

Forgiveness without Closure: Unresolvedness, Wounded Presence, and Grace in Jankélévitch and Nouwen

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Abstract: Forgiveness becomes most theologically urgent not when wounds are healed, but when suffering, memory, and moral fracture resist closure. Although contemporary scholarship has examined forgiveness through philosophical, psychological, post-conflict, and pastoral lenses, a direct constructive dialogue between Vladimir Jankélévitch's account of gratuity, irrevocability, and the unforgivable and Henri J. M. Nouwen's theology of wounded, non-mastering presence remains insufficiently developed, especially where healing and reconciliation cannot function as validating outcomes. This study addresses that gap through qualitative library research and a comparative conceptual-hermeneutical method that reconstructs each thinker on his own terms, preserves their tensions, and develops a constructive synthesis. The analysis shows that forgiveness is best understood not as the resolution of woundedness but as a fragile ethical-pastoral posture within unresolvedness: wrongdoing remains morally serious, wounds and memories persist, and yet the past need not exhaust the future. Jankélévitch clarifies forgiveness as gratuitous and irreducible to moral exchange, while Nouwen renders it pastorally as faithful presence that refuses to instrumentalize suffering. The study's principal novelty is its formulation of unresolvedness as a constructive theological-ethical category in which forgiveness can remain non-instrumental and grace genuinely gratuitous. This framework contributes to Christian ethics and pastoral theology by resisting coercive narratives of compulsory healing, reconciliation, or closure and offers a wider resource for communities confronting trauma, historical violence, fractured relationships, and enduring memory.

Keywords: forgiveness; unresolvedness; woundedness; grace; pastoral theology

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Introduction

Forgiveness becomes most difficult precisely where Christian discourse most urgently invokes it. In contexts of profound betrayal, historical violence, persistent trauma, and fractured relationships, forgiveness cannot be reduced to a straightforward moral virtue or evidence of spiritual maturity. Contemporary philosophical and theological scholarship increasingly treats forgiveness as a contested phenomenon because the past cannot simply be undone, suffering does not necessarily disappear, and reconciliation may remain impossible. Quintana Domínguez (2023), for example, demonstrates how Derridean accounts locate forgiveness at the limits of moral calculability rather than within predictable processes of restoration. Recent pastoral scholarship similarly shows that religious meaning can shape how people interpret and practice forgiveness while also revealing the complexity of translating theological ideals into lived experience (Christoffersen, 2023; Haikola, 2023). Forgiveness therefore raises a fundamental theological question: how can Christian communities affirm grace and the possibility of a renewed future without diminishing the truth of wounds that remain?

The difficulty intensifies when forgiveness encounters what appears morally unforgivable. Philosophical accounts influenced by Derrida resist limiting forgiveness to offenses that can already be explained, compensated, or repaired, because such conditions risk turning forgiveness into an extension of moral exchange rather than an event that exceeds calculation (Quintana Domínguez, 2023). Yet unconditional accounts generate their own ethical danger when transferred directly into political, ecclesial, or post-conflict contexts. De Jongh (2025) highlights the tension between unconditional forgiveness and the conditions of public and political life, particularly where historical violence continues to structure relationships. In Christian formation, this problem is equally serious: exhortations to forgive can become harmful when they imply that victims must suppress anger, reconcile prematurely, or regard continuing woundedness as spiritual deficiency. Trauma-informed religious education consequently stresses that theological formation must attend carefully to vulnerability, power, and the continuing effects of trauma rather than impose predetermined religious outcomes (Keefe-Perry & Moon, 2019; Sutton-Adams, 2023).

A growing body of empirical and interdisciplinary research further challenges linear models of forgiveness. Odak (2025) shows that forgiveness in post-conflict religious settings may involve decisions, emotional setbacks, lingering resentment, collective narratives, and memories that persist long after a person claims to have forgiven. Caravà and McCarroll (2025) likewise conceptualize forgiveness as an extended moral process in which memory is retained, reinterpreted, emotionally transformed, or reactivated through later encounters. These findings indicate that forgiveness unfolds through asymmetries among cognition, affect, memory, social context, and moral agency rather than through a universal progression toward closure. Psychological intervention research nevertheless demonstrates that carefully structured forgiveness programs can produce meaningful benefits. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that forgiveness interventions can increase forgiveness and improve dimensions of psychological well-being, although their outcomes depend on intervention design, duration, and context (Akhtar & Barlow, 2018; Wade et al., 2014). The gap, therefore, is not that therapeutic approaches are ineffective, but that measurable improvement can too easily become the conceptual standard by which forgiveness itself is judged. A theological

account must still ask what forgiveness means when anger recurs, traumatic memories remain, relationships cannot safely be restored, and therapeutic resolution does not occur.

