

REMEMBRANCE

AND

FORGETTING:

BUILDING A FUTURE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Remembrance and Forgetting: Building a Future in Northern Ireland

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Members of the Faith and Politics Group

1. INTRODUCTION

In 1991 the Faith and Politics Group produced a booklet entitled *Remembering Our Past: 1690 and 1916* in which we considered two “foundation events” in Irish history: the Battle of the Boyne and the Easter Rising. We tried to look at the significance of these foundation events for today. This booklet seeks to take the discussion further and to explore the significance of what we remember and what we forget.

How the past is to be dealt with is an issue which has been given particular focus by the Good Friday Agreement and its subsequent endorsement in referenda, North and South. It is of the nature of political settlements that they look to the future. They require a new start to be made, which implies release from the past. How does this release best take place? Is it through a “blessed act of oblivion” (William Gladstone), drawing a double line underneath the past? Or is it through a remembering and a reckoning with the past?

In parts One to Seven we deal with how we remember **and** forget, and how we construct the past using particular interpretative keys. We illustrate this in the case of Ireland. We explore issues relating to the suppression of memory in part Six and whether memory needs to be recovered. In part Seven we give a couple of examples of the recovery of memory in the Republic of Ireland.

In parts Eight and Nine we consider the dangerous power of memory and how it relates to the desire for revenge and to a desire to keep faith with the heroic sacrifices of the past.

In part Ten we explore alternatives to revenge and sacrifice in terms of truth telling, punishment, restitution, respect for victims of violence, respect for the dead and the need for new covenants.

In part Eleven we deal directly with how the past is to be dealt with in terms of grieving, telling our stories, dealing with the wounds, forgiveness, and acknowledgement of wrongs and apology.

Part Twelve deals with the churches and memory and part Thirteen suggests the possibility of a new configuration of remembering and forgetting in a context where injustice, antagonism and desire for revenge have been taken out of the Northern Ireland situation.

2. THE IMPORTANCE OF MEMORY

Nations and peoples weave their sense of themselves into narratives. These (foundational) stories tell us what we need to know about ourselves and how we remember what has happened to us. The stories function not only internally in maintaining community identity and solidarity, but also externally in shaping the relationship of the group with those outside. And the stories, in turn, are shaped by these relationships.

The symbolic narratives of groups are incorporated in flags, anthems, songs, speeches, national holidays and war memorials. They are also incorporated into festivals and rituals, e.g. Remembrance Day and the Twelfth of July.

Whatever is remembered has a direct bearing on the things that preoccupy us today. Thus remembering is always selective. Remembering **and** forgetting are two intertwined ways of reconstructing the past, and thereby giving identity. All groups depend on the forgetting of events and of people that do not fit into the ‘story’.

No memory tells us simply what is the case because every remembrance is laden with individual and collective desires and interests, as well as collectively shared convictions - which are themselves shaped by 'cultural memory'. Thus, for instance, arguments about how many Serbs were killed in Croatian concentration camps during the Second World War, or the number of Protestants killed in 1641, are not just about facts. Facts and events need larger narratives, and since larger narratives are in dispute, facts and events are in dispute too. There are different 'memories' of the same event.

People often construct their past using a particular interpretative 'key'. This is a way of reading history, enabling people to understand themselves, but also how their enemies fit into the story. An example: in 1389 the Serbs fought against the emergent Ottoman Empire at the Battle of Kosovo Polje. They lost. Remembering this battle came to be the interpretative 'key' for how the Serb people understood themselves. The Yugoslav dissident Milovan Djilas said: "*wipe away Kosovo from the Serb mind and soul and we are no more.*" The Serbs had fought to defend the values of Christian Europe. However, Christian Europe, and particularly the Catholics, never appreciated the sacrifice, and the Serbs came to see themselves as heroic victims. President Slobodan Milosevic sought to draw on the story at the 600th anniversary in 1989 to reassert his own power.

Jewish identity has been built round the trauma of events, in particular in this century the holocaust. The novelist David Grossman has commented that there is no week in the Israeli calendar in which there is not a memorial day of some sort for a traumatic event. Examples of how Protestant and Catholic have used particular interpretative keys to construct their history will be discussed in part Four.

3. MEMORY AND POWER

Victory gives the victor the right to render the 'official' story. They can tell a story of triumphalism and superiority, of manifest destiny, of a mission to civilise, depending on the chosen interpretative 'key' or 'keys'. The 'nasty' bits - often a reality of massacre and murder - can be forgotten.

The vanquished retain their memories - what one has suffered one never forgets - and out of them narrate their own version of what happened. The story becomes a story of resistance, a resentment of that defeat, and a hope for a decisive transformation of the situation.

The vanquished often have to fight the version of events, the story, as told by the dominant people or colonial power. David James and Jillian Wychel illustrate this from the experience of the Maoris in Aotearoa/New Zealand (the power to name is also part of the struggle between rival stories):

"... it has been difficult for the Maori story even to be heard, let alone accepted, by the majority. The Pakeha community [the majority community] and the monocultural state in Aotearoa/New Zealand have until recently held an almost complete grip on the education system and the media, and therefore on easily accessible information.

One of the peripheral but strongly held themes of the Pakeha story is of the assimilation of Maori to the new national order introduced by the Crown. One of the central themes of the Maori story is of resistance to assimilation despite all attempts by the Crown and the dominant culture and of continual demands for local self-determination and for a voice in national matters.

The occupation of Pakaitore/Moutoa Gardens in 1995 was a classic instance of the difference between the two stories. For most citizens, relying on the mainstream media for their information, it was a story of a turbulent time of youthful anger and violence, of gang involvement, of vandalism against historic monuments, and of the final vindication of the law through the court declaration that ownership of the land did properly lie with the local council.

For the occupiers, the story was one of mainly disciplined protest against the delay and denial of justice, of withstanding harassment from the police and the community, and of the drawing together of the iwi, young and old, into a twelve-week intensive seminar-cum-political negotiation which has helped to create new representative bodies for the iwi... The legal title to the land was never the main issue."

Often the oppressed internalise the oppressor and their story. Even after liberation or a change of circumstances, the story can live on in the minds of the former oppressed. Envy, resentment and enmity can continue to be present. The vanquished often have to face the forgetfulness of the victor. The Irish have a story about the killing instigated by Oliver Cromwell at Drogheda in 1649; it is important to their identity. The English have no story at all.

The vanquished often tell their stories in ways that demonise the conqueror: they refuse to recognise their humanity and see them as incapable of changing. Memory can be a form of thirst for vengeance. And the victims find it difficult to acknowledge that they can be perpetrators too. As the *Irish Times* columnist Fintan O'Toole says of the Irish: "*In our collective memory we are always the victims, never the perpetrators.*"

The victor can attempt to erase the memory of those who have suffered. Thus, ethnic cleansing (following on the holocaust) is an attempt to eradicate the accusing truth of the past. As the historian and commentator Michael Ignatieff says:

"In its wake the past may be rewritten so that no record of the victim's presence is allowed to remain. Victory encloses the victim in a forgetting that removes the very possibility of guilt, shame or remorse, the emotions required for a sustained encounter with the truth".

4. INTERPRETATIVE KEYS IN IRISH MEMORY

The Ulster Protestant Community

What interpretative keys are used to construct Ulster Protestant memory and identity?

