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Changing the Way we Remember

The modern ecumenical movement has its roots in the peace efforts in the XXth century. The continent has been devastated by two world wars, an iron curtain, several ethnic conflicts and wars. The ecumenical movement has tried to respond to the needs of its time, as for instance with aid to war prisoners during World War II. Exactly because of their religious background they were allowed through doors that would have been closed otherwise. The deep conflicts that have marked Europe's call for solutions of a certain profundity and such are not easily attained when a lasting peace is the goal. It seems though that our efforts must reach a certain level of reconciliation if peace is to last at all. This essay is a reflection on what interpersonal forgiveness means in the process of reconciliation. It suggests that the way we remember the past fundamentally determines how we can enter the future.

NOURISHING THE GROUND FOR A FRUITFUL FUTURE

From a Christian perspective, any discussion of forgiveness and reconciliation must be rooted in the understanding that *it is from God*. What makes forgiveness and reconciliation possible is the love and the grace of God and it is not achievable by human beings alone. Secondly, we need to distinguish between individual and social reconciliation. The goal of individual reconciliation is the restoration of the humanity of a person. Individual reconciliation is not about restoring a previous condition but about transformation; and in order to do so, it must contain the memory of the past. But reconciliation makes a new creation (2 Corinthians 5, 17-20) of both the perpetrator and the victim. The goal of social reconciliation is to create conditions that will prevent the previous trauma from being repeated, e.g. to avoid another war or ethnic conflict.

Whereas social reconciliation is not a precondition for individual reconciliation, it is hard to imagine social reconciliation without at least some reconciled individuals in the leadership. "Forgive and forget" is a way of speaking, which indicates that it is about time to leave the past for the sake of the future. Yet this expression takes the incisiveness out of forgiving. Forgiveness is not amnesia. Against this is a Jewish proverb: "Forgetting prolongs captivity. Remembering is the secret of redemption." The danger in this saying is to fall into the other ditch where remembering becomes a weapon to be on guard against anyone alien. When memories are used to maintain and solidify stereotypes it works the other way around, in fact it prolongs captivity.

NEGATIVE DEFINITIONS OF FORGIVENESS

It is crucial to clarify what is meant by "forgiveness". As already suggested, forgiveness is not forgetting. Neither is it pretending that things are different than what they seem. It is not condoning or excusing, nor can forgiveness be equated with mere acceptance or tolerance of injustice. Neither is it the same as legal pardon, nor must we confuse forgiveness with pseudo-forgiveness.

Pseudo-forgiveness is basically a manoeuvre to maintain power or gain power over others. This is the case when a

person continually reminds the offender of the injury done. This is exercising superiority incompatible with forgiveness. Forgiveness does not leave the offender indebted to the victim. The power to forgive is different from the power to do harm.

FORGIVENESS AND MEMORY

Forgiveness means abandoning the right to pay back the perpetrator with her or his own coin. Forgiveness is about not being controlled by the past. The Roman Catholic theologian Robert J. SCHREITER C.P.P.S makes the point that forgiveness is about *changing the way we remember*. The very reason why forgiveness is not to be equated with forgetfulness is that remembrance is a key issue in the process of forgiveness. Memory is closely tied up with our identity. But our memory is a construct and changes all the time as new experiences are added and others are forgotten. Some memories are painful and can have a paralysing effect on a person, creating the sense of being trapped in the past. By bringing the memory out, through telling the story, new perspectives are added and change the way we tell and remember our story.

Memory also has a preventive character. Philosopher George SANTAYANA put it in this way: "Those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it." In establishing the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* in the South African Republic, bringing out the truth was exactly one of the intentions. Experiences from other TRCs, especially in Chile, had shown how real reconciliation was complicated by the fact that no answers were ever given regarding the human rights violations that had taken place during the military dictatorships. In order to avoid a similar situation, the telling of stories has been quintessential for the TRC in South Africa. The aim has been that no one should be able to say, "I did not know."

FORGIVENESS AS PROCESS AND DECISION

Forgiveness has little to do with magic. Forgiveness is hard work and it involves both process and decision. The *process* involves bringing the truth to light, recognising and acknowledging the wounds as wounds. Yet process still leaves the *decision* to be made to forgive and at this point it becomes clear that forgiveness is not just about the deed that caused the trauma, but more about the relationship to the ongoing effects. Nothing can restore the condition prior to the trauma, but forgiveness means that the balance of power has passed from the traumatic event to the victim. The victim can decide for the future and become a survivor, which means to be able to see that there is a life after the traumatic event.

