Forgiveness is above all a personal choice, a decision of the heart to go against the natural instinct to pay back evil with evil.”  

St John Paul II

“He or she is a companion on life’s journey, one with whom to face life’s difficulties and enjoy its pleasures... The love they pledge is greater than any emotion, feeling or state of mind, although it may include all of these. It is a deeper love, a lifelong decision of the heart. Even amid unresolved conflicts and confused emotional settings, they daily reaffirm their decision to love, to belong to one another, to share their lives and to continue loving and forgiving. Each progresses along the path of personal growth and development. On this journey, love rejoices at every step and in every new stage.”
The pain of being hurt by a loved one—whether intentionally or unintentionally—is deeply seated because of the deep love that we have for that person. Our spouse—the person with whom we have publicly committed to journey with in a shared covenant of life and love—is our companion amidst all the difficulties and pleasures of life. Our love for them is so profound, and unlike any other love, that the hurt caused by any action or omission on their behalf that injures us and our relationship cuts deeply.

This is often why it is so hard for us to extend forgiveness. How can we possibly forgive someone who has hurt us and caused us so much pain? How can we forgive our spouse, who is the person with whom we have shared so much?

Forgiveness is an act of the will, not an emotional or feeling-based action. We decide to forgive another—we choose it—even when our feelings are telling us to do the complete opposite. Just like when we feel disheartened due to feeling at a task, but choose to try again and succeed; or when someone has upset us and we feel like retaliating, yet instead decide to patiently control ourselves; or when we feel like being lazy, yet decide to work. All of these examples demonstrate the ability of the will to control feelings. Likewise, “to do forgiving even when our feelings are telling us not to.”

Forgiveness is not about “moving on” or “adjusting,” but rather it is about “having compassion” and “not harming” the person toward which we are angry or frustrated. “The work of forgiveness involves seeing the offender in new ways and allowing feelings of empathy to emerge.”

Pope Francis speaks beautifully on the need for forgiveness in family life: “Once we allow it to take root in our hearts, it leads to deep resentment. The opposite of resentment is forgiveness, which is rooted in a positive attitude that seeks to understand other persons’ weaknesses and to excuse them. As Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do’ (Lk. 23:34). When we have been offended or let down, forgiveness is possible and desirable, but no one can say that it is easy. The truth is that ‘family communion can only be preserved and perfected through a great spirit of sacrifice. It requires, in fact, a ready and generous openness of each and all to understanding, to forbearance, to pardon, to reconciliation. There is no family that does not know how selfishness, discord, tension and conflict violently attack and at times mortally wound its own communion: hence there arise the many and varied forms of division in family life.’”

 Forgiving, therefore, is an act of mercy toward another. “The key to forgiveness is love. Only a person who truly loves’self is capable of forgiving others.” And we cannot truly love another without God—who is Love itself. “If we accept that God’s love is unconditional, that the Father’s love cannot be bought or sold, then we will also be capable of showing boundless love and forgiving others even if they have wronged us.”

Forgiveness is an act of love. True forgiveness requires that we act in such a way toward the other with kindness and compassion, for true love “is not resentful” (1 Cor 13:5). The Catechism of the Catholic Church describes the need for forgiveness of others and our relationship with God to go hand-in-hand: “In refusing to forgive our brothers and sisters, our hearts are closed and their hardness makes them impervious to the Father’s merciful love.”

Mother Teresa says: “When we realise that we are all sinners needing forgiveness, it will be easy for us to forgive others. We have to be forgiven in order to be able to forgive. If we do not understand this, it will be very hard for us to say ‘I forgive you’ to anyone who comes to me.”

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**FORGIVE OURSELVES**

“...being able to forgive others implies the liberating experience of understanding and forgiving ourselves. We need to learn to pray over our own history, to accept ourselves, to learn to live with our limitations, and even to forgive ourselves, in order to have this same attitude towards others.”

Just as we pray in the Lord’s Prayer, “forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us,” God extends his forgiveness to us to the extent that we forgive the failings and wrongdoings of others. If we cannot forgive ourselves to forgive those who have hurt us, how can we expect to be forgiven? For “to refuse (to forgive) is to refuse God’s mercy for ourselves.”

**RELINQUISH PRIDE**

“Practicing one’s own offenses is nothing other than being humble, and humility is the basis for any good act, especially when the action needs to be moved by love, which is the case with forgiveness. Pride only loves itself; it doesn’t consider itself in need of forgiveness and, consequently, can’t forgive.”

“Love...is marked by humility; if we are to understand, forgive and serve others from the heart, our pride has to be healed and our humility must increase.”

