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Forgiveness as a way to holiness

Danny and Leila Abdallah -Australia-

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FORGIVENESS AS A WAY TO HOLINESS

Danny and Leila Abdallah

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Danny

My name is Danny Abdallah. I am the husband of a loving wife, Leila and the proud father of seven children: Antony, Angelina, Liana, Sienna, Alex, Michael and our new addition, baby Selina. My wife and my kids are my reason for living. They are my purpose for waking up every day.

Today is Antony's 16th birthday. In 2015 when he was 9 years old, he had a dream of Jesus, and Jesus asked him: "What do you want to be?" In his dream, Antony answered that he wanted to be a Saint, and Jesus replied, "I will take you with me to heaven."

I dismissed it as only a dream. But on the 1st of February 2020, Jesus fulfilled His promise.

It was a perfect summer's day. Seven precious, adorable children took a walk to get some ice cream for my niece's 13th birthday.

What should have been an innocent and enjoyable outing for the young kids turned into one of the worst road tragedies Australia has seen in recent times.

The children were hit by a drunk and drug-affected driver who was driving in this quiet, suburban street at 150km per hour: three times the legal speed limit. How can one car hit seven children at once? They couldn't have scripted this in a horror movie.

I arrived on the scene. It was like entering the aftermath of a war zone. Four children dead; their small, fragile, delicate bodies almost unrecognizable. Who do I turn to first?

Along with Antony, Angelina and Sienna, their beautiful, loving cousin Veronique Sakr was killed. Another of their cousins, Charbel Kassas, suffered injuries so severe that he was placed in a coma for months. His sister, Mabelle and my daughter, Liana, were also hit and witnessed everything.

Four lives lost. Three families shattered. An extended family devastated. A community in disbelief and a nation in mourning.



More police, paramedics, ambulance and fire engines arrived. They put the crime scene tape up and pushed me out. From far away, I saw the police cover Antony, Angelina, Sienna and Veronique with a white sheet. They were gone. In my heart I said to God, “This is bigger than me, I surrender this to you.”

Leila – choosing to forgive

I arrived soon after Danny, to the place where four of my kids had been hit, more than half my family. It was horrific. People were screaming all around me but I was calm. I started praying and asking people around me to pray because I believed God would perform a miracle. Nothing is impossible with Jesus. I was confident that He wouldn't harm my kids.

Liana came to me bleeding. She needed to go to the hospital. I went with her in the ambulance, still believing that the other kids would join us. It wasn't until Danny arrived at the hospital with four priests that I realised three of my children had died. I was crying, screaming and begging for it to not be true.

Two days later, when Liana went in for surgery, I went back to the scene. The place was covered in flowers. I knelt down at the place where each of the children laid after they had been hit and prayed an Our Father, a Hail Mary and the Fatima Prayer. I prayed seven times; once for every child. I felt heavy, like I was walking the Stations of the Cross and all I could see was Jesus on the cross.

When the media approached me, they were speechless. What do you ask a mother who lost half her kids in the blink of an eye? I spoke from my heart. I told them: Danny and I were blessed with six beautiful kids. They loved feeding the homeless at ‘Team Jesus.’ We taught our kids to pray the Rosary, to love each other and to read their Bible. When I spoke about the driver, I said: “I don't hate him, I think in my heart I forgive him, but I want the court to be fair.” I didn't know the impact of these words. I believe the Holy Spirit moved my lips to speak words of forgiveness. The media asked me how people could help, I asked them to come and pray the Stations of the Cross at the site. Thousands showed up to pray that night. Then I asked them to pray the Rosary and thousands came again the next night. And the night after that. Every night until the funeral.

The news reports were more about forgiveness and faith than they were about the crash. How can she forgive? Why would she forgive the man who hit seven kids? Why would she still have faith? How can she still love a God who has done this to her? Like Danny said, this was much bigger than us.



Danny

I wasn't surprised that Leila chose to forgive so quickly. Anyone who knows Leila knows that she would choose forgiveness. We come from a large, extended Lebanese, Maronite Catholic family. The bigger the family, the bigger the problems, the greater the amount of love and forgiveness you need.

Leila and I built our family on prayer. In the 18 years of our marriage, we have been consistently praying the Our Father, asking God to "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." That's a very powerful prayer if you mean it.

Friends, forgiveness is our path to holiness.

Days before the accident, I had been walking along the beach with my son, Antony. The school year was about to begin. As a father, I was worried about his choice of friends. I explained to him in detail that the daily choices he makes would determine the type of man he would become. I didn't realize at the time these words were for me.

The day my children entered eternal life, I faced a choice.

What path do I take? Do I take the path of destruction or the path of construction? Do I seek to numb the pain with drugs and alcohol, or do I choose to embrace this pain?

The pain is unbearable. I have been carrying it since the day of the tragedy. I have sleepless nights, and there are days when I feel hopeless.

The choice I would make would not get rid of my pain, but it would determine where my family and I would be for the rest of our lives. We would either be stuck in the valley of pain and grief or I could lead them to the high ground.

I chose to forgive myself for telling my kids to go for a walk. I chose to forgive the offender in obedience to my Father in heaven. If my children were here today, they would say, "Dad, forgive him."

