

Forgiveness (Clark's POV)

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Rated: PG

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Summary: After witnessing the death of Lex Luthor (and being unable to do anything to save him), Clark's conflicted feelings lead him to his old childhood priest.

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Author's Note: For the purposes of this story, I have made Clark (and therefore, Superman) Catholic, since it's the religion I am most familiar with. If you dislike religious themes in your stories, then this probably isn't the story for you.

This story is a companion piece to the author's "[Forgiveness \(Father Paul's POV\)](#)."

Clark nervously stepped into the old wood-and-stone church of his childhood. It brought back memories of sacraments received, Sunday morning masses, and holiday masses — his favorite having always been the Christmas Eve vigil with the way it incorporated lit candles. The place was all but deserted now. He saw two elderly women kneeling in the pews of the church proper near the front, about three rows back from the altar. He saw one young man sitting in the back row, his attention raptly focused forward, seemingly deep in thought. A pregnant woman was lighting a candle at the base of the statue of the Virgin Mother in the small alcove to the right of the lobby. She, like the others, was too absorbed in her own thoughts to notice the primary colors of Superman's costume.

Clark was glad for that. He didn't want to be noticed, not now. All he wanted was a quiet few moments to do what he'd come here to do. He let the door go as he stepped further into the lobby, listening as the massive oaken doors groaned on their hinges as they swung shut once more. Clark breathed deeply, savoring the scents of this once-familiar holy building. A faint trace of incense still lingering in the air from some recent service. The warm smell of wax from the dozen or so lit candles in the area where the pregnant woman was. The rich scent of the oils used to keep the pews in good condition, even as old and worn as they were. The distinctive, hard-to-describe smell of wetness from the basins holding holy water. All of it was at once comforting and soothing, even as it made him more nervous.

He crossed the lobby swiftly, his stomach clenching in spasms. It had been a long time since he'd done what he was about to do. In fact, he'd never quite been comfortable doing this one particular deed. He wondered how long it had been. Though he considered himself a religious man — that was, he held a certain set of beliefs and truly believed in his heart in a higher being who had ordered the universe, who'd guided his spaceship safely to Earth and eventually led him to Lois Lane — he'd long since ceased to be a regular churchgoer. He went when he could,

and made certain to find time for it during the holidays, but his work as a reporter and superhero left him precious little time for sitting for weekly services.

He swallowed hard as he reached his goal, feeling his throat dry up. He drew a deep, steadying breath, then ducked behind the partition in the wall to where the confessional rooms were located. He saw that the door was open to just one of the rooms, the nameplate on the wall declaring that the room held one Father Paul Thistle. Clark was somewhat relieved that he knew the priest. Father Paul had been assigned to Smallville's Catholic church back when Clark was seven years old. He'd grown up listening to the priest's sermons on Sundays and at school functions, and knew the man to be exceptionally kind and compassionate.

Clark went to the door and hesitated for a moment before knocking, his heart hammering in his chest, his stomach knotted, and utterly unsure of what he was even going to say.

"Come in," came a pleasant voice from within the room.

Clark steeled himself and stepped over the threshold. He quietly closed the door behind him. He heard the soft *snick* as the wooden door completely shut. For a moment, he was silent, calling to mind the old ritual.

"Forgive me, Father," he began, his voice pitched just above a whisper, "for I have sinned. It's been..." He faltered for a moment as his mind spun. "I'm not even sure how long since my last confession. Years, certainly."

"That's okay," the priest encouraged him.

"To be honest, I'm not even really sure what to do here," Clark admitted softly.

"Come, son, take a seat," the priest offered.

Clark looked between the chair which sat across from the priest and the one hidden behind a black screen which was set into a protrusion of wall, both of which would keep him obscured from the man's view. He finally decided that it was better to do this face to face. He stepped around the projection of wall which had concealed him from view. He saw the priest's eyes widen slightly in shock, but the man made no comment.

"Thank you," Clark said as he sat, careful not to crease his cape.

The priest nodded his acknowledgement. "May I admit that I'm surprised to see you here?" he asked.

Clark smiled in a self-conscious manner. "I'm surprised to be here too." He sighed as he took in the room.

A high stained glass window let in a colorful array of light shafts. Upon closer inspection, he saw that the shards of glass had been carefully arranged to depict a lion laying down with a lamb in perfect peace and harmony. Two natural enemies who had put aside their differences, a snapshot of what paradise should be like. A crucifix hung to one side of the window, carefully carved out of what appeared to be pine. Clark dropped his gaze to his hands, which lay nestled in his lap.

"I'm not sure where to begin," he said.