**FORGIVENESS: The 3 SACRAMENTAL GRACE!**

Grace— the gift of God’s very life—is the free and undeserved help that God truly gives us to become His children. “Grace is first and foremost the gift of the Spirit who justifies and sanctifies us,” and it also includes the gifts that the Spirit gives to each person in accordance with the different sacraments. “The grace of the sacrament of marriage is intended before all else ‘to perfect the couple’s love’. If this (married) love is to overcome all trials and remain faithful in the face of everything, it needs the gift of grace to strengthen and clarify it.”

Forgiveness requires grace, because we are engaging in an action that is beyond our human limitations – our limitations for vengeance and justice, without mercy – and to forgive another, while demanding love, is to show them mercy, just as our heavenly Father is merciful (cf. Lk 6:36). We have to ask God for the grace to forgive, first and foremost, and to show us how to forgive like His! Forgiveness, then, is a free human action aided, and made possible, only by grace.
MODELS OF MERCY AND FORGIVENESS IN MARRIED LIFE

STS. LOUIS AND ZÉLIE MARTIN (CC. 1823-1894 AND 1851-1877)

Due to the cultural norms of the time where marital intimacy was often not explained to women before marriage, Louis, out of love and respect for his wife, Zélie, chose to live with her as a brother until they were ready to consummate their marriage. In time they bore nine children, with four of them passing away tragically during their early years of infancy. Yet their undying devotion to each other and their trust in God helped them to overcome their sorrows and allowed them to raise their children – including their youngest daughter, St. Thérèse – in a warm and joyful home. Zélie’s lace-making business became so successful that Louis gave up his own watchmaking trade to devote himself entirely to her endeavours. He was to lose Zelie at the age of only 45 to breast cancer. With courage, Louis embraced the challenges of being a single father to their five daughters. Despite the many trials they faced, Louis and Zélie lived a marriage grounded in a fervent love for God and always put the needs of others before their own.

ST. GIANNA MOLLA (1922-1962)

With three young children to care for, and her work as a doctor, Gianna found it extremely difficult when her husband Pietro frequently had to travel for business. But through offering this sacrifice to Christ, she was able to continue to love Pietro and find joy in her daily struggles. Gianna’s greatest trial came two months into her pregnancy with their fourth child, when a fibroma was discovered on her uterus. To save her life, the doctors offered her either an abortion or a hysterectomy which would both result in the death of her child. She refused and clearly expressed to them and her family that “They may have to save one or the other – I want them to save the baby.” Gianna decided to have the fibroma removed, which ultimately created more complications throughout the remainder of her pregnancy. Seven days after the birth of her healthy baby girl, and following agonising pain, Gianna passed into eternal life. St. Gianna Molla is known as the patron saint of mothers, physicians and unborn children because of the inviolable value she placed on the sanctity of all human life.

RECOMMENDED READING

Pope Francis
Amoris Laetitia: On Love in the Family

Pope Francis
The Name of God is Mercy

International Forgiveness Institute
www.internationalforgiveness.com/couples.htm

Livio Melina
Building a Culture of the Family: The Language of Love

Hélène Mongin
The Extraordinary Parents of St. Thérèse of Lisieux:
Sts. Louis and Zélie Martin

Fr Eamon Tobin
How to Forgive Yourself and Others

Simone Troisi & Cristiana Paccini
Chiara Corbella Petrillo: A Witness to Joy

Francisco Ugarte
From Resentment to Forgiveness:
A Gateway to Happiness

CHIARA CORBELLA PETRILLO (1984-2012)

Chiara and Enrico met when she was 18 and he was 23, and had to weather the ups and downs of young love, including several break-ups and reconciliations. Married in September 2008, they were thrilled when they discovered that they were to be new parents. But their dreams of raising a family were shattered when Chiara’s first two pregnancies resulted in two precious children with severe malformations who died shortly after birth. Chiara refused to abort her children but joyfully chose to place her trust in the Lord. Not long after, she and Enrico were blessed to be expecting a healthy baby boy. Yet, tragedy struck a third time when Chiara was diagnosed with a malignant tumour on her tongue, which spread rapidly to her neck and eyes. To protect the life of her son, she put off treatment until after the birth. This came at a heavy price, for her condition had become terminal. When Enrico broke the news to her, Chiara urged him not to tell her how long she had left because she wanted to live each day in the present. Throughout these hardships, Chiara’s deep faith allowed her to lovingly embrace these as opportunities to encounter and unite herself with Christ at the foot of the Cross.