Having a faith conversation with old and new friends is as easy as setting the table.

FAITH FEEDS GUEST GUIDE
FORGIVENESS
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The FAITH FEEDS program is designed for individuals in Catholic parishes who are hungry for opportunities to talk about their faith with others who share it. Participants gather over coffee or a potluck lunch or dinner, and a host parishioner facilitates conversation using the C21 Center’s bi-annual magazine, C21 Resources.

The FAITH FEEDS GUIDE offers easy, step-by-step instructions for planning, as well as materials to guide the conversation. It’s as simple as a parishioner deciding to host the gathering at the church hall and spreading the word.

Selected articles have been taken from material produced by the C21 Center.
CONVERSATION STARTERS

“Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us...”

Here are two articles to guide your FAITH FEEDS conversation. In addition to the original article, you will find a relevant quotation, summary, and suggested questions for discussion. We offer these as tools for your use, but feel free to go where the Holy Spirit leads.

This guide’s theme is: Forgiveness.
Stephen Pope, theology professor at Boston College, spoke to students about the importance of offering forgiveness. Here’s an excerpt from the Agape Latte talk:

One day during Lent, I was giving a talk at a parish about sin and forgiveness. After the talk, a guy named Seamus came up to me. He was about 80 years old, a first-generation American whose parents had come from Ireland. Seamus told me, “I wish I’d heard that talk 65 years ago.” I asked why, and he explained:

When I was 15 years old, my brother John was always beating me up. I told my parents, and my father said I’ve got to toughen up. My mother had eight kids and was trying to work two jobs, so she had no time to pay attention to me crying. I kept telling my brother to stop, but he was older and a lot bigger and stronger than I was. So one day I said, “I’ve had it.” I had been beaten up again and felt humiliated. I left the house in tears, and I never came back. I talked to my parents and to my other siblings, but from that day I never spoke a word to my brother.

Well, about a month ago, my sister called me and said I ought to go see John. He’s in the hospital dying of cancer. So I was going back and forth. I didn’t know what to do. I thought, OK, I’ll go see him, and then I pulled back: If I go there, he’ll just insult me again. I can’t face that humiliation. I’m not going. I go back and forth, back and forth for three or four days. Finally I go to the hospital. I arrive at my brother’s room, and he’s not there. He had died a few hours before.

I wish I had not been so unwilling to forgive. I wish I could’ve put the relationship ahead of my hurt. I’ve been carrying the burden around my entire life, and it would have been the time for me to be free of this anger toward my brother. But I’m still carrying it today because I never got to talk to him. I’ve gone to confession and been absolved, but I still have the feeling.

Seamus’s is a cautionary tale.

Stephen Pope is professor of theology at Boston College.
"We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love. There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. When we discover this, we are less prone to hate our enemies.”
- Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Summary
In this excerpt from an Agape Latte talk, Stephen Pope passes along a lesson about forgiveness. One of his fellow parishioners, Seamus, shared a story with him about overcoming the inhibition which prevented him from forgiving his brother. He also shared the heartbreak he carries with him today over missing the opportunity. Pope shares the story as a cautionary tale to inspire others to not delay forgiving someone who needs it today.

Questions for Reflection:
1. Think of a time in which you had an opportunity to extend forgiveness to someone. What helped you in that process? What factors made it challenging? How did feel after you had done it?
2. Have you ever been in need of forgiveness? Describe the experience of receiving that gift.
3. Forgiveness does not mean forgetting the wrong done to you or overlooking the demands justice, but it does free you from ill-will and malice towards someone who has offended you. As Christians, we pray, “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Do you find it easier to forgive others because you have experienced God’s forgiveness? Likewise, do you find it easier to experience God’s mercy when you extend it to others?
Many older Catholics can remember the Saturday afternoons of their youth being partially taken up by the practice of weekly confession. Although it was never put in writing, there was a kind of unwritten rule that if you wanted to go to holy communion on Sunday, you needed to go to confession on Saturday. Of course the timing minimized the likelihood that you would sin seriously before the next morning.

Today the situation is much changed. There are no long lines at confessionals in the church on Saturdays. My usual experience as a priest helping in suburban parishes is that perhaps two or three people might come to confess in an hour and a half period. Many complain that the sacrament has fallen onto hard times and lament its imminent demise.