There are identity stories of:

- Siege (1689, siege of Derry)
- Massacre at the hands of Catholics (1641)
- Resistance (1689, 1912 Home Rule, 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement)
- Blood Sacrifice (1641, 1690 Battle of the Boyne, 1916 Battle of the Somme)
- Struggle and Deliverance (1689, 1690)
- Victory over Catholics (1690).

Thus, the Protestant story is a saga of conquest, endurance, sacrifice, deliverance, fear of betrayal, and the endless need for vigilance. The hope is that the people will continue to escape and have the victory. Memory is a form of resistance. The story is endlessly replayed; the parades are a mnemonic device, a ritual recalling the need for vigilance.

Important in this is the religious dimension. There is a sacred story of Protestant martyrdom and Catholic duplicity. There are echoes of the history of Israel, of the covenant community who have been delivered but are surrounded by pagan enemies liable to corrupt with their idolatry and destroy with their violence.

The Irish Catholic Community

What interpretative keys are used to construct Irish Catholic memory and identity?

There are identity stories of:

- Defeat (Battle of Kinsale 1603, 1690)
- Victimisation (Cromwell, the Famine, Partition)
- Betrayal (Treaty of Limerick 1691)
- Dispossession of the land (17th Century)
- Injustice and oppression (18th Century Penal Laws)
- The eternal cycle of sacrifice (ennobling failure) and rebirth/redemption (1916).

Some of this is linked to the sacrificial themes of Irish Catholicism and stories of endurance in the faith during times of persecution. Memory is also a form of resistance in the Catholic tradition and there are rituals that sustain the resistance (e.g. the annual orations at the Republican plots on Easter Sunday).

What the Traditions Share

In both traditions the present and the heroic past are linked. Sacrifice is a strong theme and we have to remain loyal to what past generations have done. Sacrifice – like vengeance - is a form of ritual violence and binds present to past. The problem with interpretative keys is that the complexity of actual events disappears; they promote selective remembering. They emphasise the differences between people. They inhibit new possibilities and hope for a new story.

5. MEMORY AND FORGETTING IN THE CONTESTED SPACE OF NORTHERN IRELAND

Before antagonism intensified in the 19th century, people in Northern Ireland experienced the world in ways that reflected ‘Protestant’ and ‘Catholic’ much less sharply than was the case later. In this, they paralleled many societies in Eastern Europe at the same time. For instance, Albanians and Serbs lived relatively peacefully side by side in Kosovo before and during the Ottoman Empire. Ethnic tensions only began to increase in the 19th century, with the rise of Serb nationalism.

However, as rivalry increased – under the impact of the rise of nationalism and religious revival – communities of fear and threat emerged. Identities that once were permeable began to be closed off. Differences were emphasised. As fears increased people began to focus on the moments of antagonism in the past, e.g. stories of massacre. Remembrance of earlier events only grew in strength as contestation increased. For instance, the first commemoration of the Battle of the Boyne took place one hundred years after the event.

Antagonism controls memory. Memory tells us who our enemies are today and what they have done to us in the past, or what they have been stopped from doing in the past. History is gradually shaped into an ‘us’ and ‘them’. Parallel stories develop.

David Jones and Jillian Wychel illustrated this from their experience of visiting the Tower Museum in Londonderry:

“The concept of parallel stories arising out of a contested space was dramatically illustrated in one part of the Tower Museum in L’Derry. A corridor ran between windowed displays on either side. On one side was the Nationalist story of specific events told through its symbols and artefacts and on the other side the Unionist story of the same events. On the one side the kerbstones that linked the corridor was painted orange, white and green; on the other red, white and blue”.

Antagonists tell parallel stories, but antagonists are also interlocked. Thus, there is an interdependence of memory. The theologian Alan Falconer says of Northern Ireland: *“The identity of each community has been shaped by the actions, attitudes and declarations of other communities”*. We have shaped each other, including each other’s memories.

Antagonism simplifies the story, controls what is remembered and tends to exonerate us from what happens in the conflict. We simply cannot see our role in the ‘play’: that we are caught in a fear/threat relationship.

As antagonism progresses, scapegoating and demonisation intensify. People normally belong to different but overlapping identities: religious, cultural, ethnic, national. In situations of conflict, these identities tend to fuse. Thus, for instance a religious threat becomes a political threat, and vice versa.

As antagonism escalates, all we can remember are the threats to our community and ourselves. The ‘hopeful’ bits – the stories of good relationships and co-operation – drop out of history because they are seen as unimportant in the light of subsequent events. The political scientist Frank Wright has illustrated this in his retelling of a forgotten ‘moment’ of co-operation between Protestant and Catholic in the Tenant League’s struggle to protect the position of tenants in mid-19th century Ulster. Wright has also demonstrated that the on-going division between Protestant and Catholic has been shaped by the presence of Britain. Both sides remember how this presence has affected them; the British do not remember – it is not important for their identity.

6. SUPPRESSION OF MEMORY

What we remember is a constructed narrative. These constructed narratives drive out part of reality, the bits that do not fit into the narrative. Thus, the Pope’s support for King William in 1690, and the Presbyterian United Irishmen disappear from Ulster Protestant remembrance. The many Irish Catholic Nationalists who died in the First World War did not fit into the new National myth with its authorised memories. They disappeared into an historical limbo.

A “deep remembering” (Geiko Mueller – Fahrenholtz) will disclose a complexity of events and a complexity of identity. If we cannot tolerate a complex image of ourselves, e.g. admitting elements of shame and elements of guilt, then we distort ourselves and we distort our neighbour. There is the danger of demonisation and scapegoating, and we risk feelings of rage, frustration, self-hatred and self-pity. A community in its rage and despair from loss of power can retreat inwards, see itself as the victim and refuse to examine the past. Particular memories are preserved as the community closes itself off.

Memories may be suppressed because to talk about them is too painful. The history of our guilt may be hidden, remembrance blocked by denial, discomfort and defensiveness (the willed amnesia of the perpetrator or victor). The victims may be reduced to silence or unable to speak. Returning to the point of pain has great difficulty for both victims and perpetrators. But if deeds are not identified and named they maintain their hidden power.

The unacknowledged and sub-conscious pains of older generations can have a contaminating impact on the younger ones. Not only the sins of the fathers but the pains of hurt and shame may be passed down the generations.

The danger of suppressing the past is a theme which snakes its way through many of the books of the Jewish writer, Elie Wiesel. In his novel *The Fifth Son* the father, who was a concentration camp survivor, feels unable to talk about the past to the son. The effect was that the past could not become really past; it continued to entangle hopelessly the present, in particular the life of the son. The book ends with the son saying:

“A sad summing up: I have moved heaven and earth. I have risked damnation and madness by interrogating the memories of the living and the dreams of the dead in order to live the life of those who, near and far, continue to haunt me: but when, yes when, shall I finally begin to live my life, my own?”

Similarly, Seamus Deane in his novel *Reading in the Dark* tells the story of acts of betrayal, which took place in Derry in the 1920s. They profoundly affect one family but they could never be openly talked about. The lost uncle hovers over the family and the family house is *“as cunning and articulate as a labyrinth, closely designed with someone sobbing at the heart of it”*.

We may not be able to talk honestly about what happened. The Irish historian Tom Garvin speaks about what happened after the Irish Civil War:

“For a long time after the end of the Civil War, a lot of people didn’t like talking about it. A sort of conspiracy was entered into by a lot of people – to ensure that the bitterness of the Irish Civil War was not transmitted to a younger and possibly more innocent generation.”

