



Testimony on family forgiveness

Cécile & Emmanuel Hatey

PRESENTATION :

We are Cécile & Emmanuel Hatey, and we live in Le Mans, in the west of France. We have been married for almost 19 years and have been members of Teams of Our Lady for 14 years. We are parents of a happy tribe of 6 children, 4 girls and 2 boys: Salomé 16, Augustine 14, Domitille 13, Maximilian 10, Zélie 7 and Bosco 2 ½.

BACKGROUND/INTRODUCTION

When the International Leading Team asked us to speak to you today about family forgiveness our first thought was "How can we get out of this". We were not intending to come to Fatima but above all we had no deep experience of the subject, no great hurts, nothing serious to forgive. But we could not just say no to this reasonable request from the Teams. So we had to give it some more thought. We then realised that we put less emphasis on forgiveness within our family than we did between us as a couple. Until now we had mainly focused on the latter. And when we did forgive each other within the family, we felt that sometimes our forgiveness lacked depth. So this request to speak to you about forgiveness gave us an opportunity to begin to take that forgiveness more seriously.

As if to encourage us, the Gospel reading at Mass on the Sunday after we had said yes was from St Matthew Chapter 18, in which Peter asks Jesus how many times he has to forgive his brother. Christ answers him "Not seven I tell you but seventy times seven times". The message was clear: we felt that the Lord was waiting for us there.

OUR STARTING POINT

We will begin our presentation by describing what we were doing in the way of family forgiveness when we received this call from the Teams. Next we will tell you what steps we took to improve things. Naturally we were comfortable with forgiving each other as a couple, thanks to our marriage preparation, to supportive priests, and to the Sit Down. Forgiveness was there in our family relationships too, but less systematically and less successfully than in our relations with each other. All the same we did try. When we remembered to, we tried to ask our children to forgive us when we had hurt them. We took care that they saw how we asked each other for forgiveness after we had argued in front



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of them. We insisted that they should say sorry when they had hurt their sister or brother or someone else. At Sunday Mass, at the Kiss of Peace, we made sure that they demonstrated their affection for each other in spite of the ensuing chaos and the time it took. Similarly in our family prayer we encouraged everyone to say "Thank you", "Sorry" and "Please". So we had some special times (and still do) rebuilding family unity when necessary. And then there was the time a few years ago when we had a striking experience of forgiveness as a family, at Lourdes. To make sure that we all received the Sacrament of Reconciliation, we queued up together for our turn. When we met up afterwards we were all in the same state of grace (although not for long as our children quickly resumed their bickering). But we had all felt the unconditional love of Our Lord together and that enabled us in our turn to love and to forgive one another.

But concentrating our thoughts on this topic of forgiveness within the family over the last few months has highlighted the areas where we fall short and the things that sometimes prevent us from truly living forgiveness. We realised that when we said sorry to our children, or they to each other, the apology was more often than not hurried and formulaic; the injury, an apology (mostly at our prompting when we had witnessed the injury) followed immediately by a kiss of peace. That is, when our children deigned to cooperate - which was not often. But what we learnt from our experience of forgiveness as a couple was that this process cannot be hurried, as the heart needs time to ask for and to receive forgiveness. This haste also resulted in the apology becoming automatic, (a "sorry"/ a kiss). We were taking no account of the age, the maturity or the feelings of the individual concerned, the formula - injury / apology / kiss being applied to young and old without distinction as soon as we witnessed a transgression. Often this led to refusals, grimaces, or the reluctance of a child to kiss his or her brother or sister on the cheek (and that irrespective of who had been hurt). This reaction could then frustrate the forgiveness. We also realised that our children did not automatically say sorry, not because they did not want to but because they did not necessarily understand the hurt they had caused. Or to put it another way, just because what hurt the other did not hurt them. For example, one of our daughters was ill one morning so she did not go to school. Her sister met some of her friends in the playground and told them that she would not be coming to school. One of her classmates mentioned that there was to be a written test. Our daughter, pleased to have the opportunity to make a joke, replied that her sister's illness was no doubt caused by the test. Everyone found it funny except our sick daughter, who felt mocked and humiliated in front of her friends by her sister, whose only thought was to get a laugh.