Jesus Christ, my mentor and my teacher, is the ultimate example of forgiveness. After getting beaten, spat on and then hung on the cross, Jesus said, "Forgive them father for they know not what they do." His Blessed Mother watched her son suffer for 12 hours without touching him and then chose to forgive the disciples who abandoned her son.



I had heard the Passion story so many times growing up but it's only now after such heavy grief I understand its meaning. It makes sense now. In life, it's not if we suffer, but *when* we will suffer. I don't serve a God who tests me. I serve a God who has suffered greatly before me. The God we serve is a good father who says, "Let me go first. I will show you how to conduct yourself through the worst suffering imaginable." And the way through is forgiveness.

Forgiveness is more for the forgiver than the forgiven. When you forgive the other person, you start to heal.

Forgiveness is not a single action in one moment in time. It has been more than two years, and I must choose to forgive myself and the driver every day; to not retreat into hatred. The daily choice to forgive is not easy, but it is our path to holiness.

I must ask God for forgiveness daily and keep forgiving so that my family will not be enslaved by the trauma of that night.

If I have revenge, bitterness and anger in my soul, my kids will have the same because they do what you do, not what you say. I realised that I had to do for them what God did for me. He showed me how to go through the worst type of suffering and still forgive those who did this to him.

Leila

Danny and I stand here with a message from God for all of you. It is the core message of Christianity. It is the last words Jesus spoke on the cross: it is forgiveness.

It is a choice you make. A choice to let go of anger and bitterness.

There is power in forgiveness.

There is freedom in forgiveness.

Forgiveness is a sign of strength, not weakness.

Forgiveness is a gift you give to yourself and others.

Forgiveness allows you to achieve greatness.

Jesus asked us to forgive and explained why we should forgive: for they do not know what they do. People are blinded by sin.

My beautiful daughter, Liana, my inspiration, reminds me that there is an "I" in forgive. It means it starts with each one of us. Be the initiative and forgive unconditionally. I didn't have to wait



for the driver to apologize or ask for forgiveness. I took the initiative. It started from my heart, spread to my family, our extended family, our local community, our country and – as we stand before you today – the whole world.

Forgiveness allowed my marriage to survive. It taught Danny and I to look at each other with eyes of compassion and empathy. Forgiveness has begun the healing process in all of us. Our kids can look to the future, they can dream again and most importantly, they can have faith in God. Liana was able to look at the driver with eyes of empathy and forgive him.

I would not have imagined that we would be in the Vatican on Antony's birthday to speak about forgiveness to the world and from here, I would like to wish my son a happy, heavenly 16th birthday. I am grateful to our Bishop, Antoine-Charbel Tarabay for giving us the opportunity to be here. He nominated us to speak but the Lord made it possible. The Lord never abandoned us.

Through God's grace and mercy, we were able to forgive. Jesus asked us to forgive seventy times seven times. Practice forgiveness on a daily basis. If you want to be able to forgive something big, start by forgiving yourself and your family. Seek God's mercy, love and forgiveness of sins in confession.

I am not speaking from a place of perfection. I am far from perfect. You can ask Danny off-camera and he will be able to tell you this is true.

Are any of you perfect? None of us are perfect. Our kids weren't perfect. The saints weren't perfect either. The less perfect we are, the more opportunity to ask for forgiveness. Love is loving someone in their imperfection and their sin and forgive them anyway. We are all called to be saints through love and forgiveness.

Forgiveness as our path to holiness did not begin on the day our kids were taken away, and it did not end on the day we forgave the driver. Forgiveness is a muscle. It gets stronger if you keep using it. It has to be a regular part of the life of every Christian family.

Forgiveness has brought us healing and peace. I am heartbroken but I am at peace because I know my kids are in heaven. They are with Jesus. I am closest to my kids when I am at Mass. When you are at your weakest, go to Church and cry on Jesus' shoulder.

Everyone has a cross to carry. We can't control what happens to us, but we can choose how to respond. Take control of your life: Repent, love, forgive, confess and be humble. This is our path to holiness.



Danny

I look at faith like a spiritual bank account. Every good deed, every act of kindness, every prayer, every time you forgive and every time you love, you make a deposit. You do this so that on the darkest day of your life, when you have nothing to give, you can go to your faith account and cash out. We had to do that on the 1st February 2020.

We pray that you never go through anything like the suffering or grief that we have been through. We hope that you will never have to forgive something so big. But you have to prepare yourself for whatever suffering will come. If we can leave you with something today, it would be to encourage you to pray, to practice forgiveness every day and to teach your kids to do the same.

After every death there is a resurrection. Leila and I have been privileged to hear from many people who have forgiven and been reconciled since hearing our story. Each of these stories is a resurrection.

In memory of our kids, we turned the tragedy into a day of forgiveness. i4Give Day is marked in Australia that is now marked each year on the 1st of February and it is a movement that lasts all year long.

People are yearning for forgiveness and are beginning to understand the freedom it brings. It is not just a message for Catholics or Christians. It is for the whole world. It is a humanitarian message. It is a path not only to holiness, but to freedom. We as Catholics have an obligation to spread the message of forgiveness. With God's help, Let's make a difference in the world.

Compare with spoken text