The construction of a state, the re-building of society, the need to work with former opponents, the compromises that an end to conflict require, a realisation that no-one has clean hands, fear of stirring up new bitterness, fears about the amount of truth that can be borne, the psychological burden on individuals: all may seem to require a prudent silence or a determination to let bygones be bygones.

It may well be that this approach may ‘work’. A generation may ‘background’ its hurt, pain and bitterness and carry them to the grave in order to avoid passing them on to younger generation. And thus for a future generation a conflict may become irrelevant. Some countries, like Spain after Franco, and Poland under its first post-Solidarity government, determined to draw a thick line under the past.

This solution may be available in particular situations, although it should be made clear that particular people and groups have carried the burden of making it ‘work’. In other situations the danger may be that if we have not faced the demons of the past the pragmatic and necessary agreements we make will be of a precarious nature. There will be a constant danger of them breaking down and of the past repeating itself. Dangerous silences may be created which can break into the bitter voice of mutual recrimination, with the risk of setting off a new round of the cycle of conflict. Thus, the “act of oblivion” approach has its dangers. By repressing the real history of the interethnic carnage between 1941 and 1945 in the former Yugoslavia the Titoist regime helped to create the conditions for its return. The international community has attempted to create an imposed silence over the history of the recent war in Bosnia so that the carefully planned ‘peace’ reached with such difficulty is not jeopardised. History may, however, repeat itself.

A Christian account puts the weight on: establishing the truth about the past, acknowledging guilt and responsibility, acting forgivingly, and then moving on. Nevertheless, in an imperfect world counsels of perfection may not always be politically feasible and may even threaten a fragile peace process. The best we may find in some situations is that politicians and groups may be able to act in new ways without dealing with the past.

7. RECOVERY OF MEMORY

Memories can be recovered without the renewal of bitterness. We can begin to face the complexity and the pain. The following are two examples:

The first is an extract from a letter which appeared in *The Irish Times* of 11th December 1997 from Una O’Higgins O’Malley, a former member of the Faith and Politics Group. It concerns remembrance of the Irish Civil War.

“Your columnist Vincent Browne can be a formidable confronter on radio but, on reflection, I found something important in his recent accusation to Nora Owen TD that Fine Gael, while priding itself on its part in founding this State had never openly expressed sorrow for the 77 executions and for such incidents as Ballyseedy carried out in the name of its predecessor, Cumann na nGael. I utterly refute, however, his facile taunts that Cumann na nGael paid no price for all of this. For a start, they lost Michael Collins and I think, among other things, of the assassination of their Vice-President and of his father (my father and grandfather). But this letter is not about ‘what-aboutery’; rather it is an attempt to suggest the necessity for some structured way of together remembering, expressing sorrow for, and maybe even repenting of, the violence of our shared past.

I have difficulty with this word ‘repenting’ it is because I don’t see how succeeding generations can really take responsibility for what was done before their time in circumstances with which they are not familiar. However, insofar as we have overlooked the anguish of the other side and failed to attempt reconciliation with them, we do have matters of which to repent.

Some years ago the leaders of Ogra Fianna Fail and of Young Fine Gael (grandsons of Sean

Lemass and of Kevin O’Higgins respectively) together laid a wreath of shamrocks at the Four Courts in shared remembrance of all who had lost their lives as a result of the Civil War – part of a Walk of Remembrance organised by the Glenree Centre for Reconciliation. At that time, it would not have been possible to have had participation from Sinn Fein. But at a concelebrated Mass in Booterstown on the 60th anniversary of the assassination of O’Higgins, he was remembered in the company of the three Republicans who had killed him – something which brought great peace to at least two of the families involved.

I think that if we want our current peace process to succeed we must consider appropriate ways in which we might try to heal the wounds of the past – wounds which can still throb surprisingly painfully after so many decades. Would the new Taoiseach with the support of the Opposition approve, for instance, of a special inclusion in the Remembrance Service held annually at Kilmainham in July of prayers for forgiveness and healing of the Civil War? Many other ideas could be floated by a representative group facilitated, for example, at Glenree. I believe it would be good to address this unfinished business before the end of the century and the start of new millennium”.

The second is a report from *The Irish Times* of 25th November 1997 of the promotion of joint remembrance of the Irish dead of the First World War.

“THE Government is to contribute £150,000 towards the purchase of a Peace Park and the construction of a Round Tower in Messines Ridge, West Flanders, to commemorate the 50,000 Irishmen from both sides of the Border who died in the first World War in the 300-mile battlefield in France and Belgium.

The Taoiseach, Mr. Ahern, said yesterday this would serve as ‘a powerful symbol of reconciliation.’

The project is being carried out by the organisation, A Journey of Reconciliation, whose joint executive chairmen are former Fine Gael Donegal TD, Mr. Paddy Harte and Mr. Glen Barr, former senior political spokesman of the Ulster Defence Association.

Mr. Ahern said ‘I thought it was an excellent idea and I was glad to recommend it to the Government for financial support.’ He wanted to commend the people who had undertaken the project.

Today both patrons and trustees of the Journey of Reconciliation will travel to Messines to meet the Burgomeister, Mr. Jean Liefoghe, and an inter-denominational ceremony will take place which will celebrate the ‘turning of the sod’ on the proposed site of the war memorial.

As a memorial, it will recognise the savagery of war, and the futility and the inhuman scale of the killing.

It will also become a place where both communities can join together in remembrance. Its construction will involve young Protestants and Catholics from north and south. In addition, voluntary contributions and assistance from the business community on both sides of the Border will be vital to the project.

The design of the Peace Park and the Round Tower symbolises the ideas and features representative of the entire island of Ireland. Four areas characteristic of the provinces will be treated in landscape terms.

The Round Tower was chosen as it predates the Reformation and political divisions in Ireland. No one political or religious party can lay claim over it. The symbol of ancient Ireland, Newgrange, is relocated in the design so the position of the sun will shine down the site axis and enter an opening in the Tower at 11 a.m. on November 11th, which was the exact hour and date of the Armistice in 1918”.

8. THE DANGEROUS POWER OF MEMORY

Commemoration of past events is frequently a pitched battle between opposing ideologies and groups. The past is an argument about the present. Often commemoration tells more about contemporary needs than about the events themselves. The literary critic Edna Longley says: “*Commemorations are as selective as sympathies. They honour our dead, not your dead*”.

Commemoration can revive conflict. Sir Kenneth Bloomfield in his report *We Will Remember Them* speaks of “*the first stirrings of the current conflict in the clash of conflicting ideologies in 1966, at the time of commemoration of the Easter Rising and the Battle of the Somme respectively*”. It is no accident that these are the two defining events in modern Irish history and that they have been told as stories of heroic suffering and sacrifice.

Memorials often tend to perpetuate the past and its hurt. Jane Leonard in a report entitled *Memorials* (1997), commissioned by the Community Relations Council, says of the memorials to those killed in the Troubles:

“*Consider the experiences of loss, desires for revenge, national and religious identity, bewilderment and continuing vulnerability on some existing memorials*”.

This suggests the difficulty of common remembrance in a context of a civil conflict where victims (and their families) were often bitterly opposed to each other. There is still no common memorial to the dead of the Civil War in the South.