This tension becomes especially important at the intersection of pastoral theology and education. Marchinkowski (2023) interprets Nouwen's wounded-healer paradigm as locating ministry within shared vulnerability rather than in the superiority of an unwounded caregiver, whereas psychological studies commonly operationalize forgiveness through assessable changes in forgiveness, coping, distress, or post-traumatic growth (Aditya & Utami, 2025; Worthington, 2024; Xie et al., 2025). Reconciliation-oriented approaches add another trajectory: Turza et al. (2026), for instance, employ Girardian mimetic theory to interpret religious motivation as a potential movement from cycles of violence toward restored relationships. Educational scholarship similarly demonstrates the value of teaching forgiveness. Forgiveness education has been conceptualized as character formation (Lin et al., 2011), employed with at-risk adolescents (Freedman, 2018), interpreted through philosophical and religious-educational frameworks (Horowski, 2018; Wu, 2021), and shown to strengthen empathy, altruism, and willingness to forgive among adolescents (Ghobari Bonab et al., 2025). Yet these trajectories leave a significant conceptual gap. Scholarship has richly examined forgiveness as philosophical aporia, psychological intervention, pastoral practice, reconciliation, and moral education, but it has insufficiently theorized how forgiveness may remain ethically and theologically meaningful when healing, reconciliation, and closure do not follow.

The present study occupies this gap by bringing Vladimir Jankélévitch's philosophy of forgiveness into direct constructive dialogue with Henri J. M. Nouwen's pastoral theology of woundedness. Its novelty lies not simply in comparing two influential thinkers but in allowing their distinctive conceptual resources to generate the category of unresolvedness. Jankélévitch's gratuity, irrevocability, and confrontation with the unforgivable illuminate why forgiveness cannot be reduced to reciprocity or moral exchange, while Nouwen's wounded presence provides a pastoral grammar for remaining with suffering without mastering it. Their dialogue enables this study to conceptualize unresolvedness not as failed forgiveness but as a possible theological-ethical condition in which the reality of wrongdoing is preserved while the future is not surrendered entirely to it. In this respect, the study contributes to philosophical theology, Christian ethics, pastoral theology, and religious education by providing a framework that distinguishes forgiveness from compulsory reconciliation, therapeutic success, and emotional closure—a distinction particularly relevant to contemporary Christian education (Horowski, 2024).

The significance of the study therefore lies in protecting both the theological integrity of forgiveness and the dignity of wounded persons from instrumentalization. It aims to reconceptualize forgiveness beyond moral achievement, therapeutic resolution, and reconciliation by examining how Jankélévitch's notions of gratuity, temporal irrevocability, and the unforgivable intersect with Nouwen's account of woundedness, vulnerable presence, and non-instrumental pastoral care. More specifically, the study seeks to explain how forgiveness can acknowledge the full moral weight of injury without making the past determinative of every possible future and how grace can remain gratuitous rather than functioning as a reward for successful healing. This purpose also carries educational significance because Christian formation occurs not only through doctrines taught but

through the interpretive frameworks by which learners understand suffering, responsibility, justice, reconciliation, and grace. Trauma-informed religious education reminds educators that formation should expand the learner's capacity for truthful discernment rather than compel predetermined emotional or spiritual performances (Keefe-Perry & Moon, 2019; Sutton-Adams, 2023).