I think it’s fair to say that what’s happened in the last forty years or so is that people’s perception of serious sin has changed quite a bit. Now the stress on the positive aspects of our Christian faith is very good news indeed. People are much more accustomed nowadays to pay more attention to God’s love, mercy and compassion than to their sins. They recognize too (if they have been well-catechized) that in order to commit a serious sin three things are required:
serious matter, knowledge by the person, a freedom. I suspect it is true that people who are honestly striving to lead good Christian lives do not commit serious sins very often.

What's the problem then? Why do some lament the apparent disappearance of frequent confession? Why go to confession at all, especially if one is not conscious of serious sin? I think there are at least three answers to those questions.

The first is that we human beings have a great propensity for self-deception. Some people of course have the opposite problem and scrutinize their motives endlessly, but I think that the vast majority of us are not terribly vigilant about our wrongdoing. And even when we do recognize our wrongdoing and admit it before God, we run the risk of under- or over-estimating it. There is something very honest and human about our admitting our sins before another human being, who stands as a very tangible representative of God and the Church. It is from this ordained priest that we can hear the declaration of God's pardon in a way that no one else can. Moreover, because of the solemn seal of the confessional this is literally the safest place on earth. I am quite sure that God does forgive our sins when we confess them honestly to Him, but the genius of sacramentality is that things like forgiveness, healing, God's self-gift all become very real for us in their being ritualized by human beings and (in the case of the other sacraments) the material goods of the earth.

The second reason for going to confession is the development of a good habit. I remember a conversation with an undergraduate a number of years ago. I think he was a sophomore in college. He was asking about confession because he was unfamiliar with it. A Catholic, he had gone to confession only once in his life – before his first holy communion at the age of eight! Presumably the situation was not dire -that is if he had committed no serious sin – but at the same time he was missing out on a valuable opportunity to take stock of his life before the Lord. It is essential for our growth in holiness that we regularly take time for a completely honest examination of conscience. It seems to me that today people who are involved in 12-Step programs have a much better sense of this than the broader Catholic population. Significant events do have a big impact on our lives, but so do ordinary repetitive patterns.

The last of the (many possible) reasons I want to articulate for going to confession is the fact that regular confession helps us to recognize the extent of God's grace in our lives. I frequently say to penitents: “You may think this sacrament is about how bad you are, but in reality it's about how good God is.” It's difficult sometimes to realize that sin is only sin when we see it in the context of God's mercy. Otherwise our misdeeds are merely wrongdoing. When we can see our wrongdoing as an offense against the God of love, we get a gut sense of what the 18th century clergyman and poet, John Newton, meant when he wrote: “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.” The tangible, sacramental act of penance and reconciliation actually saves us from the wretchedness of our misdeeds. The indispensable admission ticket to Christianity is gratitude to the God who forgives us our sins so that we can live the life He wants for us.

As we’ve seen here the sacrament of penance has taken a number of different forms over the centuries. How it will develop in the future is anyone's guess, but I am convinced it still has great value today - for anyone who needs to hear with regularity the spoken word of God's forgiving love and I think that means anyone who wants to be called a Christian.

John F. Baldovin, S.J. is professor of historical and liturgical theology at the Boston College School of Theology and Ministry.
"Confession is the sacrament of the tenderness of God, his way of embracing us."
—Pope Francis

Summary
In this reflection on the sacrament of Confession, author John Baldovin, SJ, reflects on changing sacramental practices, namely that the faithful are approaching confession less frequently than they once did. He writes that the sacrament still remains valuable, in that it offers Catholics the opportunity to know themselves better and to intimately experience God’s mercy. As he says, “The indispensable admission ticket to Christianity is gratitude to the God who forgives us our sins so that we can live the life He wants for us.”

Questions for Conversation
• Describe your experience with the sacrament of confession. Do you experience God’s tenderness, as Pope Francis describes it? Do you find it valuable to hear out loud that God has forgiven you? Have you had challenging confessions?
• Of the three reasons Baldovin gives go to confession—honest self-knowledge, developing good habits, and recognize God’s grace at work—which speaks to you most and why?
• In the Our Father we pray to be able to forgive others as God forgives us. Do you find it easier to extend mercy and forgiveness to others knowing that God extends both to you?
GATHERING PRAYER

Be With Us Today
St. Thomas More (1478-1535)

Father in heaven,
you have given us a mind to know you,
a will to serve you,
and a heart to love you.
Be with us today in all that we do,
so that your light may shine out in our lives.
Through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

For more information about Faith Feeds, visit bc.edu/c21faithfeeds

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