

Forgiveness and the Northern Ireland Conflict

Forgiving and politics - 25th November, 1994

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A Discussion paper

1. The difference between Reconciliation and Forgiveness

In the past few years many people in Northern Ireland have been asked by the media if they forgive the killers of their relatives. An amazing number have replied 'Yes' and called for no retaliation, saying they would not want any family to go through the suffering which they have experienced. But this on its own is not reconciliation.

Forgiveness is *our* side of the process: we forgive someone who has injured us. It may and often does lead to reconciliation. But not always. Why? Because the other party does not say 'Sorry', does not repent, or is not willing to accept our forgiveness.

Repentance requires change. The person who commits wrong has to do more than say 'Sorry'. He or she has to turn towards the person they have wronged and try to make amends. That is what the Bible means by repentance. It involves entering into new and just relationships.

Reconciliation only happens when *both* sides come together.

2. What happens when we forgive or if we fail to forgive?

The past cannot be changed. What is done is done and there is no power to undo it. Forgiveness is a response to this. It respects the unchangeable. Yet it finds a way of changing the unchangeable by setting it in a new light, so as to get rid of festering infection, and open up new possibilities.

Forgiveness is often incredibly difficult. It may well be all the more so now that violence seems to have ended, because there is a possibility of prisoners being released early. It is and will be very hard for people to see those who killed their relatives walking freely down the main street of the town in which they live -- and often victim and killer live in the same area.

A political settlement may also mean that many crimes -- both by the forces of the State and by paramilitaries -- will not be investigated. Wrongs done may be left in limbo, or they may fester and infect the present and the future. Thus the dead and the families of the dead will be twice sacrificed -- once in the original event and a second time by a lack of justice which they are asked to accept for the sake of peace and stability for the majority.

Yet the challenge to forgive is neglected at one's own peril. If those who are unjustly bereaved cannot eventually come to forgiveness they will be left in a place of darkness, their lives filled with bitterness. But if they can receive and use the gift of forgiveness they can be freed from this prison and be given the possibility of a new start.

Frank Chicane, General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches, tells of the differing responses of two of his former enemies to the end of apartheid. One was deputy minister of law and order when Chicane was detained. He came to Chicane, said that he knew what they had done was wrong, and asked for forgiveness. Frank was able to accept his apology. Both were freed as a result. The other was a policeman who tortured him by ripping out his hair and making him pick up the bloody locks. He is now in a senior position in the South African police. He has never offered an apology. Frank has found it very difficult to relate to him. That means that 'I am a prisoner of that act. He is a prisoner of that act' (*The Guardian*, 10 June 1994).

If we fail to forgive we will hand on our bitterness to the next generation. The conflict in the former Yugoslavia is an example where bitterness was handed down, not only from atrocities committed during the Nazi period, but from generations before that going back to the wars between the Christians and the Muslims. Do we want this to happen in these islands?

3. Does forgiving someone mean they escape the consequences of what they have done?

No. If people do not face the reality of what they have done and try to develop new and just relationships, then they remain in a prison of their own making. We need to accept responsibility for the suffering we have imposed in the past. Acts of repentance need to be credible. Willy Brandt's dramatic gesture of kneeling at the Warsaw Ghetto Memorial in 1970 was an appropriate act of repentance by a German leader towards the Jewish people. It came at the right time. It may well be that such acts have to be made some way down the road rather than at the start of the process of reconciliation. But we can take steps that will start us on that journey.

4. Steps on the road to reconciliation

One step is to recognise that we have all contributed in some way to the bitterness and division, by what we have done, or by what we have failed to do.

A second is to take each other seriously by ending our mutual denial. We have become used to seeing Northern Ireland as simply 'British' and 'Protestant', or part of the 'nation State of Ireland'. The ceasefires are a moment of opportunity for us to recognise each other, *to make new and just relationships*, and to put aside for good our denial of each other.

A third is to face the fact that none of us can get all we want and to begin to find out positive values in other communities. Daoud Jattub, a Palestinian journalist, writes of the Middle East Peace plan: 'It falls short of what a lot of people want, but it's a corner-stone for the new house, not a ceiling... We now have an opportunity for everybody in our nation to participate in this building' (*The Guardian*, 15 Sep 1994).

Fourthly, we need to be aware of our own insecurity and demands for honour and respect. People naturally demand respect for their national and political identity, especially where they feel this is threatened. But our own hurt can blind us to the pain others feel because *their* identity is threatened.

Moving towards forgiveness, however, may well be a slow process, often involving expressions of bitterness and anger. Loyalists have expressed 'abject and sincere remorse' for what they did. Republicans have admitted that others besides themselves suffered. These are

steps in the right direction. But people will respond in different ways to statements like these. The wife of a man murdered by the UDA was asked recently about the Loyalist's expression of remorse. Her response was 'I can't really deal with that yet. I have to put it to one side for the moment' (*The Irish Times*, 15 October 1994).

Conclusion

We have all suffered so much in the past twenty-five years that it is very difficult even to think of forgiveness and repentance. Yet it is only through forgiveness and repentance that we can restore communication and recreate community.

We need to go back to the way Jesus prayed. This means asking God for the grace to enable us to forgive others, just as God forgives us our own sins. That is how Our Lord asked us to pray when he taught us the Our Father.

If we have committed grave wrong we also need to ask for the grace to believe that the risen Christ meets us in our guilt and despair and offers us a new future.

This article has been produced by members of the Interchurch Group on Faith and Politics whose most recent publication is *Breaking Down the Enmity*. The Group are currently working on a new document looking at ways forward in the light of the ceasefires.