Accordingly, the study argues that Christian education requires a more differentiated grammar of forgiveness. If forgiveness is taught primarily as a linear progression from offense through repentance to reconciliation and emotional peace, students may implicitly learn to regard continuing anger, grief, distance, or wounded memory as evidence of moral or spiritual inadequacy. By contrast, understanding unresolvedness as a legitimate site of ethical and theological discernment allows theological educators, pastors, and religious teachers to distinguish forgiveness from forgetting, reconciliation from renewed access to harmful relationships, and grace from the denial of justice. This approach does not weaken education for forgiveness; it deepens it by locating forgiveness within responsible moral formation. Existing scholarship already demonstrates that forgiveness can function constructively within character and religious education (Horowski, 2018; Lin et al., 2011), but the present study contributes a needed qualification: mature formation must also educate learners to discern the limits, risks, timing, and non-guaranteed character of forgiveness.

The broader implication is that education about forgiveness should cultivate not only the capacity to forgive but also the capacity to remain ethically present when resolution is unavailable. Educational programs have shown that forgiveness can foster hope, empathy, prosociality, and constructive responses to interpersonal conflict (Freedman, 2018; Ghobari Bonab et al., 2025), while philosophical approaches caution against reducing forgiveness to a technique for achieving predetermined social outcomes (Wu, 2021). The framework developed here therefore extends forgiveness education toward an ethics and pedagogy of faithful presence: one capable of holding together grace and justice, forgiveness and memory, vulnerability and moral responsibility. For theological colleges, seminaries, churches, and Christian educational communities, such a perspective may help form ministers and learners who neither impose premature reconciliation nor abandon the possibility of transformed relation. The study ultimately proposes that forgiveness need not close the wound in order to prevent the wound from closing the future—a theological insight with significant implications for educating communities to respond responsibly to trauma, conflict, fractured relationships, and enduring memory.

Methods

This study employs qualitative library research using a comparative conceptual-hermeneutical method to examine forgiveness through the philosophical thought of Vladimir Jankélévitch and the pastoral theology of Henri J. M. Nouwen. The primary corpus consists of Jankélévitch's *Forgiveness*, *L'Irréversible et la nostalgie*, and *Traité des vertus*, together with Nouwen's *The Wounded Healer*, *The Inner Voice of Love*, and *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. These works were selected because they directly address the study's central concepts, including gratuity, irrevocability, the unforgivable, woundedness, vulnerable presence, and non-instrumental pastoral care.

The analysis proceeds in four stages. First, Jankélévitch's thought is reconstructed through the concepts of non-reciprocity, irreversibility and irrevocability, and the unforgivable. Second, Nouwen's writings are analyzed through woundedness, vulnerable presence, and the refusal to master another person's suffering. Third, the two frameworks are compared across themes such as reciprocity, temporality, agency, memory, healing, and reconciliation, while preserving their conceptual differences rather than forcing harmonization. Finally, relevant philosophical, pastoral, psychological, and empirical scholarship is used as a critical interlocutor to test the scope of the comparison and support a constructive synthesis. Through this process, the study develops "unresolvedness" as a theological-ethical category describing a condition in which wounds and memories remain real while forgiveness is not made dependent on therapeutic improvement, reciprocity, reconciliation, or closure.

Results and Discussion

The comparative conceptual-hermeneutical analysis yields five interrelated findings. First, forgiveness becomes conceptually distinct when it is understood as gratuity rather than moral exchange. Second, forgiveness does not cancel the past but alters the degree to which the past is permitted to determine the future. Third, the unforgivable functions as a critical limit-case that exposes the danger of converting forgiveness into moral obligation. Fourth, Nouwen's theology translates these philosophical insights into a pastoral practice of wounded, non-mastering presence. Finally, the convergence between Jankélévitch and Nouwen generates the study's central constructive finding: unresolvedness can function as a theological-ethical site in which forgiveness remains non-instrumental and grace remains gratuitous. Rather than describing forgiveness as a progressive sequence culminating in emotional healing or reconciliation, these findings locate it within a more fragile relationship among memory, justice, woundedness, responsibility, and futurity.

