

The Ministry of Forgiveness in a Praxis of Reconciliation

Robert Schreiter, C.P.P.S.

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Introduction

As we look to the role of the Church in the process of national reconciliation after two decades of armed conflict, it is important to identify what things we, as the Church, can contribute to the process.

In this presentation I would like to focus on a central element that is both distinctive to the Christian tradition and at the same time one of the most difficult areas in which to work. I am speaking of forgiveness.

We all know how central forgiveness was to the ministry of Jesus. He often shocked the religious authorities by the forthright way that he offered forgiveness to those who were considered sinners. He mandated his disciples to forgive over and above the forgiveness that wrongdoers might request: indeed we are enjoined to forgive not seven times, but seventy times seven. When asked to teach his disciples how to pray, he told them to ask God to forgive them their sins in the same way they forgave others. And after the resurrection he passed on to disciples this power to forgive.

When we think of forgiveness, both its importance to having a different kind of future than what is dictated by the past, and how difficult it is to overcome the resentment and the suffering caused by injustice, we are awed at what Jesus demands of us as the praxis of his Kingdom. How can the terrible deeds of the past be set aside? How can wounded hearts and aching memories be healed? How can we bring ourselves to forgive for the

sake of reconciliation? We find ourselves caught between Jesus' requirement to forgive if we are to be his disciples and the immense difficulty in carrying out that command.

It is when we are faced with having to come to terms with the violence and terrible misdeeds of the past and how they have affected our lives that we realize how daunting a challenge this is. Difficult as it is, we are nonetheless called upon as Christians to do what we can to bring about forgiveness, both within our own hearts and in the life of the nation.

To approach this difficult topic, this presentation will proceed in three parts. The first part will look at the obstacles to forgiveness: why it is so difficult and the misconceptions about forgiveness that can block the way to understanding it. In a second part, I will try to present the Christian vision of forgiveness, concentrating on some of its distinctive features as they relate to the situation you are facing after two decades of armed conflict. In the third and final part, I will turn to the praxis of Christian forgiveness, as it is enacted in Christian communities and in the wider Church. This final part will focus on how the Church, in its ministry of forgiveness, can help heal the nation. The intent is to help priests, religious and laity lead a ministry of forgiveness within their communities.

Forgiveness: Obstacles and Misconceptions

In order to engage in a ministry of helping victims of human rights violations come to forgiveness, it is important to begin by looking at why forgiveness is so difficult, and to clear up some misconceptions about what forgiveness really is.

Forgiveness—especially for severe violations of human rights—is difficult because our very humanity has been violated. The worst acts of violence affect the most fundamental dimensions of who we are. Our capacity to trust, to build relationships with others, and

our very right to life itself are sinned against in violence. We are treated as less than the human beings who we truly are. By threatening to destroy our very capacity to trust, to build and sustain relationships, violence undermines the resources we need to regain our humanity. Forgiveness deals with memory, with our identity, and our ability to move to a different place in our lives. All of these are endangered by the violence we have experienced. In that violence we are treated as less than human beings, as people who do not nourish and cherish relationships, how love and are loved by others. We are made into objects upon which violence wreaks its destructive force.

To be able to forgive is to regain the humanity that has been wrested away from us. Forgiveness is the act of a restored human person. Christians believe that it is God—the author of our humanity—who brings this restoration about in his grace. We believe that this restoration is made possible by the fact that God’s own Son entered into the full dimension of our humanity, and himself experienced violence and death. He has opened the way to forgiveness and reconciliation for us by treading the same path that has been so painful for us, thereby “making peace”—as St. Paul says in the Letter to the Colossians—“by the blood of his cross.” (1:20)

In order to be able to understand this great transforming act of God, we need to be able to move beyond some common misconceptions about forgiveness. These misconceptions get in the way of helping people come to forgiveness.