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As we grow up we start to understand our differences. It's just as well. Comparing Salomé at 16 and Zélie at 7 one sees a subtlety in relationships that has grown with the passage of time.

OUR PROGRESS

Prompted by this review we have looked more closely at some of our family habits. First we looked at our own habits as parents. Take something which will be familiar to everyone here - the Sit Down. We realised that at the very least this heart to heart made the process of forgiveness easier, with our spouse obviously, but also with our children. We ourselves have adopted a formula for our conversations as a couple, one of the points of which is to ask "How may I have hurt you?" It can happen that during our Sit Down one of us mentions something hurtful said or done in relation to one of our children that calls for an apology. In such a case the insight of our spouse and their angle on the event reinforces our own opinion and gives us a more exact understanding of who our children are and the nature of our relationships with them.

We soon realised that we had to give our children time to themselves, to "Speak and Tell". So we arranged a tête à tête for three - one child and the two of us, over a meal. The object of this meal is primarily to make a space away from their siblings who are sometimes too dominant. If the child does not spontaneously talk about the things that may wound him or her we work through a series of questions. "Have Mummy and Daddy hurt you?" "Have your brothers and sisters been inconsiderate or upset you?" On the other hand, if it is the child who has been thoughtless, the fact of being a small group makes it a lot easier to bring things up with him or her. As we said before, our children sometimes fail to apologise because they are unaware of the hurt they have inflicted. So we thought it appropriate to help them to appreciate the effect of their words and actions and to encourage them to ask to be forgiven. Encourage, not compel, as that is where our part as parents ends with our older children, since forgiveness must come from the heart. With the younger ones on the other hand it is more a case of telling them, as one would when teaching good manners. Finally these special moments allow us to listen to the feelings of each of our children and to understand better how they react to events.

Still pursuing our stock-taking exercise, we thought next about how to improve forgiveness between siblings. Nowadays the formula "I apologise"/ "I forgive you", said quickly and automatically, accompanied by a kiss on the cheek on good days, no longer seems enough, even though it is still essential and a starting point. We realised that forgiveness must be lived with the whole of our being. With the heart, but also with the body, as we are both body and soul. None of



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our children deals with it in quite the same way. Some, the more sensitive ones, need a long hug when forgiven for things which have hurt a lot. With others a good open-hearted discussion in a calm atmosphere will re establish good relations. We realise that we give something of ourselves in the way in which we forgive, and that it is a good idea to take into account the sensitivities of each person in order for our forgiveness to be real and deep. Forgiveness involves going out to the other person, and the extent to which we build intimacy into these moments enhances its effectiveness. Clearly in our family it is we as the parents who are currently the ones to embody this closeness. Between each other our children are not all at the same stage, depending chiefly on how demonstrative they are by nature. But we believe that perhaps, having experienced it themselves, they will in turn be able to express it later.

We have also found that the one who has been hurt can help the offender to apologise by remaining friendly in spite of the injury. Admittedly, this is not the normal course of events and moreover it is difficult: I am the injured party so I have the right to an apology and I insist on my rights. But since it is difficult, we should not be afraid to invite the Lord to intervene in our arguments.

One evening at home there was a lot of shouting. An argument had blown up out of nowhere. Emmanuel was away on business so there was no one to calm things down. Anger was everywhere. Everyone was in a high state of irritation. It got worse and worse. The only way we could think of to get ourselves out of this hateful state of affairs was to gather round our prayer corner and to wait. There were a lot of tears that night, but feeling God's unconditional love enabled us to 1) calm down, 2) re establish relations with each other, seeing the good in each other and 3) express forgiveness. We had never come together like this after an argument before (everyone went off to sulk in a corner). I truly believe that this improvement is as a result of our time reflecting on the topic that we are discussing here - forgiveness in the family.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, we would like to repeat that the form and implementation of forgiveness within the family evolves just as in any relationship. The progress which we have made over the last few months and which we have told you about is only a stage on the journey. So for example, we expect that family forgiveness will take a different form when our children have grown up. We feel it is important to discuss this topic regularly in order to encourage development, but also to rely on the forgiveness received from the Lord through the Sacrament of Reconciliation in order to maintain the impetus to forgive.