Forgiveness as Gratuity: Beyond the Moral Economy of Exchange

The first key finding is that forgiveness loses its distinctive character when it is made dependent upon reciprocity, deservedness, or predetermined outcomes. Jankélévitch's argument is intentionally demanding: once sufficient reasons make forgiveness reasonable, it risks becoming indistinguishable from excusing, clemency, accommodation, or reconciliation (Jankélévitch, 2005). Looney (2015) sharpens this insight by interpreting Jankélévitch's forgiveness as a gratuitous remission outside the normal economy of moral exchange. Marion's (2002) phenomenology of the gift strengthens this interpretation because reciprocity threatens to reinscribe giving into circulation, while Derrida and Dufourmantelle (2000) similarly warns against reducing hospitality and forgiveness to forms of debt management. Levinas (1991), from another direction, places ethical responsibility prior to symmetrical contractual relations. Jankélévitch's own association of *désintéressement* with *pardon* in *Traité des vertus* further suggests that forgiveness belongs to an initiative that cannot simply be deduced from self-interest or proportional moral calculation (Jankélévitch, 1968). These sources converge on an important finding: forgiveness may coexist with

reciprocity, repentance, and reconciliation, but none of them can constitute its necessary condition without changing the nature of the act itself.

This conclusion requires careful differentiation from contemporary psychological research. Meta-analytic evidence shows that structured forgiveness interventions can increase forgiveness and may improve depression, anxiety, hope, and other dimensions of well-being (Akhtar & Barlow, 2018; Wade et al., 2014). Prospective research also associates religiously or spiritually motivated forgiveness with several psychosocial well-being outcomes (Chen et al., 2019). These findings are valuable, but they answer a different question from Jankélévitch's. They demonstrate what forgiveness-oriented interventions may produce; they do not establish that such outcomes define what forgiveness is. The theological danger arises when empirical benefits are transformed into normative conditions, so that forgiveness is judged genuine only if it heals, reduces distress, improves relationships, or produces reconciliation. The present study therefore interprets gratuity as a form of theological non-appropriation: authentic forgiveness does not seize control of the offender, the victim, or the future by demanding a particular outcome. In this sense, grace remains grace because it cannot be converted into a mechanism through which one result is purchased by another.

Nouwen provides the pastoral counterpart to this philosophical finding. In *The Wounded Healer*, pastoral action becomes distorted when care is evaluated primarily according to its capacity to fix another person or produce an anticipated transformation (Nouwen, 1972). The conceptual parallel with Jankélévitch is significant. For Jankélévitch, forgiveness ceases to be gratuitous when subordinated to utility; for Nouwen, care ceases to be genuinely present when subordinated to mastery. Thus, non-reciprocity and non-mastery are two dimensions of the same anti-instrumental logic. Forgiveness cannot become a technique for securing another person's repentance, just as pastoral care cannot become a technique for manufacturing healing. This constitutes the first original interpretive contribution of the analysis: grace becomes pastorally credible when it releases both forgiveness and care from the demand to prove themselves through success.

Forgiveness as Temporal Rupture: Memory Without Erasure

The second finding concerns the temporal structure of forgiveness. Jankélévitch distinguishes irreversibility from irrevocability: time cannot move backward, but more importantly, what has been done cannot cease to have been done (Jankélévitch, 1974; Looney, 2015). Chronological distance therefore possesses no intrinsic moral power. Years may weaken memory, alter affect, or transform circumstances, but they do not retroactively compensate a victim or change the moral facticity of an offense. Forgiveness cannot consequently be identified with forgetting. If memory fades, the wrong does not thereby become less historically real; and if memory persists, forgiveness has not necessarily failed. The analytical result is that forgiveness operates neither by deleting the past nor by rendering memory morally irrelevant. Instead, it concerns how persons inhabit a past that cannot be changed without allowing that past to exhaust every possibility of the future.

Ricoeur (2004) provides an important conceptual bridge by interpreting forgiveness as a capacity to loosen the bond between an agent and an irreversible act without denying that the act

occurred. Derrida's (2001) reflections on mourning intensify the argument: loss does not become ethically meaningful because mourning successfully concludes; its singularity continues to address the living. Banki (2017) similarly places forgiveness within the register of futurity rather than completed possession. The future opened by forgiveness is therefore neither restoration of an untouched past nor guaranteed reconciliation. It remains exposed to contingency, refusal, and renewed vulnerability. Recent research on lived religious forgiveness supports the importance of this complexity. Haikola (2023) found that religious narratives of forgiveness included themes of divine mercy and Christian duty, but also tensions involving revenge and justice, indicating that religious meaning-making does not simply dissolve conflicting moral responses.

