



## **A Politics of Forgiveness: A Catholic Perspective**

By William Bole

It has been said that the Irish forgive and forget nothing, and yet, Northern Ireland has arguably become an international showcase of forgiveness, even against the bloody backdrop of Protestant-Catholic strife. This political drama, still unfolding, is captured in “The Power of Forgiveness,” and the experiences of Northern Ireland – together with some other fractious societies – offer a fresh look at Catholic peace-builders in our time.

In recent years, many voices of forgiveness and reconciliation in Northern Ireland have transcended what the Irish call their “troubles,” the merciless cycle of tit-for-tat revenge that erupted in the late 1960s. Even the Irish Republican Army, which led the armed resistance against British rule, began speaking the language of forgiveness in 2002 when it formally apologized to the families of innocents killed as a result of its campaigns in past decades. Still, as the film chronicles, the harsh memories of offense are vivid, and the healing has just begun.

Consider John Loughran, nephew of a Catholic man who was killed in 1973 when British forces fired from a rooftop on several unarmed men were leaving a pub on a street corner in Belfast. In theory, Loughran is open to the idea of forgiving those responsible for killing his uncle and five other men, but he says British authorities have never acknowledged that the soldiers on that night wrongfully killed innocent civilians; authorities said the men were IRA fighters, which the Catholic community denies to this day. Loughran says that without such acknowledgment, there can be no forgiveness in this case.

What this particular story shows is that forgiveness, especially in a setting of inter-group conflict, is a process. It must often include elements such as truth-telling and justice, and there have been many telling examples in Northern Ireland of religious as well as political leaders forging such a process.

Even while the bombs were still going off, some Protestant and Catholic leaders began openly acknowledging the historical sins of their communities and exchanging sweeping apologies. One of the more memorable exchanges of repentance began in March 1994, when the Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, traveled to Dublin and declared in a sermon that the English need to ask forgiveness for their centuries of often brutal domination of the Irish. Early the following year, the Catholic primate of Northern Ireland traveled to Canterbury and responded in kind, acknowledging political crimes perpetrated by the Irish. “This reciprocal recognition of the need to forgive and be forgiven is a necessary condition” of healing between Protestants and Catholics, said Archbishop Cahal B. Daly, who has since retired.

Gestures of this kind multiplied on both sides of the conflict. Within a few years the language of forgiveness and repentance was coloring the reconciliation process in Northern Ireland, helping to bring about the historic Good Friday peace agreement embraced by Northern Ireland's voters in 1998.

And so, from Northern Ireland comes another lesson, too often overlooked – that forgiveness can and does happen in the midst of extreme social strife.

The most celebrated example is South Africa: a brutal white minority regime fell, and black South Africans rose to power. Practically everyone assumed that blacks would do unto whites as whites had done unto them. They didn't. Prisoner-turned-president Nelson Mandela appointed a truth commission instead, and he made his white jailer an honored guest at his 1994 presidential inauguration. In so doing, Mandela awakened many to a bracing reality later expressed in the title of Archbishop Desmond Tutu's 1999 book – *No Future without Forgiveness*.

At his own presidential inauguration in South Korea, the former dissident Kim Dae Jung stood alongside several ex-autocrats who had made many earnest attempts to kill him over the years. Kim is a Catholic who has spoken movingly of how he experienced Christ's love and forgiveness while waiting to be executed for his human-rights activism. On that day of triumph in 1998, Kim proclaimed that the "politics of retaliation" was over. And it was.

Another sign of forgiveness at work in the political world comes by way of East Timor, which tore itself away from Indonesia in 2002. East Timor president Xana Gusmao marked the second anniversary of his country's independence by reducing prison sentences handed to three pro-Indonesian gunmen who had staged a massacre in which a priest and two nuns were among those killed. East Timor is the most densely Catholic country in Asia, and Indonesia is the largest Muslim country in the world. President Gusmao called his decision a "symbolic act of forgiveness," part of a quest for reconciliation with Muslims.

These and other merciful acts point to a "politics of forgiveness." Admittedly, those words echo with implausibility, not only because forgiveness is usually consigned to the realm of personal piety, but also because of our geopolitical times, marked by a permanent war on terrorism and seemingly endless bloodletting in Iraq.

Even apart from the present dangers, forgiveness has hardly been a traditional value in world affairs. The concept is foreign to most secular political philosophies in the West and is peripheral to the tradition of Christian just-war teaching – or was, until Pope John Paul II issued his groundbreaking 2002 World Day of Peace message titled, "No Peace without Justice, No Justice without Forgiveness."

Our concept of forgiveness needs to be open enough to let aggrieved people voice their anger, as we Americans needed to do after the atrocities of September 11, 2001. It needs to be challenging enough so that people examine their own faults, as we Americans also needed to do after 9/11. It also should be strong enough to allow for justice – and meet the challenge posed by John Loughran in "The Power of Forgiveness."

When explaining his conditions for forgiveness with respect to the 1973 killings in Belfast, Loughran stated: "What we [Catholics in the local community] need is truth, justice that must be based on a degree of acknowledgment of what happened and the wrongdoing that was inflicted on a community." Loughran seemed to be affirming that

forgiveness is compatible with punishment or remediation, as long as such measures derive from a sense of justice, not revenge.

These and other dimensions of forgiveness make possible “a future society marked by justice and solidarity,” to use the words of John Paul II, because there really is no future without forgiveness.

## QUESTIONS

William Bole writes about religion, ethics, and politics. His books include *Forgiveness in International Politics: An Alternative Road to Peace*, coauthored with Drew Christiansen, SJ, and Robert Hennemeyer, and most recently, *The Life of Meaning: Reflections on Faith, Doubt, and Repairing the World*, with Bob Abernethy. He references one international story from the film and reminds us of two others. Maybe these questions, coming from his thoughts, will help your group start a good conversation about forgiveness and politics.

- Do you think John Loughran from Belfast is right when he says that without an acknowledgement of guilt from the British Army there can be no forgiveness for the murder of his uncle?
- What kind of message do you think Nelson Mandela sent to the world when he invited his white jailer as an honored guest at his inauguration?
- When to countries are in conflict their citizens demonize each other. When the conflict is over, can individual citizens from either country join in an apology if they have actually done nothing wrong?
- Where do you see forgiveness as a potentially useful kind of negotiation in the world today and how likely do you think it to occur.
- Who might extend an apology to the United States and to whom might we extend an apology?

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