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"And Forgive Us Our Trespasses..."

Vic Tam from Hong Kong recounts the story of her father's conversion, the result of God's grace and mutual forgiveness in her family.

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The writings of Saint Josemaria have helped me in many ways since I started reading them, which I began doing in my youth in Hong Kong. Especially this point from *Furrow*, in a section entitled “The Heart”: “Forgiveness. To forgive with one’s

whole heart and with no trace of a grudge will always be a wonderfully fruitful disposition to have!" *Fruitful* is right, and my story offers a real-life example.

I was four years old and my brother, Nicholas, two and a half when my parents divorced. However, the unwritten agreement between them was that Dad would come home every Tuesday and Thursday for dinner, and Sunday for the whole day, to be with us just like a normal family. Hence I grew up in a stable and happy environment, although we didn't yet have the faith.

When I was still little I never understood why my Dad did not live with us or asked my parents what had happened. We are from Hong Kong, and in Chinese culture, one does not typically question authority. When I was slightly older, I would tease my Mum about Dad not being

there with us, but she never said anything negative about Dad, so I made up the story that Dad worked somewhere else and it was more convenient to live somewhere closer to his work. One day when I was twelve or thirteen, when I was teasing Mum again, she told me and my brother that she and my Dad were divorced and that Dad had another wife. I accepted this without much fuss because I had watched enough television dramas to know that these things do happen in life.

Just before I finished kindergarten, a teacher at my Christian school had invited my Mum to join their Christian fellowship. Mum declined the invitation saying that she was a single parent with young kids and a heavy job, and that perhaps when the kids were grown up and she had no other worries, then she would think about it. My teacher answered her that there were always excuses

in life that stop us from knowing God. Eventually my mother decided to return to catechism classes at the Catholic Church – her mother (my grandmother) had been Catholic, though my mother had never been baptized – and she started bringing me and my brother along to Sunday school while she attended her classes. We would go to Sunday Mass, and afterward Dad would come and pick us all up for lunch, and then basketball or football. After a year, Mum, Nicholas and I were all baptized. That was at Easter, 1993.

After completing my studies at Oxford, I moved to London and obtained a professional training contract in the field of auditing. In May 2014, I received a *Whatsapp* photo from one of our family's regular gatherings. I spotted that my Dad had aged significantly, lost a lot of weight, and was wearing a cap indoor. I called Dad to ask if he was

alright, and he said he was just trying to keep fit. He still had a sense of humor, so I was hoping that everything was fine. A few months later in August, after I finished all my chartered accountant exams, Mum called me one day to ask if I could go back to Hong Kong for my cousin's wedding at the end of August. I said no because I had taken up my holidays already and workload had intensified. She then told me that Dad had a brain tumor. She found out in July when Dad physically could not hide it anymore. I called Dad right away. To start with, he was not happy that I knew about it, but at the end of the conversation he said, "Pray for me." I was stunned, but happy that he was open to God at that moment. I said, "Of course I will pray."

By this point, my dad had remarried, divorced again, and remarried a third time (this marriage would

ultimately end in divorce also). Over this period, I never heard Mum speak badly about Dad, and I never saw any other man visiting our home other than my Dad. In September 2014, I went back to Hong Kong for two and a half weeks to be with my Dad. He wanted to receive milder Chinese therapy because he would not want to suffer the effects of chemotherapy. The Chinese therapy clinic was very far from his place. Trains and taxis were really inconvenient for him, and he did not want to bother anyone to give him a lift, so bus was the only option. He asked me to accompany him on those journeys. Each way was 2.5 hours with 3 buses. It was a golden moment to be with him alone, and we were able to have small talks, watch the news, talk about work, politics and cooking, and in each bus journey, I would fit in one thing about God or spirituality.

One day he wanted to have tea with me and have a nice chat. I wondered: what did Dad want to talk to me about? We sat down at a nice café next to Victoria Harbour, and I asked him what was on his mind. He then got serious and asked, “Have you ever blamed me?” as tears rolled down his cheeks. I said no, I never blamed him, and explained that I had to thank him for always being there for me, and I understood as an adult how difficult it was to be with someone whom you had fallen away from as if nothing had happened. That I grew up happily, and that Mum did not hold a grudge either.

Later on before leaving Hong Kong, I told him over tea, referring to our earlier conversation and his question about whether I had ever blamed him, that I could not judge and that no one on earth could judge; only God judges, so we need to ask God for forgiveness. Afterwards I went to

look for a nearby church, so if he wanted to go later on he could go without me.

On my last day in Hong Kong, my Dad asked if we could visit the church together. I suggested that we could pray the Visit to the Blessed Sacrament. I prayed the first part of the prayers and he prayed the second part. I started with the Our Father, and when he prayed, “and forgive us our trespasses,” we were both moved and began to cry. I have never seen anyone pray the Our Father that well in my life. To this day, I cannot pray it as well as he did then. At that moment, I could see my Dad’s conversion in his heart.

In November 2014, my Dad’s condition rapidly declined, especially when he had a fall at home after an operation. My brother, strong enough to physically help him at home, was able to look after him a

lot. I was also able to go back to Hong Kong in November and be with my Dad in the hospital. By that time he could not really speak much but could show his discomfort and frustration.

One day I went to the hospital in the morning out of visiting hours. Having come all the way from the UK, I wanted to be with my Dad as much as I could. When I arrived the doctors were already around him and there was a lot of action going on. They told me that they had called my brother to get there and also to tell our other relatives. Dad had pneumonia. This meant that these were probably going to be the last days of his life. When he was given the oxygen mask and the doctors had left him, I told him about baptism again and that there was pastoral care in the hospital. If he wanted to, I could call a priest to baptize him. He nodded. I called them but they said

that it was better to ask for a priest who knew my family better. I asked Dad again if I could call a priest I knew to come baptize him and he nodded again. Meanwhile many of my relatives and Dad's colleagues had come. At 6.30pm, the priest I called still had not come.A friend of mine reminded me that, given the circumstances, I could actually baptize him myself. She said, "Just remember the formula, choose a name, and water." I decided to baptize my Dad as Paul, because it sounded closest to his Chinese name. "Dad, I am going to baptize you now, but in English because I don't know it in Chinese. Paul is your baptismal name. Paul, I baptize you, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen." Dad was conscious although not able to speak, but from his rolling of his eyes it seemed to me that he was wondering, "What is my daughter

doing here? I thought it would be a priest!”

At around 7pm, the priest, Father Paul, came. He apologized that, due to traffic and lack of parking spaces, he could not arrive earlier. He said that since baptism was already done, there was no need for the final sacrament (the anointing of the sick). He gave my Dad a blessing, drew the sign of the cross on Dad’s forehead and on his hand, and said a prayer.

Vic Tam

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