The deeper interpretation is that forgiveness produces what may be called temporal non-totalization. The past remains true without becoming total. This distinction is central to the study because many accounts of closure subtly imply that a past wound becomes properly integrated only when its disruptive force has been overcome. Jankélévitch, Derrida, Ricoeur, and Banki suggest another possibility: ethical transformation may consist not in mastering the past but in refusing its absolute sovereignty over the future. Forgiveness therefore changes the relation to irreversibility rather than irreversibility itself. In theological terms, this provides a more cautious account of hope. Christian hope need not require a retrospective claim that suffering has been repaired, justified, or rendered necessary; it may instead name the possibility that what has happened, although irrevocable, does not possess the final word.

The Unforgivable, Justice, and the Limits of Prescriptive Forgiveness

The third finding is that the unforgivable functions as the decisive limit-case of forgiveness rather than merely as its exception. Jankélévitch (2005) locates forgiveness most radically where conventional moral justification fails—where wrongdoing cannot be excused, proportionally compensated, or rendered reasonable. Yet this does not produce an easy command to forgive everything. His account remains suspended between the excess of forgiveness and the historical reality of acts that may remain practically unforgivable. The importance of this aporia is that it prevents theology from transforming forgiveness into moral normalization. Murphy and Hampton (1988), for example, preserve resentment as a morally intelligible response to violated dignity, while Griswold (2007) emphasizes conditions such as acknowledgment, responsibility, repentance, and reform. Nussbaum (2016) likewise demonstrates the importance of future-oriented goods but recognizes situations in which movement toward reconciliation may reasonably fail. Kant (2019), functioning here as a limit reference, clarifies why forgiveness cannot simply be generated by duty without risking the loss of its free ethical character. Esparza (2024) and Hammerschlag (2016) further illuminate situations in which radical wrongdoing fractures the ordinary normative world within which reconciliation would otherwise make sense.

Contemporary scholarship makes this finding particularly consequential. Boon et al. (2025) argue that unforgiveness has often been treated too simplistically as the undesirable opposite of forgiveness and call for greater attention to circumstances in which not forgiving may express legitimate moral agency. Recent experimental research similarly suggests that explicitly refusing

forgiveness can, in some circumstances, preserve value integrity and support self-regard rather than simply produce psychological dysfunction (Quinney et al., 2026). These studies do not invalidate the substantial literature demonstrating benefits associated with forgiveness. Rather, they weaken the assumption that forgiveness is always the only psychologically or morally legitimate response.

The problem becomes still more serious when social power is taken into account. Perez et al. (2024), examining racialized expectations surrounding Black forgiveness, argue that pressure to forgive can displace demands for justice and delegitimize anger as a morally meaningful response to wrongdoing. Strelan et al. (2020) likewise demonstrate that responses to transgression are bound up with the restoration of victim agency and power; their findings complicate any simple opposition in which forgiveness is inherently empowering while all alternative responses are necessarily destructive.

This evidence permits a stronger theological interpretation of Jankélévitch's limit-case. A theology that commands forgiveness without attending to power, justice, safety, and moral agency risks contradicting the gratuity it seeks to proclaim. If forgiveness must be given because ecclesial authority, social expectation, or religious identity requires it, the act risks becoming compulsory performance rather than gift. Conversely, withholding forgiveness cannot automatically be classified as gracelessness or spiritual immaturity. In some circumstances, refusal may preserve moral truth, protect violated agency, or resist an oppressive demand for harmony. The original contribution here is not to privilege unforgiveness but to define an ethics of non-coercion: Christian forgiveness must remain genuinely free enough that its absence cannot automatically be pathologized and its presence cannot substitute for justice.

