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## RECONCILIATION AS AN ACT OF COURAGE AND INNER FREEDOM. RECONCILIATION AS THE CHALLENGE OF MODERN EUROPE

### Summary

*Reconciliation is a process with philosophical and theological foundations. They complement each other, as it is of crucial importance to trust in the work of the Holy Spirit, along with human endeavours. It is the Holy Spirit who can truly liberate the human heart from all negative thoughts and hatred. Reconciliation does not imply forgetting about past events, it has to do with internal liberation which manifests itself in forgiveness, mutual respect and the sincere wish to create new relations. In the words of St. John Paul II, reconciliation is a sign of internal strength, freedom and courage, but most of all it is the work of God. And so the human perspective of reconciliation, which is of equal importance, complements the theological perspective, which leads to a new level of life quality. Every human being in this world, in all their fragility, is in desperate need of forgiveness. This need presents itself in a person's humility and in their capacity to accept sincerely the forgiveness of their fellow humans and God. At the same time, every human being is expected to exercise forgiveness, as this is the only way to stop the vicious circle of vengeance and hatred. Reconciliation happens on both the personal and the structural level. If the latter is unfair, it is impossible to achieve a new quality of relations within a society.*

**Keywords:** reconciliation, forgiveness, dignity of person, freedom, theology, courage

### Introduction

*The Bull of Indiction of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000,<sup>1</sup> includes the purification of memory among the signs „which may help people to live the exceptional grace of the Jubilee with greater fervor“. This purification aims at liberating personal and communal conscience from all forms of resentment and violence that are the legacy of past faults, through a renewed historical and theological evaluation of such events. This should lead – if done correctly – to a corresponding recognition of guilt*

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<sup>1</sup> Janez PAVEL II., *Incarnationis mysterium. Bull of Indiction of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000* (29. XI. 1998.), (Roma: Libreria Editrice Vaticana), 11.

and contribute to the path of reconciliation. Such a process can have a significant effect on the present... and is thus an act of courage and humility,<sup>2</sup> as is written in the Introduction to the document *Memory and Reconciliation: the Church and the Faults of the Past*, published by a special International Theological Commission and proposed by its President, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger.

In the above-mentioned bull, John Paul II adds: „As the successor of Peter, I ask that in this year of mercy the Church, strong in the holiness which she receives from her Lord, should kneel before God and implore forgiveness for the past and present sins of her sons and daughters.“<sup>3</sup> The purpose of this document is not to search for particular cases in history but to explain the assumptions which justify the regret of past faults. „Christians are invited to acknowledge, before God and before those offended by their actions, the faults which they have committed,“<sup>4</sup> the Pope concludes, „Let them do so without seeking anything in return, but strengthened only by ‘the love of God which has been poured into our hearts’ (Rom 5,5).“<sup>5</sup>

Besides stressing the importance of assuming responsibility for past faults and thus recognition of guilt, the document highlights the readiness to forgive all injustices suffered by Christians. The Jubilee Year offers an opportunity for the purification of memory and thus reconciliation, which is a sign of a new start. Our purpose here is not to analyse the document of the Theological Commission in detail, as its contents are rich and compact, and thus difficult to summarize. It is right to understand it as an encouragement and an excellent starting point to think about reconciliation in our place and time, and at various levels.

The Jubilee Year opened the door of hope: the door of believing in salvation, in the power of reconciliation and forgiveness. This door was opened by God, who „loved us first“, who was the first to offer his hand in reconciliation through Christ. He proclaimed the Good News of Peace and reconciled the world with God the Father. He came to show us the way out of the vicious circle, or better: the devil’s circle of an

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<sup>2</sup> Cf.: MEDNARODNA TEOLOŠKA KOMISIJA, „Spomin in sprava: Cerkev in napake preteklosti“, *Communio: mednarodna katoliška revija* 10 (2000.), 3-61.

<sup>3</sup> Janez PAVEL II., *Incarnationis mysterium. Bull of Indiction of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000* (29. XI. 1998.), 17

<sup>4</sup> MEDNARODNA TEOLOŠKA KOMISIJA, „Spomin in sprava“, 7-8.

<sup>5</sup> Janez PAVEL II., *Incarnationis mysterium. Bull of Indiction of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000* (29. XI. 1998.), 19.

eye for an eye. Jesus did not eliminate justice, he completed it with the commandment of love, charity, and forgiveness, the corner-stones of the new civilisation. Since then, man has been able to cut the growing spiral of revenge.