"Just tell me what's on your mind," the priest encouraged with a friendly, open smile.

Clark nodded but stayed silent for a minute. Then, finally, "Three days ago, I watched a man die."

"I'm sure you see death on a regular basis, Superman," the man said.

Clark shook his head. "I do, but this was different, Father..." He let the statement trail off into a question, as though unsure how to address the white-haired, gaunt man before him. "I'm sorry. I'm not sure how you prefer to be addressed." Guilt tore through him as he said the words, knowing he was lying to a priest whilst inside a confessional. Clark, of course, knew that the man went by his first, rather than last, name. But Superman would have no knowledge of that. He mentally sighed at the mind games and white lies he had to spin in order to

maintain his disguise, hating them more in this moment than he had in a while.

“Father Paul,” the priest said, smiling.

“Father Paul,” Clark repeated.

“Tell me, Superman. How was this death you spoke of ‘different’ than other times?”

Clark hung his head, his entire body burning with shame. “This time, I didn’t do anything to prevent it.”

If that surprised Father Paul, he didn’t show it. “I’m sure there must have been a reason why,” he said, never losing the friendly, neutral tone to his words.

“I couldn’t,” Clark said, nodding his affirmation to the priest’s words. “I literally couldn’t do a thing to try to save him.”

“Why not?” the clergyman asked, the question innocent and completely devoid of judgment.

Clark froze for an instant before deciding that he knew Father Paul well enough that he didn’t have to hide every detail. He could trust the man. After all, didn’t priests take a vow to never discuss anything said within a confessional?

“Because,” Clark said slowly, choosing his words carefully, “I was wounded. No, that’s not really correct. I guess...weakened is a better word. The man who died...Lex Luthor...he attempted to kill me, just before he leaped off the top of Lex Tower. He almost succeeded. I barely got out of the trap he’d set for me alive. By the time he jumped, I only had enough strength left in my body to watch. I tried to fly up to catch him, but I barely managed to give even a tiny hop.”

Clark stopped himself there, surprised at how easily the words had started pouring from him. He pulled his gaze from his hands to look at Father Paul.

“It sounds like the situation was completely out of your control,” the pastor of the small church said.

Clark nodded slowly. “I guess. I just feel like I should have done more. Like I should have been smarter and avoided getting caught in his trap.”

“Because you’re Superman?” he asked. Again, there was no weight behind the question. It seemed like he was just trying to put the pieces together.

“Because I knew something didn’t feel right,” Clark said, shaking his head, “as soon as I got the message that Luthor wanted to meet with me. I’ve never trusted him, since the moment I first met him. At first, it was just a gut reaction to the man, something I couldn’t justify or put my finger on. But as time went on, my suspicions about the man and his possible criminal activities grew. So, I feel like I should have known something was amiss when he casually asked to meet with me.”

“And why did you meet with him?”

“Because he said that he was concerned about a friend of mine.” He didn’t elaborate further, not wanting to get into the heart-wrenching details of how he’d nearly lost Lois to the lunatic billionaire.

“I see,” the priest said quietly, nodding absently, as if in thought. “Superman, it sounds like you are completely blameless in the matter. There is no sin in trying to help a friend. There is no sin in being physically unable to help someone in need.”

“I know,” Clark said in a small voice. He sighed.

“I can see that something else is bothering you,” Father Paul said gently. He leaned slightly forward in his seat, as if his closer proximity might provide a more intimate setting for Clark to open up to him in.

Clark nodded, speechless, for the moment. He didn’t want to voice the words aloud, but they were the main reason why he was even in that freshly painted confessional room.

“The truth is,” he said, swallowing around a sudden lump in his throat and pulling his gaze away to stare once more at the brilliantly lit, stained glass window. He watched a few dust motes dance lazily in the sunlight — first red, then drifting into green,

then gold. “The truth is,” he started again, maintaining his stare at the window, “when I saw him die...I took no pleasure in it. I’m not that kind of person. If anything, his death has haunted me over the last few days. I see it every time I close my eyes — the arc of his body through the air, the sound of it as it hit the asphalt. But when he died, I couldn’t help it...I felt like a weight was lifted from my shoulders. I felt *relieved* that his life had ended.”

“Relieved?” Father Paul repeated, his wish to have Clark continue to clarify what he meant remaining unspoken.

Clark sighed. “Not for me. Well, at least, not totally for me. I knew I could handle whatever Luthor might have thrown at me next. At least, I believed that I could have. But mostly, I felt relieved for my friend, knowing that she was beyond his reach, beyond the mentally abusive manipulations that he’d been committing against her.”

“Lois Lane,” Father Paul said. “I remember reading about her impending nuptials with Mr. Luthor in the paper.”