There is a dangerous power of memory to stir up hatred and desire for revenge. This is because in places like Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia, and Ireland the past continues to torment because it is not really past. The past ‘contaminates’ the present. There is no saving distance between past and present.

Such societies are not living in a serial order of time but in a simultaneous one. The German theologian Geiko Mueller-Fahrenheit tells a story of a visit to the Republic in 1969:

“Somewhere south of Dublin we passed a village and the remains of what would have been a large mediaeval church caught our eye. So we stopped and walked over to the ruins. On our way back to the car, we met a peasant woman. Pointing with her thumb to the ruined church she said grimly: ‘Cromwell did that to us’”.

This story can be paralleled by the explanation given by a Belfast woman to a member of our Group for why Orangemen are not allowed to attend Catholic services: *“It’s because of all those people they killed”* – the killing she was referring to was the massacre of Protestants in 1641.

For the women yesterday and today were the same. Michael Ignatieff says about the Balkans:

“Simultaneity it would seem is the dreamtime of revenge. Crimes can never be safely fixed in the historical past; they remain locked in the eternal present, crying out for blood”.

9. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF REVENGE AND SACRIFICE

Two of the chief obstacles in the path of reconciliation are the desire for revenge and a desire to keep faith with the heroic sacrifices of the past. This is why memory has a dangerous power. We now consider the significance of revenge and sacrifice.

Revenge

Revenge is a desire to keep faith with the dead, to honour their memory by taking up their cause where they left off; the violence is a form of **respect** for the community’s dead. Time and again the slaughter inflicted by one side in Bosnia in 1992 was repaying a slaughter in 1942.

Revenge is also an expression of the demand that things must be put right. A wrong has been done and it must be put right through inflicting suffering on the other(s). Thus at the heart of revenge is a demand for justice. The use of violence is a way of settling the account and redressing the wrong.

There is, however, a paradox at the heart of revenge. The past cannot be undone. Killing will not bring the dead back to life. The impact of injustice on past generations cannot be undone. The violent pursuit of justice and visions of justice creates more injustice and intensifies the cycle of revenge. And the cycle of revenge brings unending futility.

Sacrifice

The heroic sacrifices of past generations (e.g. those of 1916) are another pull of the past on the present, requiring honour and respect. Further they may require – indeed demand - further acts of sacrifice in the present, because the imagined community of the martyrs must

be kept faith with until final redemption is obtained. Nationalisms and political ideologies tend to take on aspects of religion (e.g. “For God and Ulster”, “For God and Ireland”). As such they make absolute claims on their adherents. In particular, they demand that adherents must be prepared, if necessary, to die for the cause.

Vengeance and sacrifice share much – they are often inter-related. They require – and continue to require – acts of violence, thus continuing the vicious cycle of violence. Commemoration of the glorious dead in stories, rituals and monuments edifies and unifies the believing community. It stimulates vengeance and sacrifice, and clothes their usual tawdry reality in seductive attractiveness.

10. ALTERNATIVES TO REVENGE AND SACRIFICE

We have argued that revenge is a form of respect for the dead and a seeking after justice. But revenge usually results in an unending cycle of violence and the ‘fact’ of injustice cannot be undone, e.g. the dead cannot be brought back to life. Therefore revenge must be replaced with new forms of respect for the dead (or the victims who are alive) and by forms of justice which do not seek to return ‘like’ for ‘like’. Similarly sacrifice needs to be replaced by acts of “living sacrifice” (Rom. 12:1), such as working for justice, peace and good relationships. We now explore what this might mean.

Truth Telling

It has been shown in many situations that it is important for a public account to be rendered of what happened and who was responsible. Wrongdoing and injustice are publicly acknowledged. Building a trustworthy peace, it has been argued, requires honest discourse about the past. Thus Truth Commissions have been established in such countries as South Africa, El Salvador and Guatemala. Of central importance is that these are official attempts at truth telling. They arise from, or are part of, a peace process and often incorporate political compromises.

Thus, in South Africa, amnesty was given to perpetrators in return for public disclosure. The perpetrators were held to account but they were not punished if they disclosed what they had done. Signs of contrition or apologies were not required, even though they did take place on some occasions. The victims were able to publicly tell their story, and for the families of victims there was the possibility of finding out what happened to their loved ones. The victims and their families were given respect. The aim was the restoration of personal and civil dignity. A process such as this may be sufficient for many people to put the past behind them. What was given up, however, was the possibility of punitive justice against the perpetrators.

An official Truth Commission may help to change public discourse and memory. The ‘facts’ of some events and the responsibility for them may be established. Particular lies may be nailed. The magnitude of the hurt and the pain may be exposed. All of this is important but the limitations of such Commissions need to be understood. There is no necessary link between ‘truth’ and ‘reconciliation’. The ‘truth’ may bring anger and further polarisation. The ‘truth’ proclaimed by a Commission may not be accepted. This is because there are competing ‘truths’ in situations of conflict; what has happened is embedded in rival narratives of why it happened and who was responsible. Truth Commissions cannot bring the arguments of the past to a conclusion. New realities, critical and moral reflection, spiritual transformation, changed relationships and time may, however, open up the possibility of some ‘shared’ truth being established.

In Northern Ireland the families of those who have disappeared without trace - up to 20 people were abducted by paramilitaries, killed and secretly buried - seek to find out what happened to them. There are the disputed deaths by the security forces in controversial circumstances. There are the unresolved murders. People want to know exactly what happened, and who did what. The families of the Bloody Sunday victims in Derry want the innocence of their loved ones established.

Many people want answers. Will a Truth Commission mechanism in Northern Ireland provide some of them? Truth Commissions are grounded in a peace process and appear to work best when there is a powerful political consensus that 'truth' must be established. The context of a fragile peace like Northern Ireland's, where the conflict continues to smoulder on, may be unpropitious. Nevertheless, the issues are not whether we need a Truth Commission but how are we to deal with the past, and how we are to finish with what has happened? Some reckoning has to take place. There has to be some encounter with truth so that we can have freedom from the past. This may point to the need for various groups and institutions (e.g. churches) to engage in a process of structured self-examination of their role in the conflict.

Punishment

Punishment is the punitive aspect of justice. We cannot do without some form of punitive institutionalised response to wrongdoing, no matter how inadequate and imperfect it may be. Punishment of the perpetrator is a statement that the injured person matters. Through the criminal justice system the perpetrator is called to account and held responsible for their misdeeds. The truth of what happened is hopefully revealed and there is the possibility of the victim's story being told. The perpetrator pays for what they have done and this is reflected in the seriousness of the sentence. Punishment is one way respect is shown to the victims (and their families).

Without an adequate criminal justice system people often feel impelled to express their anger in unrestrained ways, for example through retaliatory action. The function of a properly working justice system is to prevent a spiral of revenge by successfully criminalising and punishing offenders. The continued functioning of the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland – no matter how inadequately – preserved the community from even worse excesses of retaliatory violence.

It is understandable that early release of paramilitary prisoners causes difficulties. It seems to indicate that what has been done to the victims of violence and their families is of no account. They are not respected. There is no justice. There is no fairness. This is why actions by paramilitaries which show that victims are respected might help, for example expressions of regret, remorse, or even apology. These expressions are signs that the people we have injured are fellow human beings with claims upon our respect.