Whoever claims that reconciliation is impossible has given up hope in mankind. The point of the Jubilee Year was to stress the possibility of reconciliation, because first and foremost, reconciliation is the work of God, and only then is it the fruit of man's efforts. Forgiveness has roots in salvation: there is only one true and sincere forgiveness, God's forgiveness. It is essential for Christians to include God in reconciliation, to ponder upon Christ's death and resurrection. This does not mean, of course, that those who have different convictions cannot join the process of reconciliation. The dignity of each individual, and his conscience, open to truth and effort to do right in life, are anthropological (philosophical) starting points which are common to everyone who is genuinely ready for reconciliation. In Christianity, these starting points are based on Revelation, and given new dimensions through the Gift of Faith.

Reconciliation means a new conversion and a new quality of being, at the personal and the communal level:

„The Slovenian nation will never rise and gain moral healing until it confronts all evil which has accumulated between us, until it wipes away the tears from the suffering faces and rights the wrongs we have inflicted upon each other. The nation's reconciliation is one of the most urgent tasks we are facing... it is the price for the future of Slovenia. Without reconciliation, we are a nation with no future.“<sup>6</sup>

This reflection has no intention to analyse any actual events. My intention is to offer some general starting points which should form the basis of any reconciliation, from the theological and philosophical point of view. We shall focus on the personal level, the inner cosmos of human mind and heart, „the most secret core and sanctuary of a man, where he is alone with God“<sup>7</sup>, according to the Second Vatican Council, face to face with his Creator, as well as on the communal level, as this personal activity leads to a new quality of interpersonal relationships in striving for a nobler life.

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<sup>6</sup> Franc RODE, *Spomin, zavest, načrt Cerkve na Slovenskem* (Ljubljana: Družina, 1995.), 133.

<sup>7</sup> F. RODE, *Spomin, zavest, načrt Cerkve na Slovenskem*, 135.

## 1. What reconciliation is not

The word reconciliation is used in many different contexts, which is why it is often misunderstood and misinterpreted. This is particularly the case when reconciliation is applied to the social context, in order to right the wrongs suffered by a particular group of people. In this case the word reconciliation is often simplified, only partly close to its true meaning, and at the same time grossly misunderstood. So what, then, is not reconciliation?<sup>8</sup>

### a) Reconciliation is not „instant“ peace of mind

The first and most common misunderstanding of reconciliation is as an attempt to eliminate violence that has been inflicted upon someone from memory, or to talk about reconciliation without recognising the facts. Not confronting or rather ignoring the facts is justified by the excuse that the past should be forgotten, that one should make a new start, without any traumatic memories. This sort of „reconciliation“ is favoured by those who have either inflicted violence and caused injustice or participated in it. They would like the victims to forget the violence, forget and forgive what has happened. Such reconciliation, a form of „instant“ peace of mind, reluctant to confront the facts and the truth, is far from the true purification of memory.

Thus the suffering of the victims is presented as unimportant, or even ignored; the victim who has suffered injustice is humiliated and the perpetrator is neither able to face the truth nor start a new life. The victims should not be asked to forget about or ignore their suffering, as this would imply that the violence inflicted upon them can continue, and those who express such demands are indirectly saying that their suffering is not important, that the victims are irrelevant in the process of reconciliation. By devaluing and ignoring memory, we devalue and ignore human identity, and by devaluing and ignoring human identity, we humiliate and ignore human dignity. That is why reconciliation as „instant“ peace of mind is the exact opposite of true reconciliation. Forgetting about suffering means forgetting about the victim, and thus the causes of the suffering remain hidden and unsolved.

Reconciliation as „instant“ peace of mind tries to avoid analysis of the causes of suffering. If these causes are not defined then the suffering

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<sup>8</sup> Cf.: Robert J. SCHREITER, *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order*. (New York: Orbis Books – Boston Theological Institute, 1992.), 18-27.

continues in a certain form; the vicious circle of violence continues and more and more people are hurt in the process. Reconciliation cannot be something that happens quickly and declaratively, it takes time and requires a contextual basis.