Wounded Presence and the Pastoral Refusal of Mastery

The fourth finding arises from Nouwen's distinctive contribution. Whereas Jankélévitch clarifies the ethical structure of forgiveness, Nouwen supplies a pastoral grammar for living within its unresolvedness. In *The Wounded Healer*, woundedness is not merely a defect that must disappear before ministry becomes possible; it becomes part of the condition from which genuine solidarity emerges (Nouwen, 1972). The caregiver therefore cannot occupy the uncomplicated position of the healed expert standing outside the suffering of another. This does not mean that caregiver and sufferer possess identical wounds, nor that professional or pastoral competence is irrelevant. It means that authority cannot be grounded in the fantasy of invulnerability. Pastoral presence becomes truthful when the caregiver enters relation without appropriating another person's suffering as a problem whose successful resolution demonstrates ministerial effectiveness.

Nouwen's *The Inner Voice of Love* deepens this interpretation by refusing to make recovery into a spiritual performance (Nouwen, 1996). Likewise, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* does not conclude with a completely harmonized household: the elder son's resentment remains narratively unresolved even as the father's welcome is extended (Nouwen, 1992). Such incompleteness is theologically important. Grace is present, yet not every relationship has been reconciled; welcome

occurs, yet conflict has not disappeared. This narrative pattern directly parallels Jankélévitch's insistence that forgiveness cannot secure its own success in advance.

Recent pastoral research supports the need for precisely this kind of differentiation. Christoffersen (2023) argues that forgiving others presents a distinct pastoral challenge in contemporary post-secular contexts and requires attention to the dynamics through which forgiveness is actually lived rather than merely prescribed. Haikola's (2023) empirical work similarly shows that religious people may interpret forgiveness through divine mercy, prayer, sacrifice, duty, revenge, and justice simultaneously rather than moving through a single uniform sequence. Trauma-informed religious education adds an important caution: theological care must recognize the continuing effects of trauma rather than assuming that spiritual formation can bypass them (Keefe-Perry & Moon, 2019).

The constructive interpretation emerging here is pastoral non-mastery. Non-mastery is not therapeutic indifference, passivity, or refusal to seek healing. It names the discipline of accompanying suffering without defining the sufferer by whether the desired pastoral outcome has occurred. In relation to forgiveness, this means the church cannot make reconciliation the proof that forgiveness was authentic, nor emotional calm the proof that grace has been received. Nouwen's wounded presence thus gives embodied form to Jankélévitch's gratuity: both resist the temptation to control what follows from the gift. Pastoral fidelity is therefore measured less by successful resolution than by whether care remains truthful, non-coercive, relationally responsible, and capable of staying present where suffering cannot yet—or perhaps cannot ever—be neatly resolved.

Unresolvedness as the Constructive Site of Forgiveness and Grace

The fifth and principal finding is the category produced by the dialogue itself: unresolvedness. In this study, unresolvedness does not designate psychological dysfunction, indecision, or passive acceptance of injustice. It describes a theological-ethical condition in which moral judgment remains operative, the past remains historically real, wounded memory persists, and yet forgiveness is not required to produce closure in order to remain meaningful. For Jankélévitch, this condition appears where forgiveness exceeds calculation without abolishing the gravity of wrongdoing (Jankélévitch, 2005). For Nouwen, it appears where presence remains faithful to woundedness without converting care into control (Nouwen, 1972, 1996). The convergence is therefore structural rather than merely thematic: Jankélévitch protects forgiveness from exchange; Nouwen protects pastoral care from mastery. Their dialogue makes unresolvedness intelligible as the space produced when neither exchange nor mastery is allowed to determine the meaning of grace.

This finding also clarifies why therapeutic evidence must be interpreted carefully rather than rejected. Forgiveness interventions can indeed promote significant psychological benefits (Akhtar & Barlow, 2018; Wade et al., 2014), and religiously motivated forgiveness may correlate with dimensions of flourishing and psychosocial well-being (Chen et al., 2019). Yet such outcomes should remain possible fruits of forgiveness rather than theological criteria for its authenticity. Otherwise, people whose trauma persists, whose relationships remain unsafe, or whose emotional

wounds recur become vulnerable to a secondary judgment: not only have they suffered injury, they may also be regarded as having failed to forgive properly.

Unresolvedness resists this secondary violence by separating four realities that are often collapsed: forgiveness is not identical with forgetting; forgiveness is not identical with reconciliation; forgiveness is not identical with healing; and forgiveness is not the suspension of justice. This differentiation also answers the charge of moral quietism. To remain within unresolvedness is not to abandon accountability. On the contrary, it refuses a false resolution that would achieve harmony by minimizing the truth of harm. Boon et al.'s (2025) insistence on the potential moral significance of unforgiveness and Perez et al.'s (2024) critique of socially pressured forgiveness provide contemporary confirmation that moral agency can be lost when forgiveness is idealized without sufficient attention to context.