I believe this is true also when it comes to forgiving oneself. A person can be burdened by the guilt of what they have caused to another person and as such



is controlled by the past to the extent where it can be difficult to see the future. Forgiveness, however, is no easy affair and the decision to forgive is where human and divine forgiveness intersect. The ability to decide to forgive comes from the restoration of humanity that is the grace of reconciliation coming from God. "Forgiveness is an acknowledgement that the victim is now a new creation and in a position to imagine a different future." (Robert J. SCHREITER CPPS) Forgiveness is the deliberate decision and process of changing one's way of thinking and feeling toward someone who has done harm to us. It is a willed change of heart.

FORGIVENESS AND HEALING

Forgiveness challenges a person to the limits of what can be considered reasonable and manageable. It challenges a person to look closer at the hurt that has been done, to bring it out in the open public realm. The Greek word for healing (*soteria*) also means 'salvation'. Another meaning of the word is 'deliverance'. When Jesus heals in the gospels, he brings salvation. The person is being restored from her or his brokenness and brought back into an organic whole. It is a transition from a marginalised existence to the centre of existence. The meaning of deliverance has an exodus-aspect. Something happens and a transition from one condition to another takes place, from the margins to the centre as in the story of the Israelites in Exodus.

Forgiveness is a tremendous part of the healing for both victim and perpetrator. It is a deliverance from a state of captivity where humanity is violated. As long as the victim has not forgiven the perpetrator – if a perpetrator can be identified – the person is still captive of the past. And as long as the perpetrator has not received forgiveness and repented, the person is still captive of a dark past. The decision to forgive is a decision for the future, but can only be made if the past is addressed in an adequate way.

REVENGE OR UNDERSTANDING

The pain of the past can destroy a life. This was embodied in the recent Belgian movie *The Son* by Jean-Pierre DARDENNE and Luc DARDENNE. It is a story about Olivier, a carpentry teacher who works in a vocational program for troubled boys. One day a new boy, Francis arrives and after Olivier has tried to keep him out of his class, he finally decides to take him in. The atmosphere is tense. Why is Francis not welcome in the class? It turns out that Francis as a young kid had killed Olivier's son. We understand that the murder apparently began the detour of Olivier's life. He got divorced and the character reflects a deeply wounded and anxious person, who does not seem to have any close relationships. The movie peaks as Olivier takes Francis out to a mill to pick up wood and after hav-

ing had the opportunity to take revenge, he lets Francis go, who only at this point realises the connection with his teacher.

But the movie also shows another aspect of forgiveness. I think Olivier realises that his life has been tormented enough by the deed done by Francis, and Olivier does not need to add to the heap of suffering a new terrible deed himself. I think Olivier reaches this understanding as he comes to understand Francis more. Olivier visits Francis' home and sees what a lonely place it is. Francis also tells him parts of his story before he recognises that Olivier is the father of the child he killed, and through the story Olivier understands that Francis' life has not been easy. He does not have much contact with his family as his mother's new husband would not allow it and he paid a high price by the time he had served in juvenile detention.

THE ROLE OF WSCF AND THE SCMS

This leads me to question how the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) and the local Student Christian Movements (SCMs) can contribute to the forgiveness and reconciliation process that need to take place in our continent. We can focus on the issues at stake and facilitate meetings and seminars where we share our experiences and where we come to realise, by getting to know the other, that she or he is not just any other, but a person of indefinite value by being the child of God. This part has a preventive character. By building bridges, we come to a better understanding of each other and understanding is quintessential in reaching the respect for others that can help prevent conflict.

But WSCF and our SCMs must also be able to help people deal with traumas and as religious communities we can provide a safe and potentially healing place. The safe place, where stories can be told and retold again and again, where there are ears willing to listen and hands willing to serve is the first step toward forgiveness and reconciliation. We can help enhance the narrative and the understanding and tolerance about each other. We can help broaden the horizon, which I believe is quintessential in creating a reconciled world in blessed diversity.

Suggested Reading

- ENRIGHT Robert J. – NORTH Joanna (eds.), *Exploring Forgiveness*. Madison, 1998.
 MULLER-FAHRENHOLTZ Geiko, *The Art of Forgiveness*. Geneva, 1997.
 SCHREITER Robert J. C.P.P.S., *Reconciliation. Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order*. New York, 1992.
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 TUTU Desmond Mpilo, *No Future without Forgiveness*. New York, 1999.
 VOLF Miroslav, *Exclusion and Embrace. A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. Nashville, 1996.



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