Punishment necessarily individualises guilt. In the context of community conflict (Northern Ireland, former Yugoslavia, Rwanda) the pursuit of justice through the legal system is an ambiguous and frustrating activity, while necessary. Community conflict creates a context where there are all sorts of degrees and categories of guilt: that of the ideologues who promote hate and prepare the ground for violence; that of those who plan and direct acts of violence; that of those who plant bombs and pull triggers; that of helpers and supporters; that of condoners and bystanders; and so on. There are sins of omission and sins of commission. There are the sins of people who journeyed into the far country of violence. There are the sins of the people who stayed "at home", who remained law abiding but who have been consumed by anger, resentment, self-righteousness and the refusal of generosity. There are

the misdeeds of groups e.g. the paramilitaries, and there are the misdeeds of the state, its agencies and agents.

An aspect of all of this is the systemic – the transindividual - reality of evil - something particularly evident in conflict situations. This reality generating its own momentum and logic. Part of the dynamic is the seductiveness of violence and its endless justifications, and the fear, dread, hatred, excitement and frenzy which carry people along, “the diabolic forces of violence” in the words of the German sociologist Max Weber.

Human beings live in and through networks of relationships, and in communities. When these networks and communities go awry human beings tend to go awry too. Thus in coming to judgement on individuals we need to look at what happened to the networks and communities of which these individuals are part. For instance, the paramilitaries are deeply rooted in communities. They have often acted out the aspirations, fears, angers, hatreds and hurts of much larger groups of people who would not allow themselves to be involved personally in violence.

Community conflict brings distortion and dehumanisation to everyone. This is most obviously seen in what has happened to victims of violence. However, the communities from which paramilitaries come have also been dehumanised by security force action, by sectarian violence, deprivation, injustice, etc. To go further, many members of the security services have been dehumanised by what they have been involved in and by what has happened to them.

This is not to say that we make no distinctions between actors, actions and activities – for this we **must** do. Clearly some have suffered far more than others. Some individuals, groups and institutions have killed and injured far more than others, and thus carry more guilt and responsibility. Horrendous actions are **not** automatic, or even ‘understandable’, responses to someone else’s behaviour, or to injustice, or to history, or to the ‘system’. Human beings remain moral agents. Conscious options for violence are made. What we **are** suggesting is a moral complexity – a tangled web – of which we are all part.

Honest discussion about this moral complexity, particularly concerning the issues of guilt and responsibility and who has paid the price of the conflict, is something that is required of us if we are to deal adequately with what has happened over the last 30 years.

Part of the complexity is the issue of the punishment of perpetrators. On the one hand the perpetration of violence demands punishment and this is why the granting of amnesty in many countries in South America was greeted with outrage by many. Impunity means that the past and what happened are not faced up to. There is no accountability and no justice. The dead get no respect.

On the other hand the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland could not bring an end to politically motivated or retaliatory violence, by convicting and punishing perpetrators. Only a few of them were caught and convicted. And perpetrators are part of a chain of guilt, of communities that have gone awry, of institutions and groups that have demanded and commanded total dedication and loyalty. In part their violence has had a representative character. Further, perpetrators can also be victims too. In a context of a serious attempt to move away from a repetition of the atrocities of the past and to bring an end to community conflict the claims of mercy and forbearance have weight. Forbearance and mercy take what has happened seriously but deal forgivingly with those responsible for the misdeeds of the past.

Those organisations using violence to achieve political ends may alter course in response to changing realities and circumstances, even to the point of embracing peaceful means. This may open up the possibility of such groups being involved in a political settlement.

Settlements involving those who have used violence bring all sorts of issues and questions to the fore: Has violence finally ended or is it simply a tactical suspension? What about the decommissioning of weapons? What about the release of politically motivated prisoners? What about unsolved terrorist crimes? What about the ‘military’ end of these organisations? How are those former comrades who will not accept the settlement to be dealt with? Many of these are difficult and painful issues – issues relating to trust and confidence between communities and to different perceptions of justice and punishment – and can not be resolved at once. They have to be dealt with as part of a process of political transition.

It is of the nature of political settlements that they recognise and accommodate political realities and necessities. They require a new start to be made and a line to be drawn underneath the past. They seek to avoid issues of blame and put the emphasis on responsibility for the future. The aim is to end the cycle of conflict by the creation of a peaceful democracy where people can live together under the rule of law. We become partners in a common project.

In seeking to move to a new future from a violent past there is a balance to be struck between the claims of punitive justice, the claims of mercy and forbearance, and what is required to create the ‘common good’ of a peaceful democracy. The early release of prisoners should be seen in this context. And of course the elements of risk, painful contradiction and ambiguity need to be acknowledged.

In the striking of a balance people may be left without justice and without any ending. There is the element of the tragic and the intractable in conflict situations – the “tears in things” (Virgil). One aspect of this is that people continue to pay the price of the conflict all their lives, and this is too often passed down the generations. There is no relief from memory; it continues to sear and scar.

Restitution

Restitution is the restorative aspect of justice. We can never undo and make good the evil that has been done; in this sense strict restorative justice is impossible. We can seek to repair the damage that has been done, where that is possible. However, restitution should be seen more as an act of compensation that fulfils certain functions in the present: firstly, as a sign of recognition of the seriousness of what has happened; secondly, as a sign of the seriousness of repentance; thirdly, it meets some need of the victim; and fourthly, it aims at facilitating a more human future. Respect is shown to the victim. Thus working for peace, reconciliation and justice by those who have been involved in violence can be seen as a sign of repentance and restitution (it is a “living sacrifice”). There is a danger of focusing too much on financial compensation, for how can we measure the ‘value’ of a death or injury or how can we compare one death or injury with another?

Respect for Victims of Violence

Victims of violence have their particular needs: for justice, for the seriousness of the harm to be acknowledged, for apology and repentance from those who have done them wrong, for their stories to be heard, for compensation, for practical support. They have a claim upon our respect, to be remembered and allowed to remember. The past cannot be put right, but we can seek to ensure that it is not repeated. This is one form of memorial to the victims of violence.

Respecting the Dead

We acknowledge the suffering and grief of the other side. We face up to the deaths our side has caused. Perhaps, in time, we will be able to mourn together.

One of the key things in the South African situation was a capacity to have empathy with opponents. When Nelson Mandela first met F.W. de Klerk he immediately made the point that he understood the Afrikaners' suffering in the Boer War. He respected their dead.

And respect for the dead may enable us to live differently. Thus the character of Marian in Stewart Parker's play *Pentecost*:

“Personally, I want to live now. I want this house to live. We have committed sacrilege enough on life, in this place, in these times. We don't just owe it to ourselves, we owe it to our dead too... They're not our masters, they're our creditors, for the life they never knew. We owe them at least that – the fullest life for which they could ever have hoped, we carry those ghosts within us, to betray those hopes is the real sin against the Christ, and I for one cannot commit it one day longer.”

New Covenants

The German philosopher Hannah Arendt has suggested that the primary requirements for people to live together are:

- (1) their willingness to enter into promises and agreements – covenants –and to keep them; and
- (2) their willingness to set aside the past – its broken promises and agreements, its enmity and its vicious circle of action and reaction --and start anew. This is where forgiveness comes in – which will be discussed in part Eleven.

Living together in Northern Ireland requires promises and agreements in a number of key areas:

- the establishment of a political consensus that will undergird the rule of law, the criminal justice system and policing, so that violence from whatever source can be successfully criminalised;
- all groups being bound by the principles of democracy and non-violence and showing in practice that there is a clear and unambiguous break with violence;
- the creation of just conditions for the future;
- the creation of a shared community where different communities have security and parity of esteem.