The first is that *forgiveness requires forgetting about the past*. This misconception is enshrined in a saying one often hears among Christians: “Forgive and forget.” The intention behind this saying is that we should put behind us entirely whatever wrongdoing happened in the past, and live now in such a way that is as though it never

happened. While this might seem like a laudable idea, there are two things very wrong with it. First of all, to ask victims to forget terrible events that have changed their lives forever is to make them victims once again. Forgetting in effect tells victims that what happened to them was not as bad as they think, or they are not important enough that such attention should be paid to them. That is why forgetting amounts to make them victims yet again.

Second, “forgive and forget” is nowhere in the Bible. Jesus stresses the importance of forgiveness throughout his ministry. But that should not be confused with asking people to forget what happened to them.

When we forgive, we do not forget. Rather, *we remember in a different way*. Forgiving is about gaining a new relationship to the deeds of the past and the people who perpetrated them. It means being able to see the wrongdoers as more than wrongdoers utterly identified with their deed. It is about being able to see them as human beings as well—weak, misguided, confused or caught themselves in terrible things from their own past. In the report on how the Church responded to violence, it was noted that some of the young people recruited by the *Sendero luminoso* were anxious to change an unjust society, and had become so desperate that they succumbed to the *Sendero*’s murderous Maoist ideology. We know in other instances that the young recruits were sometimes forced to commit atrocities to show their dedication to the cause.¹

This is not to condone their actions, but simply to point to the fact that the motivation and the person behind those atrocities can be mixed up. Forgiveness is about establishing a new relationship to the past, not trying to forget or erase that past.

¹ See the accounts in Cecilia Tovar et al., *Ser iglesia in tiempos de violencia* (Instituto Bartolome de las Casas, pro manuscrito), 221f.

This is an important insight, because in so-called national processes of reconciliation, victims are frequently asked to forget what has happened to them and put the past behind them. The call to do this comes most often from the wrongdoers themselves or those who failed to act on behalf of victims during the time of violence. Such forgetting is a denial of the humanity of victims. Forgiveness is learning to relate to the deeds of the past—and those who did them—in a way that removes their toxic quality.

Another reason that asking victims or their survivors to forget the past is wrong has to do with those who died in the violence. To forget the deaths of the innocent is to dishonor the dead. It is to cut off our relation with them. This is a reason why people instinctively react against any forgiveness that forgets what has been done. This instinct is a correct and deeply human one. We cannot forget those who died wrongly in the violence of the past. We have a duty to honor and remember them. How we are to remember and honor them will be taken up below in the discussion of the praxis of forgiveness.

A second misconception about forgiveness is that *forgiving means not punishing the wrongdoers or seeking reparation for victims*. The widespread use of impunity as a tool in national reconciliation in effect does this. It denies justice to victims. If justice is ultimately about right relationships in which all are recognized as human beings and children of God, then foregoing justice by impunity can never be seen as doing justice or promoting reconciliation. While it is often not possible to seek out and deal with every wrongdoer, the punishment of those who directed the violence can be an important part of national healing. Offering some measure of reparations for victims is a clear

acknowledgement of the wrongdoing of the past, as well as a pledge to prevent such wrongdoing in the future.

A third and final misconception about forgiveness is that *Christians must forgive immediately and totally*. This misconception grows out of how we understand Jesus' command to forgive completely. That certainly is the charge that Jesus has given us, but to expect that we can achieve that instantly is a potential denial of our humanity. The effects of violence and violation insinuate themselves into our lives and our relationships in such a way that we often are unable to unravel their grasp upon us. Usually coming to terms with traumatic events takes long periods of time to uncover and heal. Sometimes when we think we are beyond the event, something provokes in us anger or fear that we did not know was still within us.

The fact that healing of the human heart often takes a long time means that we must respect this fact in the process of forgiveness. Psychologists have suggested that there are at least four stages in the act of forgiveness: (1) acknowledging that we have been violated and dealing with the feelings that arise from this; (2) deciding that we want to forgive rather than continue to harbor resentment; (3) doing the emotional and spiritual work needed to work through resentment and the restructuring of our relationships; and (4) engaging in the act of forgiveness.² If healing is about restoring our humanity, then we must honor this process of the healing of the human heart.