This sort of reconciliation, which ignores the facts and refuses to face the truth, insisting on the need overcome the past and forget what has happened, is far from authentic reconciliation and true peace. Shutting one's eyes to the past, ignoring and suppressing one's memory does not indicate the end of violence, it only prolongs its destructive effects. Reconciliation is about reclaiming people's dignity, the dignity of those who have suffered injustice as well as those who have inflicted it. It is about having the courage and the power to confess the bad deed. It is a demanding and gradual process which requires personal readiness and determination to regain one's basic quality of life.

b) Reconciliation should not be a negotiating process

True reconciliation is sometimes considered to be replaceable, as a sort of negotiating process the purpose of which is to eliminate the conflicting situation or at least to alleviate it. In this case, reconciliation is reduced to a particular process in which skilled negotiators try to mediate between the conflicting parties by evaluating their interests and trying to reach the most agreeable solution by means of negotiation. Thus reconciliation is reduced to the process of trading and negotiating, in which each party is trying to protect its interests.

Reconciliation as a negotiating process, based on interest, has very little to do with Christian views on reconciliation. Everything is reduced to a kind of trade which is very often far away from the truth and true values. The problem here is that reconciliation is only considered to be something human, leaving aside the aspect which is essential to the Christian understanding of reconciliation: the initiator of reconciliation is God, and man only tries to follow him with his endeavours and actions. The other problem is the fact that reconciliation in this case is reduced to the level of technical-pragmatic reasoning; reconciliation becomes a certain skill, a form of negotiation, unable to solve the initial conflict which calls for reconciliation.

So far, we have only discussed two aspects of what reconciliation is not. Perhaps the following reflection will clarify certain aspects which are important in terms of reconciliation.

## 2. Reconciliation as an act of forgiveness

a) Forgiveness as a new quality of being and interpersonal relationships

The God of Christianity is the God of unlimited forgiveness. The God of Jesus Christ is first and foremost the God who through his own Son proclaimed to people forgiveness of their sins. His words and actions prove the firmness of this truth in the Bible. The gospels describe forgiveness as a break from a certain logic of human relations, which follows the principle of just payment. In his sermon on the mount, Jesus says:

„You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles.“ (Mt 5, 38-41).

The above words may lead to a belief that Jesus was naïve. But he is trying to tell us something completely different. He requires neither passivity nor renouncing the fight against evil and basic endeavours for truth and justice. He shows us that returning evil with evil, even if in the name of justice, does not change human society. A new attitude is required, which does not search for measure in the past actions, but instead searches for an action which creates something new and breaks the vicious circle of hatred. Otherwise we are closed into the logic of continuous repetition of one and the same thing. This logic is destructive in its core, and in the end it leads to exclusion or even the death of at least one of the opponents.

This novelty, breaking the vicious circle, presents itself in forgiveness. Forgiveness does not mean forgetting about what has happened, it is a brave choice for a new kind of future, different from past actions locked in our memory. Man is liberated by the act of forgiveness, and granted new strength to enter an adventure of encountering something new. Forgiveness opens the door to new hope and a new future, and thus to new quality of being, on the personal as well as the communal level. We can well imagine the future of the paralysed man, had Jesus not forgiven and healed him; or the future of the sinful woman and the Pharisees. As soon as the law of eternal repetition or retribution is interrupted, the future is unpredictable and open. This way a believer copies his Creator in the act of forgiveness. He develops a new relationship with the person

he is forgiving. Forgiveness in its core changes interpersonal relationships and thus reveals the face of God.<sup>9</sup>

We can only hope that forgiveness will have a healing effect upon the perpetrator, but we can never be sure. Forgiveness without proper moral grounds is based on „hope against hope“. The hope a person has for the perpetrator includes risk, either great or small.

Jože Krašovec writes in his book *Reward, Punishment and Forgiveness*:

„The perpetrator can either refuse or even abuse forgiveness, and such risk can turn into a threat. That is why risk is a part of consideration about the propriety or impropriety of forgiveness. We must not overlook the fact that basically every forgiveness or reconciliation presents a risk, even if the perpetrator recognizes and acknowledges the injustice he has inflicted upon an individual. There is always the danger that a person who has committed an evil act will do something similar again. The question of God’s forgiveness without adequate basis with the perpetrator needs to be dealt with the fact that no person is just enough in God’s presence, and that people keep insulting each other and God, despite our later regrets; which means that God keeps forgiving each and every person. God’s mercy would therefore stop only in the case of complete impenitence. Until then, we believe that God is merciful despite man’s unworthiness, as the sincerity of the repentance can often be doubted.“<sup>10</sup>