The Good Friday Agreement is a political accommodation which seeks to end the cycle of violence – the vicious cycle of action and reaction – between the communities in Northern Ireland. It is an attempt to start anew with a set of promises and agreements contained in the Agreement or flowing from it.

The Good Friday Agreement is not peace but an opportunity to make and build peace. As the South African politician Kadar Asmal, who has had long experience of Ireland, said after the Good Friday Agreement: “*You are nowhere near a larger settlement in Ireland.*” By “larger settlement” he means finding a way of living together. The Agreement affords us a **possibility** and it provides necessary political structures which give us the institutional means of working together by cross-community consensus.

Finding ways of living together will be a painful, slow, difficult, uncertain and risky process with no results guaranteed. It is a question of inching our way out of the shadows and into the light. It will require learning the ways of peace, democracy, respect, restraint and compromise. There are no easy endings to civil conflicts. It will take a long time for relationships to be transformed and for distrust, hurt and fear to be overcome - particularly in a context where large numbers of people remain angry, resentful, disbelieving and alienated. We can expect no utopian outcome; human peace is always imperfect. Therefore we must accept the humanity and fallibility of each other.

While we hope for reconciliation (the final end of justice is renewed relationships), what may emerge at first is simple co-existence where there is a willingness to accept the existence of the other. Such co-existence assumes co-operation on a fair basis.

11. DEALING WITH THE PAST

Important in all of this is how people remember and how they deal with past. How people remember profoundly affects how they behave in the present and significantly affects their politics; thus in Northern Ireland the politics of historic grievance and the politics of siege. Our accumulated history – “*the debris, we carry with us, each, of hurt and counter hurt*” (Amy Clampitt) - is part of today’s reality. It pushes people back to standing by their ‘own’ and against their enemies. Memories can enslave and condemn us to a seemingly endless living out of the past. In the words of the Scots poet Edwin Muir:

“... *loves and hates are thrust upon me by the acrimonious dead*”.

Grasped by the ghosts of the past we are unable to imagine a different future.

Because the past can so possess us it is important that we find ways of letting go what has happened. We now explore ways in which this can take place.

Grieving

We may need to lament and grieve for what has been lost and done, and acknowledge anger, bitterness, pain, resentment, loss of identity and uncertainty. For this we need a language. The resources available in the biblical language of lament and the ritual actions of the faith community could be of help in this.

Telling Our Stories

We need to tell our stories to each other and listen intently to what we are told – which involves reaching beyond the words - feeling the pain of the other as transmitted through the ‘memory’ of their community. This is ‘felt’ history. Thus, we begin to see from the perspective of the other. We practice what the Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf describes as “double vision”, seeing both “from here” and “from there”.

Geiko Mueller-Fahrenheit describes an exchange of stories between the former German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt and the Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev, during Brezhnev's visit to Bonn in March 1973:

“On one evening there was a meeting in the residence of Willy Brandt, who was then chancellor. The atmosphere was cordial until Brezhnev began to recall in great detail some of the atrocities committed by Nazi troops in Russia. Everyone was listening with a mixture of respect and dread, because it was obvious that the Soviet leader had to free himself of these oppressive memories. His words had to be understood as an indication of what it had cost the Russians to come to the capital of Germany – the heart of what had been their most bitter enemy.

Brezhnev spoke for some twenty minutes. Then Schmidt, who was minister of defence at the time, responded by telling his own story, for he had been one of the German soldiers stationed in Russia. He spoke of the schizophrenic situation of German soldiers who did not adhere to the Nazi ideology but had been educated to be patriots and thus felt bound to defend their country. In recalling this encounter nearly 15 years later, Schmidt comes to a revealing conclusion; he writes that this ‘exchange of bitter memories greatly contributed to the mutual respect’ that existed between him and Brezhnev despite the fact that the two found themselves in opposite camps from that evening up to the end of their terms of office”.

Dealing with the past may mean working through our history together, particularly visiting together those points that continue to have a painful sting, as Schmidt and Brezhnev did. It may help us recover what we have forgotten, denied, covered up and silenced.

It may mean looking at our symbols – anthems, rituals, songs, festivals, special occasions – and the stories and memories in these symbols. What do they say about the ‘other’ side? What do they say about us? Is this what we want to say now?

Honest discourse about the past – particularly in the presence of the other – may provide resources for a more hopeful future. The danger is that we refuse to do this and instead we search for people and institutions to blame for what has happened over the last 30 years. We make ourselves “whited sepulchres” (Matt. 23: 11) who hide our guilt, responsibility and hypocrisy in proclaiming that we are radically different from these other people.

Dealing With the Wounds

People and communities must be given a way of dealing with their suffering, wounds and grief. There is a need for opportunities for the past to be addressed symbolically, ritually and liturgically, and for spaces to be “*provided for people to express to and with each other the pain and injustices experienced. Acknowledgement and mutual recognition of the legitimacy of their experience is decisive in the reconciliation dynamic*” (the US Mennonite expert on many conflict situations, John Paul Lederach). If hurt, pain, anger, guilt, and loss are not dealt with effectively they will be driven underground, sure to surface in unexpected and harmful ways.

Forgiveness and acknowledgement of wrongs (including apology) are interrelated ways of dealing with what has happened, which may be deeply transformative.

Forgiveness

One of the main reasons why violence was not much greater over the past 30 years has been the way that many people have chosen consistently to seek to cut cycles of vengeance by

calling for, and practising, non-retaliation and forgiveness. Forgiveness is a central aspect of the Christian Gospel. It has significantly penetrated Irish life, and its practice – particularly by many victims and their families – has had social and political effects.

However, the victims of violence or their families cannot be burdened with the demand that they forgive those who have perpetrated crimes against them. That is something they may, or may not, be able to do. None of the rest of us can sit in judgement on them. Nor can anyone forgive on behalf of those who have suffered.

What is required is that the community at large – battered, hurt and damaged by what has happened over the last 30 years – be prepared to enter into a more general process of being able to set aside the past – with all its enmities and demands for revenge – and start anew, accepting the existence of the other. This is something in the nature of forgiveness. As the former Zambian President, Kenneth Kaunda, said, forgiveness is not so much an isolated act but *“a constant willingness to live in a new day without looking back and ransacking the memory for occasions of bitterness and resentment”*.

Such a process of communal forgiveness takes what happened seriously; thus, truth seeking and telling are important. It does not trivialise or condone violence and injustice. Guilt and responsibility remain. What such a process does do is seek to bring peace to the past for the sake of the present and the future. The goal is healing and a move forward into new relationships. It is about rebuilding what has been torn to pieces, creating trustworthy and sustainable structures and providing secure social spaces for people. Such forgiveness is made easier when there is evidence of people acting in new ways, e.g. decisively moving away from violence or being prepared to negotiate new and just political arrangements, or when regret or apology is expressed for what has happened.

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 memories of atrocities committed during the Nazi period, but going back generations before that, even to the wars between Christian and Turk. And, if the politics of grievance is not given up, the past keeps everyone in its grip. Either we find ways to forgive or else we separate from, or seek to destroy, each other. Thus, forgiveness is a practical necessity for continuing to live together. (For further discussion on the issue of forgiveness see the Appendix.)