We can take our cue here from Jesus himself. In the account of his crucifixion in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus' first words on the cross are: "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." (23:34) These words are ordinarily interpreted as Jesus

² See the discussion in Robert Enright and Joanna North (eds.), *Exploring Forgiveness* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998).

forgiving his executioners. But if we look more closely we notice that Jesus is asking God to forgive them. Jesus is still in the midst of his suffering; to forgive the executioners for a deed that is not yet completed is not to take Jesus' suffering seriously. What we have instead, I believe, is what was seen as the second stage of forgiveness just outlined: Jesus decides that he wants to forgive, but cannot yet forgive something that has not yet been completely done.

I have found that this can be a great consolation for those who are struggling to forgive, but feel that they are being unfaithful disciples of Jesus because they cannot yet forgive. In this passage in Luke's Gospel, we find Jesus in the very human condition we ourselves share. Forgiveness is a process of healing; it is not just the final act itself.

If we can help people move beyond these three misconceptions—that forgiveness is about forgetting, that it requires foregoing the punishment of wrongdoers, that it must be instant and complete—then we can help them embrace what forgiveness really is: a changed relationship with the past that both acknowledges what has been done and allows for the restoration of the humanity of the victims. To understand this more completely, let us turn to the second part, which is the Christian vision of forgiveness.

The Christian Vision of Forgiveness

Forgiveness is an important part of human life, and religious traditions around the world devote attention to it, although they may differ in understanding of what is required in forgiveness and whether every wrong deed can be forgiven. Christianity has made forgiveness a central tenet of its self-understanding. I want to outline here some of the basic dimensions of Christianity's concept of forgiveness. There are four main points.

First of all, *it is God who forgives*. Both Judaism and Christianity are insistent on this point. Only God can forgive sins. This is the case for three reasons. First of all, any wrongdoing—be it against ourselves, against others, against the earth, or directly against God—is ultimately wrongdoing against God. We believe that God is the creator of all things, and that all things and all people owe their very existence to God. That means that God is intimately related to every being. That is what we affirm when we say that God is a God of life. Wrongdoing of any kind harms the network of relationships upon which we depend and which derive ultimately from God. Hence, God must be involved in the undoing any wrong.

The second reason why we place forgiveness in God is our understanding of God's mercy. "Mercy" in the modern sense has come to mean in juridical terms foregoing punishment—we speak of "granting mercy." But in its older sense it means God's acute attention to suffering and what suffering does to the human heart—"misericordia." God's deep compassion allows God to embrace the sinner and see more than the sin. This is the basis for understanding forgiveness as remembering in a different way: we can imagine a different relationship with the wrongdoer than only a relationship to the wrongdoing. This understanding of God as merciful is something Christianity shares with both Judaism (God as *hesed*) and Islam (God as *al-rahman*).

The third reason that causes us to believe that it is God who forgives might be seen as more practical. We know that the consequences of wrongdoing—especially profound wrongdoing such as the violation of human rights—have consequences far beyond what we can discern or measure. It can effect yet unborn generations. Only God has the range of vision to be able to encompass the extent of damage that wrongdoing creates. Thus,

our point of reference as Christians in thinking about forgiveness is locating it first and foremost in God.

Second, we are able to forgive because we participate in God's act of forgiveness.

Our capacity to forgive comes from God inviting us into the profound source of mercy out of which forgiveness flows. We know how difficult it is for us to forgive, especially when we try to forgive those who have committed heinous crimes.