The study's original interpretation can therefore be stated as follows: unresolvedness is truthful openness. It is truthful because it refuses to revise the past into a reconciliatory story that the evidence of suffering cannot sustain; it is open because it refuses to allow that same past to dictate the only possible future. Grace, within this framework, is neither compensation for suffering nor the final harmony achieved when every wound has healed. It is the gratuitous possibility that relation, responsibility, hope, and futurity may remain open even while some wounds remain unresolved. The father's welcome in Nouwen's reading of the prodigal narrative exemplifies this structure: welcome occurs before complete family reconciliation, and the unresolved elder son remains inside the narrative horizon rather than being erased from it (Nouwen, 1992).

Taken together, the findings substantially reframe the theological grammar of forgiveness. Gratuity challenges exchange; irrevocability challenges erasure; the unforgivable challenges coercion; wounded presence challenges pastoral mastery; and unresolvedness challenges the assumption that closure is the necessary telos of grace. The resulting framework does not diminish the value of healing or reconciliation. Instead, it places them in their proper theological position: as possibilities that may follow forgiveness, not outcomes that determine whether forgiveness was real. The central contribution is therefore an ethics and pastoral theology of fidelity without forced completion. Christian forgiveness, on this account, need not make brokenness disappear; its more demanding task is to remain truthful about what is broken while refusing to concede that brokenness possesses final authority over what the future may become.

Conclusion

This study concludes that forgiveness is most theologically significant not where wounds are successfully resolved, but where memory, injury, moral responsibility, and fractured relationships persist without guaranteed closure. Through a constructive dialogue between Vladimir Jankélévitch and Henri J. M. Nouwen, the analysis identifies five interrelated findings: forgiveness exceeds reciprocity and moral calculation through gratuity; it confronts the irrevocability of the past without confusing forgiveness with forgetting; the unforgivable exposes the limits of coercive and procedural accounts of forgiveness; Nouwen's wounded presence translates this philosophical exposure into a pastoral practice of accompaniment without mastery; and their convergence makes

unresolvedness intelligible as a theological-ethical site in which forgiveness can remain non-instrumental and grace genuinely gratuitous. The study's central novelty therefore lies in reconceptualizing unresolvedness not as evidence that forgiveness has failed, but as a condition in which the truth of wrongdoing can be preserved without permitting the past to determine the whole future. This framework contributes to Christian ethics, pastoral theology, and Christian education by distinguishing forgiveness from compulsory reconciliation, therapeutic success, emotional closure, and the suspension of justice, thereby encouraging forms of formation and pastoral care grounded in truthful memory, non-coercion, vulnerable presence, and fidelity to those who remain wounded. Future research should examine how this theology of forgiveness without closure operates empirically across trauma-informed Christian education, pastoral counseling, post-conflict communities, survivor-centered ministry, and intercultural or interreligious contexts, particularly by exploring how unresolvedness can be taught and practiced without legitimizing passivity, minimizing accountability, or weakening the pursuit of justice.

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Artificial Intelligence (AI) was used during the preparation and revision of this manuscript solely to assist with language refinement, editorial organization, reference identification, and reference-format consistency. AI was not used to generate the substantive theological arguments of the study, conduct independent data analysis, interpret the research findings, or make academic judgments or decisions on behalf of the author. All concepts, arguments, analyses, interpretations, source selections, and conclusions presented in this article remain the sole responsibility of the author and were critically reviewed and verified by the author.

Author Contribution

Chrisoneiro Sidabutar: Conceptualization; development of the research methodology; literature search and source selection; comparative conceptual-hermeneutical analysis; theological and philosophical interpretation; manuscript preparation; critical revision of the manuscript for important intellectual content; and final approval of the version to be published. As the sole author, Chrisoneiro Sidabutar takes full responsibility for all aspects of the research and for ensuring the accuracy, integrity, and scholarly coherence of the work.

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