Acknowledgement of Wrongs and Apology

There are many people who carry responsibility for what they have done, or been involved in, over the last 30 years. That is something which cannot be avoided or evaded, although we have discussed the complexity of the issue earlier. People have to live with what they have done or been involved in. It is in this context that repentance arises: stopping what we are doing; recognition, examination and acknowledgement of wrong doing; finding another way; seeking forgiveness; and seeking to repair the harm done. Repentance is the ‘letting go’ of evil behaviour.

Clearly we are not responsible for, or guilty of, acts we have not done, or in which we have not been directly involved. At the same time, we belong to groups, communities and nations that have done things which were wrong, in the distant or more immediate past. Our history has imposed suffering on others and often brought benefits to ourselves. We cannot run away from this history and its consequences, for we are caught up in it, even if we are not personally guilty. The past affects present realities and relationships. Thus, there is a solidarity in sin, which involves the living and the dead.

Acknowledgement of wrongs done and hurts caused represents a facing of the reality of what a particular group, community or nation has done. Our acknowledgement of what has happened, our sense of regret and our disapproval of past actions by our group or community are forms of respect for past generations and present day victims. They enable us to conduct our relationships in the present in a more generous and just way.

Acknowledgement of wrongs done and hurts caused may take the form of apology. Apology is the verbalised face of repentance. It opens up the possibility of reconnection with the other. For instance, the Stuttgart Confession of Guilt in 1945 recognised the Evangelical Church in Germany's share of the responsibility for the terrible things done during the Third Reich. It paved the way for an honest approach to what had happened and for that Church's re-entry into the ecumenical community.

Apology – clearly and publicly expressed – is one way of convincing people that a clear break with the past has been made. Of course, apology has to be followed by or linked to, an attempt to undo wrongs and act differently – to establish a new justice and a new relationship.

Public rituals of atonement are important to help individuals come to terms with the painfulness of their societies past, for their healing and for reconciliation. As Michael Ignatieff says:

“When President Allwyn of Chile appeared on television to apologise to the victims of Pinochet's crimes of repression, he created the public climate in which a thousand acts of private repentance and apology became possible. He also symbolically cleansed the Chilean State of its association with these crimes.”

For apology to have power it must be made by leaders who have credibility and a capacity to be considered representative, both by the group they are apologising on behalf of, and by the community to whom they are apologising. Timing is important; there are particular moments when words of apology speak. Too soon and often the apology is not believed: the pain, hurt and anger of the victims appear not to have been taken seriously. Place and context are important, as is an audience willing to respect and hear the speaker. Apology also needs to be set in the context of a process of establishing a new relationship. And the words chosen are important. For apology to have power it should be about specifics, where possible, and not just generalities. It must seek to render an account rather than be a glib ritual.

But symbolic actions may be more important than any words; for instance the West German Chancellor Willy Brandt falling to his knees at a monument to those who died in the Warsaw ghetto rising.

Demands for apology are often part of a claim for justice and respect. An acknowledgement that a wrong has been done is important. But demands for apology are often counter-productive and can feed resentment. They are frequently seen as an attempt to humiliate the other. Apologies best arise out of process of free, honest and authentic reflection, and not from moral blackmail. Apologies – even murmurs of regret – should be received in a forgiving spirit with a lack of self-righteousness by a community. After all, there is *“none righteous no, not one”* (Rom. 3:10) everyone is a sinner, all groups have committed wrongs in their history. The aim should be new relationships, not moral (or other) victories.

12. THE CHURCHES AND MEMORY

The churches in Ireland have carried memories of community experience and given it meaning. They have helped to maintain memories – memories of fear, grievance, antagonism and anxiety. They have assisted us in naming our enemies and told us why they are enemies.

It is clear that there have been positive Christian contributions in the conflict over the last 30 years. The deep seriousness with which certain Christian imperatives have been taken by faithful Christians – imperatives such as love, kindness, peacefulness, patience, self control, non-retaliation, forgiveness – have been crucial in restraining the conflict. Similarly the courage and leadership of many individual pastors and church leaders has helped to contain the violence. There have been many Christians in the forefront of peace and reconciliation work. More and more churches and church leadership have co-operated together. Increasingly distinctions have been made between political and religious commitments. Nevertheless the churches as institutions have contributed to community division and sectarianism. In a spirit of humility and contrition the churches are challenged to acknowledge their part in and responsibility for the conflict. There is a reckoning to be made. Judgement will come in some form or another.

Over many years we have fed sectarianism by defining our own denomination's identity primarily in opposition to other traditions. Theological disagreement has often been animated and kept alive by the need to tell a story which justified exclusivity, separation and division. And at the same time the dividedness of our communities has been reflected in our churches. We have often allowed the stories of nationalism and cultural and political identity to overpower the story of the gospel. Political loyalties and exclusive traditions have been put before the God who will have no other god before him, even in the church. Divided churches have failed to be agents of healing and reconciliation in a divided society. We have been satisfied to be chaplains to tribal communities. In speaking to the churches in Northern Ireland, *Sectarianism: A Discussion Document (1993)* said:

“What has happened in Northern Irish society calls us to a profound change of heart (metanoia). The call is to face reality to abandon our myths, to accept our part of the responsibility for what has happened and find new ways forward together” (p.100).

We need to remember and feel the pain of failure to face the damage that has arisen from our unhappy past.

We need the grace to turn away from the captivity of our limited visions and our tattered absolutes.

We need to turn to God, not to our political prescriptions or our cultural and ecclesiastical traditions. Turning to God must first of all be an act of repentance. And, in order to make this repentance in a truthful and credible way, churches must also come face to face with the painful reality of their own complicity with, and participation in, the brokenness and fallenness around us. The test of this is the seriousness of our engagement with the issue of sectarianism.

As we turn to God in repentance, we find that to turn to God is also to turn to one another. And in this apologies and expressions of regret are important. Some instances of this in Ireland are the following:

- the Catholic Bishop of Ferns, Brendan Comiskey, in June 1998 expressing “deep sorrow” and asking forgiveness for the Catholic boycott of Protestant businesses in Fethard-on-Sea, Co. Wicklow;

- the Catholic Bishop of Killaloe, William Walsh, in 1997 apologising and asking forgiveness for the “pain and hurt” caused “to our non-Roman brethren” by the *Ne Temere* decree, followed by the regret expressed by the Archbishop of Armagh, Sean Brady, on the same subject in the following year;
- the Presbyterian General Assembly passing a resolution in 1966 urging its members “humbly and frankly to acknowledge and to ask for forgiveness for any attitudes and actions towards our Roman Catholic fellow-countrymen which have been unworthy of our calling as followers of Jesus Christ”;
- a representative group of Orange Order chaplains expressing “deep sorrow” to the Roman Catholic community in Northern Ireland that so many of them had been intimidated out of their houses and that several of their churches had been burnt, after widespread disturbances in early July 1998 connected with the refusal to let an Orange procession go down a road at Drumcree, Co. Armagh.

13. REMEMBERING AND FORGETTING

New relationships and new covenants will enable the communities to rewrite their histories – it will create a new configuration of remembering and forgetting, a new ‘economy of memories’. As the assassinated Egyptian President Anwar Sadat said: *“Peace is not a mere endorsement of written lines, rather it is the rewriting of history.”* This will be in a context where injustice, antagonism and desire for revenge have been taken out of the situation. It will be a certain kind of remembering: remembering the past in order that we do not repeat the past’s destructiveness, so that we become different people. It will also be a certain kind of forgetting: forgetting not as amnesia but rather as a release from the full weight and burden of the past.