How do we participate in God's act of forgiveness? We do so by receiving the gift or the grace of forgiveness. Forgiveness is not a capacity we earn for ourselves; it is something that God freely gives us. It is this act of freedom and graciousness that makes forgiveness be an overcoming, a transcending of the past without erasing it. It is a transformation of human relationships that requires more than we ourselves can achieve. In forgiving we recognize the work of God within us—restoring our humanity, acknowledging our freedom, making us protagonists of our history rather than the victims of it. By accepting the grace of forgiveness, we enter into a deeper relationship with God that transforms us, takes us to a new place, makes of us, as St. Paul puts it, “a new creation.” (2 Cor 5:17)

Third, this vision of forgiveness as a new relationship with God charts out for us a ministry of forgiveness. God does not only empower us to forgive. He calls us to a ministry, a praxis of forgiveness. This is the intent of Jesus' breathing the Holy Spirit upon the disciples after the resurrection, and giving them the power to forgive sins. (John 20:22-23) The Catholic Church has understood this power given to the disciples as the power given to priests and bishops in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. That is indeed the case, but I believe it has a wider dimension as well, enjoined upon all Christians. We are

all called to a ministry of reconciliation and forgiveness. (See Luke 24:47) This is not only aimed at healing individual human hearts, but also at the transformation of society. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu has reminded us so forcefully, there is no future without forgiveness.³

What is the shape of this ministry of forgiveness and reconciliation? I have already pointed out how it transforms the victim. It lifts the victim out of resentment and the toxic bond to the wrongdoing of the past. It makes victims subjects of their own history, transforming them, and empowering them to transform others. It is based on an intense attention to relationships—our relationship to the past, to the dead, to the wrongdoer, to the deed. Let us look briefly at each of these relationships.

The relationship to the past is mediated by memory. Memory is more than recounting what happened. It is a record of the feelings that surrounded the event and continue through time to the present. Memory is not a static thing. It changes as our lives change in the present, prompting us to discover new dimensions to the past. One speaks of the forgiveness and reconciliation process as a healing of memories, a regaining of memory that allows us to live now a different way in the present. If the memory of the past only poisons us, it can keep us hostage in our victimhood and suspend, as it were, our lives in a vacuum. The healing of memory is about transforming the past without forgetting it.

Forgiveness also brings us into a new relationship with the dead. As was noted above, people are sometimes reluctant to consider forgiving because it would seem to dishonor the dead—their suffering and the injustice done to them. If forgiveness is about remembering in a different way, it also must involve remembering the dead in a different

³ This is the title of his memoir of chairing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa.

way. Part of that remembering the dead in a different way requires that we not reduce the life of those who have been killed to that violent act. Remembering that violent act is a moment of solidarity with them in their suffering. But the dead are remembered best by including in our memory the lives they lived—their lives of dedication to others, their kindness, their commitment. Remembering the dead by creating memorials to them that focus not just on the past but on continuing their work of devotion to others and to the Kingdom of God make the relation with them a living one and not just one of a museum.

The most problematic of the relationships in forgiving is to the wrongdoer. This is especially the case when those who have committed acts of violence do not repent of what they have done. It would seem that, in these cases (unfortunately, often the majority of cases with which a ministry of forgiveness must deal) any movement toward healing and reconciliation is blocked. But here the Christian vision provides an important insight. Forgiveness is not dependent upon the good will of the wrongdoer in itself. Forgiveness comes from God. Wrongdoers who accept the grace of God may come to show remorse and repent of their past, seeking the forgiveness of victims. But often the victim is left without the prospect of such a relationship. Here we need to understand more profoundly the depths of the mercy of God. God can bring about healing in the heart of the victim that can allow the victim to come to a new place. In some instances, it is the healed victim who can create the social space for wrongdoers to come to repentance. If we believe that wrongdoers cannot be reduced to their heinous deeds, then that ambiguity in their motivation—fed by fear, uncertainty, confusion, or a warped past of their own—can provide a space where the grace of God can enter. It may take the graciousness of the healed victim to communicate that to them. I have come into contact

with instances of Guatemalans (largely indigenous people) who were conscripted into the army and then forced to commit atrocities. Some of them speak of their desire to repent, but do not know how, or fear the reprisals from their communities if their pasts are discovered. The plaintive cry that comes from them is this: “I want to rejoin the human family.” They know that what they have done has excluded them from that circle. It may be victims who can lead them back into those bonds of human relationship and intimacy.