Clark nodded. “Yes.” His blood froze in his veins. Had he said too much?

But the clergyman didn’t press the issue. “Superman,” he said evenly, still with the same warm, inviting tone. “It’s only human to feel relief when a threat — real or perceived — is removed from our lives. You said yourself that you don’t take any pleasure in seeing a man die. And you’ve said that you couldn’t have made the rescue, that you even tried to, and found yourself unable to.”

“Yes...”

“So, you can’t be blamed for what happened.”

“Maybe not,” Clark said, looking down at the fresh tan carpeting on the floor. “At least, not for Luthor’s decision to commit suicide. But I *do* blame myself for everything else. My pride, my hatred, my concern for Lois allowed me to blindly walk into a trap when I should have suspected that something was up. Even when he low—sprung the trap,” Clark quickly amended, “I had this moment of such extreme...ego. I brushed it off, refused to take it seriously. That was my downfall. I lost those precious moments when I should have gotten myself far away from that worsening situation. It’s my own fault that I was too weak, too sick, too injured to save him. So yes, I do blame myself,” he said in an intense, quiet voice.

“Superman, you can’t foresee every event. Granted, I don’t know you well at all, but it seems to me that seeing into the future is *not* one of your, albeit, extensive, abilities.”

Clark let out a single, rueful laugh. “No, though sometimes I wish it was.”

He couldn’t help but to think about Lois in that moment. What he wouldn’t give to know if they would one day be together as a couple, the way he’d been dreaming about for nearly a year, since he’d first met her. And if it wasn’t meant to be, he’d even want to know *that*, so he could figure out some way to come to terms with that eventuality.

“And,” he continued after a moment, “I blame myself for my reaction to his death.”

“Your relief over the fact that he couldn’t influence Miss Lane any longer,” Father Paul clarified.

Clark nodded and dragged his eyes upward to meet the priest’s gaze. “Yes. Not just Lois either, but for everyone. Luthor was an evil man. I know, I know, who are we to judge...only God himself should apply the label of good or evil to any given person. But...he *was* an evil man. The things he’d done...the murders he’d ordered...I felt...still feel...that the world is much better off without the billionaire crime lord in it.”

“It seems to me like that’s really why you’re here.”

Clark sighed heavily. He’d thought getting such a confession off his chest would have lightened his soul, but the truth was, finding the right words to attempt to give voice to his tangled jumble of emotions was more difficult than he’d ever imagined.

“Yes,” he said, shoving back his horror at his own feelings —

feelings he hadn't known were possible for him until they'd blindsided him as his enemy's body had broken on the hard pavement before Lex Tower. He knew his voice sounded rougher than normal, but he couldn't help it. "I guess...I guess I feel like I shouldn't have those thoughts at all."

"Because you're Superman?" Father Paul asked, his voice betraying nothing but a desire to understand Clark better.

"Because I was raised better than that," Clark said quietly. "Because I was taught to respect human life — because I *do* respect human life. I guess...I feel a little like a hypocrite. How can I claim to be a crusader for life when someone's suicide — regardless of my ability or not to save him — brings a sense of... I don't know. Almost a sense of peace, I guess. Not that I'm okay with death at all. But, again, peace knowing that a threat to the world has been extinguished. It's...I don't even know if I'm making any sense. It's something I'm having trouble verbalizing. I apologize for that."

"There's never a need to apologize when you're trying to sort out your feelings," the priest said kindly. "Just say whatever it is that comes to mind."

"I feel like a horrible person," Clark admitted after a moment, as he pulled his gaze away from the older man. He wanted to shrink away into the chair right about then.

"You aren't a horrible person, Superman. You're human."

"No, I'm not," Clark said with a sad sigh.

"Maybe you weren't born on this planet, but believe me, son, you're just as human as the rest of us. Sure, you're a bit stronger and faster, and maybe you're the only one who can fly, but it's not your genetics or your abilities that make you human. It's your *heart*. Your ability to love and be compassionate. It's having passion and feeling confused, or scared, or lonely, or even being unable to sort out how, exactly, you feel about some matter that isn't black and white. This is one of those moments — any one of us would feel the same as you. The loss of a life is tragic, that's true. But when that life ends and puts a stop to the threat of other lives being lost or damaged, any one of us is going to have those slivers of relief mixed into their emotions."

Father Paul paused for a moment, perhaps to allow his words to sink in. "God gave us the ability to feel many things at once. There are no right or wrong ways to view a situation that is so firmly rooted in a gray area, such as this one."

