Faith Formation MA.2.2.46, MA.4.3.3

Tool 8: The relationship between forgiveness and reparation.

Teaching tool

At one time or another most of us have probably heard the expression, “Forgive and forget.” This expression gives the idea that forgiveness involves wiping away all of the consequence of one’s guilt and even wiping it from memory. This is an unfortunate expression because it does not accurately express the Church’s teaching on the nature of sin and the nature of forgiveness.

One aspect of sin is that it damages relationships. The relationship may be between the individual and God only or it may include human relationships. This is evident in many cases. If I steal from you, and you know that I stole from you, the chances are that whatever our relationship was before, it is harmed – if not completely broken – now. When we speak about the relationship of an individual with God we recognize that sin either wounds, or in some cases, completely destroys that relationship. This damage to the relationship of an individual with God that comes from a sin is what is called by the Church, “the eternal punishments due to sin.” The gift of God’s forgiveness heals this relationship and does away with these “eternal punishments.”

There are other aspects of sin, however. Not only are relationships damaged or destroyed, but other real harm can flow from sin. If I steal from you, not only have I damaged our relationship but you have suffered a real financial loss. Simply being forgiven does not magically by itself heal this other real loss. The Church teaches that every offense against justice and truth, including those concerning the unjust taking of property and offenses against another’s reputation require reparation, *even if the guilty party has been forgiven*. Indeed, authentic forgiveness often requires that the guilty party make reparation, or at least have the authentic intention of doing so, in order for the forgiveness to occur. These effects of sin that linger even after forgiveness has been bestowed are called by the Church the “temporal punishments due to sin.”

Pope St. John Paul II forgave the man who tried to assassinate him. That man was not immediately released from prison simply because his victim had forgiven him. The real consequences of that man’s actions continued to play themselves out in his life. Still, the forgiveness bestowed did release both of them from the prison of hatred.

God’s gift of forgiveness does not mean that God “forgives and forgets” for that would ignore the demands of justice.

Reflection Question

Think of an example of a person who sinned against you and who you ultimately forgave? Was there any reparation that took place? What difference did that reparation or its lack make?

Additional References

Catechism of the Catholic Church nos. 2454, 2487, 2509

United States Catholic Catechism for Adults pp. 244, 426, 437

Catechetical Framework for Lifelong Faith Formation MA.2.2.38, MA.3.7.22, MA.4.5.10

Tool 9: Beings stewards of God's gift of forgiveness.

Teaching tool

Central to the unique human and Christian vocations each individual received from God, is the call to be good stewards of those gifts. Stewardship is an expression of the discipleship called for by baptism. Disciples who practice stewardship recognize God as the origin of life, the giver of freedom, the source of all they have, are, and will be. They know themselves to be recipients and caretakers of God's many gifts. They are grateful for what they have received and eager to cultivate their gifts out of love for God and one another. Among the many responses of the grateful steward is prayer. The prayer of blessing and adoration is a dialogue in which one's prayer ascends in acknowledgement and acceptance of the gifts God has already given that descend to humanity. The gifts are recognized as such and the one who prays acknowledges in humility that he or she is a creature before the Creator.

If we have received God's gift of forgiveness then we have a responsibility to be stewards of that gift just as much as we are of any other gift. As Christian disciples we too must be people of forgiveness and people who carry out a ministry of reconciliation. In the fifth Beatitude, Jesus Christ teaches that God's mercy can penetrate the hearts of all people, allowing them to forgive their enemies through the example and help of Christ. As St. Paul wrote in his second letter to the Christian community in Corinth, "And all this is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and given us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, as if God were appealing through us" (2 Corinthians 5:17-20a).

So God's gift of forgiveness is not to be hoarded, but to be shared by generous Christian stewards.

Reflection Question

In what way do you feel yourself being called, as a disciple of Jesus Christ who has already been given God's gift of forgiveness, to be joyful a steward of that gift and to be a forgiving and reconciling person?

Additional References

Catechism of the Catholic Church nos. 1847, 2626, 2840, 2862

United States Catholic Catechism for Adults pp. 242-243, 450-454, 488

Catechetical Framework for Lifelong Faith Formation MA.2.4.5, MA.3.2.34, MA.4.2.6, MA.5.2.3, MA.6.2.1