14. MEMORY AND BIBLICAL FAITH

Throughout the Old and New Testaments people are being called to remember God’s acts. And this remembering calls them into certain patterns of response, to be certain sorts of people. This is a remembering that frees us.

God’s acts are not ‘normal’ acts of power. In the Exodus the Israelites, who are about to be made victims by the Egyptians, are delivered by God. In the resurrection Jesus, who was made a victim by the religious and political authorities and the crowd, is vindicated by God. This is a radical and subversive change of perspective. Because of God’s acts we hear and recall the story of people who would have been discarded by history as having no relevance, no importance, no existence, or as simply guilty ones. Jewish and Christian faith are built round the memory of victims, victims who escape. These stories break the usual pattern of power relations. The powerful usually make history and it is their story which is remembered and becomes the defining one; the victims are reduced to silence. But God leads a powerless and oppressed people out of slavery and enters into a covenant relationship with them. Exodus becomes the foundational story of the Jewish people, as Easter becomes for Christians. They are interpretative keys.

The Passover injunction to remember involves the re-appropriation of God’s liberating activity when he brought the Israelites out of Egypt and gave them a future. The past is made present again. The Jewish people in the celebration of Passover experience again their deliverance in the context of their own time. Such a re-living is also an act of thanksgiving to God for entering into a covenant relationship with the community.

At the heart of Christian faith is a person who did not make victims and yet was put to death as a guilty one. In the Eucharist we return to this innocent victim (*“Do this in remembrance of me”*). Through this remembering once again the past is made contemporary and the liberating activity of God is experienced. The activity of remembrance is paralleled with God’s remission of sin, through the death and rising again of Jesus. As we appropriate the memory we are able to accept responsibility and seek forgiveness. We remember that the sacrament originated *“in the same night, as he was betrayed”*. Those who eat at Jesus’ table are his betrayers, then as now. And he continues to accept us, to allow us into his fellowship. We remember the body broken “for us” who were God’s enemies and the blood shed to establish the “new covenant” – the new relationship of promise and commitment – with us who have broken the covenant (1 Cor. 11: 24-25). We also partake in the expectation of a new heaven and a new earth (*“For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes”*, 1 Cor. 1:26). Thus memory becomes a ground of hope for a redeemed future.

In the remembering of Jesus the liberating activity of God is experienced and we are offered the possibility of remembering the people we have diminished and rejected and injured – the people we have made victims. We are given back memory. This recovery of memory is the ground of hope, for it offers us, in the presence of Jesus, the possibility of the restoration of relationships. There can be no authentic hope without memory. As T.S. Eliot says *“This is the use of memory: for liberation”*.

The Christian story is about giving us the memory – through the innocent victim, Jesus – to see our own victims (this is deep remembering). It is a subversive memory because it makes us uncomfortable, because our false innocence – the narratives we wish to tell – is exposed. We enter a new story where we relinquish denial. We see and accept our part in the story. We discover the truth about ourselves.

The Christian story also tells us that the victims do not in their turn make victims. Render no man evil for evil. The aim is the remaking of relationships, the embrace of the other, the starting again of promises and commitments. We seek to break down the *“exact and tribal intimate revenge”* (Seamus Heaney) for we no longer need to inflict suffering on others. Victims are not required.

APPENDIX

FORGIVENESS – A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

(adapted from *Forgive Us Our Trespasses...?*)

Central to the Gospel was Christ’s teaching on unconditional forgiveness. Modern scholars agree that in relation to forgiveness Jesus only departed from the practice of his time in one aspect: he forgave unconditionally. The Dutch Dominican theologian André Lascaris says:

“When Jesus started his public life, he only brought about a seemingly minimal change: he accepted people into his company who were sinners and were not able to fulfil the demands of the Torah. He forgave unconditionally. He offered communication to people without asking anything from them beforehand. He transcended the fundamental law of justice, the law of reciprocity. According to St. Luke Jesus forgave his enemies on the cross ‘for they do not know

what they are doing' (Luke 23:34). This same power to forgive unconditionally he gave to his disciples (John 20:23)."

This change is at the heart of Christianity. Jesus offered a way back into the community for people who had no way back because they could not fulfil the demands of the Law. He did this through offering unconditional forgiveness.

The phrase from the Lord's Prayer "forgive us our trespasses..." meant originally "forgive us our financial debts". In Jesus' time, as today, there was huge poverty because of debt. The remission of debt offered a way back into the community for people who were being crushed by it. The demands of the Law and the demands of debt were major oppressive realities at the time of Jesus, and Jesus was concerned about both.

Clearly a legal or a banking system cannot be run successfully if people always know that they will get off or avoid paying their debts. But if we do not allow people a way back when the legal or financial system is oppressing them, we are in essence saying that we prefer them to be destroyed.

The God revealed in Scripture wishes to offer people a way back to Him. He seeks to provide a new future and a way forward for people dominated by the past and its consequences. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is the sign and promise of this. When the divine reality of forgiveness and new life is given, experienced, grasped or even glimpsed we have the possibility of forgiving others. We are able to be forgiving because we ourselves have been forgiven.

This is why forgiveness has the priority, why there is always inclusion before exclusion, and acceptance and grace before judgement. The Lord's Prayer asks us to ask forgiveness of God only to the extent that we are willing to offer it to others.

Forgiveness is not Reconciliation

There is a difference between forgiveness and reconciliation. Forgiveness is our side of the process: we forgive someone who has injured us. Only we can forgive; no one can do it on our behalf. It may and often does lead to reconciliation. But not always. Why? Because the other party may not say "sorry", may 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, acknowledge what they have done and try to make amends. That is what the Bible means by repentance. It involves a willingness to enter into new and just relationships.

Reconciliation only happens when both aspects – forgiveness and repentance – come together in a new and more just relationship.

The Inter-personal and the Political

We move by means of analogy from the inter-personal – where forgiveness and repentance are normally located – to the political where we speak of the social embodiment of forgiveness, repentance and justice. Such a movement is valid; nevertheless, there are limits to the scope of the analogy. Individuals cannot be compelled to forgive or repent, even if there is a communal disposition towards

forgiveness, repentance and justice and a political settlement broadly acceptable to a large majority of people. These may facilitate interpersonal forgiveness and repentance, but they do not guarantee it. Some may not repent and others may not be able to forgive. Coercion may have to be applied on minorities who will not accept a political settlement, which a significant majority willingly accepts. There is a limit to what communal effort and politics can achieve. There always remains an area of transcendent activity and concern which takes us beyond the world of politics. This is particularly applicable in the case of forgiveness. The presence of forgiveness points to the transcendent concern and activity of God. It shows us the world on the “far side of revenge” (Seamus Heaney).

Publications of the Faith & Politics Group

Breaking Down the Enmity (1985)

Understanding the Signs of the Times (1986)

Towards an Island that Works (1987)

Towards Peace and Stability? (1988)

Remembering Our Past: 1690 and 1916 (1991)

Burying Our Dead: Political Funerals in Northern Ireland (1992)

(All the above, together with a new introduction were published as
Breaking Down the Enmity in 1993)

The Things that Make for Peace (1995)

Liberty to the Captives? (1995)

Forgive us our Trespasses...? (1996)

Doing Unto Others (1997)

New Pathways (1998)

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