The reasons for forgiveness and mercy are much more significant if the perpetrator can prove with positive actions that he is worthy of indulgence. Forgiveness is about expecting the perpetrator to admit his guilt and distance himself from it. Once he does that he may be forgiven in accordance with three basic facts: self-respect, respect towards the perpetrator, and moral rules. This is an act of courage and sincere humility, when an individual faces his wrongdoing and starts a relationship or dialogue with the person who has been hurt by his injustice, and it is the beginning of mutual respect. Repentance is the most basic thing after an unjust deed. It is also the most natural demand and expectation of people who have been hurt. True repentance means a sincere internal change. The perpetrator who faces his guilt, admits and repents it, rejects his unjust deed, wants to reconcile with the victim and start a new relationship.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Cf.: Christian DUQUOC, „Die Vergebung Gottes“, *Concilium* 22 (1986.), 104-110.

<sup>10</sup> Jože KRAŠOVEC, *Nagrada, kazen in odpuščanje* (Ljubljana: Svetopisemska družba Slovenije, 1999.), 841-842.

<sup>11</sup> Cf.: J. KRAŠOVEC, *Nagrada, kazen in odpuščanje*, 843.

The suffering inflicted upon a man with an unjust deed has various effects upon him. Some people harden after the blow they have received and continue their unjust deeds. Others are softened by suffering, they recognize their own limitations, bond with other people, and wish to make a new start.<sup>12</sup> Admission of guilt is thus an act of courage, inner strength and sincere humility, and at the same time an expression of man's willingness to start a new, more authentic and harmonious life. One of the most important things here is facing the truth, which is enabled by starting a dialogue and by admission and mutual respect, despite the deeds that have been committed.

b) Forgiveness as an act of remembering

If we observe the history of humankind we can quickly establish that it has been full of violence and injustice. Liberation theologies in Latin America have clearly shown, despite their many disadvantages, that the history of the world (including Slovenian history) has been written from the point of view of the winners. Hence the tendency to write a new history, based on what is called „alternative“ or the other side of history, which is the history of the oppressed, and those whose names have been forgotten and hidden forever.

Jesus does not forgive by calling the perpetrator and his deeds irrelevant. Quite the opposite, he connects a murder with the deepest power of evil, Satan. John the Evangelist writes that „the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him“ (John 13,2) and that right after the first morsel given to him by Jesus „Satan entered into him“ (John 13,27). This clearly shows the whole tragedy of the event. „Forgiveness does not mean trivialising and belittlement of the crime and the guilt. It proves that the perpetrator or the oppressor only has a future if he admits his guilt, changes his attitude towards the victim and thus acknowledges the victim's rights.“<sup>13</sup>

God's forgiveness is neither forgetting nor yielding of the weak. It penetrates into human relationships and transforms them. It neither creates debts nor asks for favours in return. It is revealed through Him, who was the victim of a crime, and it stands for God's solidarity with the victims of history. This solidarity does not mean God's encouragement for revolution and resistance, but it enables new relationships between people and thus renovates the world. God's forgiveness means proclaiming the Kingdom of God, which comes near through conversion and through the

<sup>12</sup> Cf.: J. KRAŠOVEC, *Nagrada, kazen in odpuščanje*, 834.

<sup>13</sup> Bogdan DOLENC, „Sprava kot krščanska obveza in možnost“, Janez JUHANT (ur.), *Na poti k resnici in spravi* (Ljubljana: Teološka fakulteta Univerze v Ljubljani, 1997.), 7-19.



change of government.<sup>14</sup> We often hear that only he who forgets truly forgives. It happens, however, that in our strong desire to forget, the memory of an old insult or wound is kept alive. The lack of power to forget is accompanied by strong feelings of guilt: man feels guilty for not forgiving, for not being able to forgive. In Paris, a monument was erected for the French who had been deported to German concentration camps. The sign reads: „We forgive, but we never forget!“ This inscription might be considered rather shocking, but we must realise that the basic message of Jesus' words and deeds was mutual forgiveness, whereas he never asked us to forget. The true virtue of forgiveness is shown when man remembers things at the same time. If he were able to forget, there would be no need for him to forgive, as there would be no reason for forgiveness. Only because the evil inflicted upon him is still locked in his memory, is he able to forgive with all his heart. And that is the key point of forgiveness: it is absolutely not about forgetting, it is the liberation from inner anger, resentment and the desire for revenge, which gnaws at every fibre of man's being.<sup>15</sup>