"Maybe, but I still feel like...like I've failed some moral test." Clark swiveled his gaze down to watch as a ladybug ambled across the carpet, wading through a patch of golden light and heading for a triangle of teal. "I can't...I can't forgive myself for viewing a death as anything but something to be mourned. I can't forgive myself for feeling the tiniest bit happy that Luthor is dead."

"And you think God is angry at you, is that it?"

Clark mulled it over for a moment. "I'm not sure what I think about that, to be honest." His voice sounded somehow weak to his ears. Defeated.

"Superman," Father Paul said, his ancient wooden chair creaking as he shifted his body around, apparently looking for a more comfortable position. "Superman," he began again as he finally settled in one spot. "God forgives all of us for our very human missteps, our very human emotions. He doesn't judge us on one moment of weakness — physical or moral. And He most certainly does not condemn those who are unable, for whatever reason, to lend their aid to those who need it."

"I just wish I didn't feel like such a failure," Clark admitted after a moment of contemplative silence. "I wish I didn't feel so...inadequate."

"Superman?"

"Yes, Father?"

"How many lives have you saved?"

The question was simple, but it had no simple answer. Did

Father Paul mean how many had been snapped up from the jaws of death? Was he supposed to include those he'd talked down from committing suicide? Should he count the people who may have been killed, had Clark not spotted and stopped a criminal before he or she could commit the crime they'd planned?

"Superman?" the elderly priest asked, after a few long moments had ticked by.

"Honestly, Father, I have no idea," he answered truthfully. "I've never bothered to keep track. And," he admitted, feeling his cheeks flush a little in embarrassment over talking about his deeds, "saving a life is so broad a term, I wouldn't know where to start anyway."

Father Paul cracked a smile that showed his crooked, yellowing teeth. He seemed pleased with Clark's answer.

"Exactly, my boy!" he said with pride in his voice.

"Exactly what?" Clark asked, feeling lost.

"Superman, what you do for the world on a daily basis...it's more than anyone has the right to ask or expect of you. You've impacted the entire world, my son. And I'm not just talking about diverting the Nightfall asteroid several months ago. The little deeds you do...saving a life, talking to a child, making people aware of the charities that your Superman Foundation supports...all of it adds up. All of it sets you apart as a prime example of what we should all strive to be like."

"But this isn't some scale," Clark protested. "I know that what I've been able to do probably outweighs what I haven't been able to. I still watched a man die. I still felt relief that he is beyond impacting the world now."

"Would you be here today, if you hadn't felt that sense of relief?" Father Paul asked, folding his hands in his lap.

Clark thought for a moment. "Maybe. I'm not sure," he said, with a slight shake of his head. "I hadn't really thought about it."

Father Paul smiled a little, just a barely-there curving of his lips. "You have a good heart, Superman. The Lord forgives you for the things you are truly repentant about. And from what I've heard here today, I believe the sincerity of your confession. What you need to do now is to forgive yourself."

"How do I do that?" he asked — almost begged.

The priest shrugged. "However way you forgive yourself for any other misstep. Each rescue you can't attend. Each disaster that occurs before you can reach that place in time. You know that you have your physical limits. Know and embrace that you have your emotional limits too...and that it is okay to have those limits. It's what makes you human, what makes you...makes all of us...strive to be better than before."

Clark slowly nodded. What Father Paul was saying made sense on a soul-deep level. He knew it might take some time, but he would try to do as the man suggested, and try to truly accept how very human he was, despite his origins. After all, why should he be any different from the human beings on the planet? He'd been raised by humans, been taught by humans, been loved by and loved humans in return. His entire perception of the world had been shaped by human beings. And he was ever grateful for that fact. In all ways but his DNA, he himself, *was* a human.

"Thank you, Father," he said as he processed the stark revelations flashing through his mind. "What you've said...it makes a lot of sense. I appreciate that you took the time to speak with me."

"Believe me, my son, it was my pleasure. And, if I may be so bold as to offer, know that my door is always open if there are other things you wish to speak about."

"Thank you. I'll keep that in mind," Clark said, favoring the man with a genuine smile. His once-burdened heart felt light as air now. "I really should be going now. I don't want to take you away from your flock for too long."

The priest smiled. "Take care, Superman."

Clark nodded, shook the man's hand, and quietly left the

room. The church was empty now, and his flight away from the place was leisurely, now that his soul was full of hope instead of torment. One day, he promised himself, when the time was right, he would further repent of his weakness by apologizing to Lois. One day, when he was sure her heart could handle his full disclosure of the truth — about Luthor's death and about why Clark hadn't been at her side the entire time.

One day, he would hopefully gain the forgiveness that mattered the most to him in this mortal realm — that which came from Lois herself.

THE END