Deeds of violence carry within them venom that can remain toxic long after the time when they were committed. While we can change our relationship to wrongdoers, it is hard to change our relationship to the deed. What is wrong remains wrong. But we can work to change the conditions that make such deeds possible. Here we see how important work for justice is so that a genuine reconciliation may take place. Justice must be aimed not only at acknowledging the wrong that has been done (the Commission on Truth and Reconciliation [CVR] has done much to achieve this), but at changing the conditions that nourish violence. The CVR report names these clearly: poverty and lack of opportunity for the young, racism aimed at minority groups, improper actions by government authorities at all levels, indifference in certain sectors of the Church. The struggle for justice is the pledge for an end to the deeds of violence.

The Praxis of Forgiveness for the Sake of Reconciliation

So how is the praxis of forgiveness set in motion in our communities? In the report from the Instituto Bartolome de las Casas, two points of pastoral praxis are referred to repeatedly as having sustained the ministry of the Church during the time of violence: presence and accompaniment. I would suggest that these two qualities can form the basis

for the ministry of forgiveness in our Christian communities today.⁴ Presence was expressed in a variety of ways during the time of violence—most notably by priests, religious, and catechists staying with communities even when others had left. That same kind of presence needs to be exercised in a praxis of forgiveness. Those in ministry must be willing to stay with people as they working toward the healing of memories, as they struggle to remember in a different way, as they work through the feelings that surround violence, as they push forward to dare to forgive. Presence of those leaders of communities bespeaks the presence of a merciful and compassionate God who does not abandon those who suffer. Even for those who felt abandoned during the violence, our persistent presence can help them deal with the sense of loss and absence in their own hearts and come to a different understanding of God’s presence in their midst.

Accompaniment involves helping people see what Christian forgiveness truly is. This is something I have tried to outline in this presentation. It is helping people get detoxified from the poison of the past deed, and concentrate on rebuilding relationships. The report pointed out in many instances how what had happened in the communities prior to the violence helped those communities sustain themselves when the violence came. A concentration on building up those relationships is part of that accompaniment. Here the great model is Jesus with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. (Luke 24:13-35) He listens to the story pouring out of their broken hearts—not interrupting them, but providing a constant presence even as he accompanies them on their *via dolorosa*. Then he helps them tell the story in a different way. All throughout they are so distraught that they cannot recognize him for who he is. It is only at the end, when their hearts are on fire, do they recognize him in the breaking of the bread.

⁴Tovar, op.cit., 110, 122.

We are reminded in this story of the power of the Eucharist in bringing about forgiveness. We recall how Jesus—already knowing that he would be betrayed—nonetheless shares the bread with the disciples, proclaiming the advent of a new covenant. Even in the broken bread—foretelling his broken body—a new relationship is being born. As Christian we can turn to the suffering of Christ to find some way through our own suffering. We can struggle to forgive as Jesus himself does on the cross. We can place our trust in what we cannot yet see. In the midst of absence and loss, we can discern the stirrings of something new.

The praxis of forgiveness has a past, a present, and a future. In attending to the past, it struggles to remember the past in a different way. It does not erase the past, it does not forget the dead. In attending to the present, it asks where victims find themselves now—how they can take up their lives again without a bitterness that keeps them tied to the past. By attending to the future, it asks what must be done to keep such terrible deeds from recurring again. And it asks how we will tell our children and grandchildren about what happened. We wish to do so to create a mindfulness in them that does not lead to vindictiveness and retaliation.

Forgiveness is rooted in the mercy of God. We are called to participate in the gift of God's mercy that respects truth, seeks justice, and builds for peace. May we ask God's help in doing so.