Forgiveness in this sense means reliving the past in one's memory, „working through“ it and making it a part of one's own history. By remembering a past injustice, man can radically change his position when he releases and liberates his negative emotions and thus dismisses them. Anger at the perpetrator of the injustice, which has burdened his memory, suddenly vanishes, and man can accomplish inner freedom and start living a fuller life. This can be done because man no longer perceives the other person solely as a perpetrator, as someone who has inflicted violence and injustice upon him; he views him from other aspects as well. When I forgive, I distinguish between the person who has inflicted injustice upon me, and the injustice itself. I judge the other person by his value as a human being, who, like me, lives in an imperfect world, marked by various conflicts.

In the creative part of remembering I try to view the person who has inflicted injustice upon me with my spiritual eyes, and at the same time I try to go beyond that. I no longer see him as a perpetrator, I try to understand him at a deeper level, where he is human, as irreplaceable and precious as me, despite his human weakness and limitations. This sort of remembering, which is deeply permeated by forgiveness, enables me to perceive myself in a completely new way: not only as a victim or an insulted person, but as someone who is capable of rising above the

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<sup>14</sup> Cf.: Ch. DUQUOC, „Die Vergebung Gottes“, 109-110.

<sup>15</sup> Virgil ELIZONDO, „Ich vergebe, vergesse aber nicht“, *Concilium* 22 (1986.), 127-134.

injustice. Forgiveness is, in the end, an act of faith in the basic goodness and good of man.<sup>16</sup>

Therefore forgiveness is readiness to let past events remain in the past, not letting them take control over other people and myself. It is an act of receiving and absorbing: I accept a painful experience into my own history as a past event which no longer determines my future. When speaking of forgiveness, we always encounter a problem that injustice or insult is impossible to forgive and forget. From man's point of view it would be extremely difficult to find an answer to this difficult question. But forgiveness reaches much further than forgetting. It is levelled with grace. The experience of forgiveness provides man with a revelation that he is not the source of his own life; his life has been gifted to him. It is rather telling that the verb „forgive“ is close to „give“ in many languages. The experience of forgiveness is the experience of being given a life at the same time.<sup>17</sup>

### **3. Reconciliation as an act of man's greatness and dignity**

On the one hand, man is a being of immense dignity and ontological goodness, but on the other he is a being of limitations and sin, which also has an extremely powerful effect on his life. If man is not untouchable and if the greatest value is placed on his individualism and personal dignity, the most natural response to insult and injustice is hatred, which tries to destroy the perpetrator. Moral hatred is inevitable, and it is not only directed at the insult or injustice, it is also, or even solely, directed at the perpetrator.

„Forgiveness and mercy are moral values in those views which acknowledge the transcendental source, transcendental core and transcendental purpose of man. The faith that man and universe derive from one and the highest Being provides the ontological-existential basis of equality and irreplaceable value of each person.“<sup>18</sup>

This fact is one of the basic characteristics of the Judeo-Christian tradition. The peak of Biblical revelation is the fact that the whole of God's work is good, and man was created in God's own image. From

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<sup>16</sup> Cf.: B. DOLENC, „Sprava kot krščanska obveza in možnost“, 12.

<sup>17</sup> Cf.: Jan PETERS, „Die Funktion der Vergebung in sozialen Beziehungen“, *Concilium* 22 (1986.), 83-88.

<sup>18</sup> J. KRAŠOVEC, *Nagrada, kazen in odpuščanje*, 837.

the point of view of creation we can say that God's love towards man is unconditional.

„The evil caused by man cannot completely eliminate his basic dignity. This leads us to believe that we must always distinguish between the deed and the perpetrator, and despite our dislike for evil, we need to acknowledge the 'inner' dignity of the perpetrator. This principle is masterfully shown by St Augustine, who says that God loves and hates man at the same time. He hates human deeds, including sin, and he loves him, who is created in his own image.“<sup>19</sup>

God does not judge man, who is a relative being, by his absolute standards. When he judges man's unjustness and unfaithfulness, he considers man's basic imperfection as general extenuating circumstances. When a man judges an unjust deed, a question arises as to what extent he will be able to judge the circumstances of a particular deed. It is of vital importance that he is conscious of his own imperfection. Man's right to hatred and vengeance is disabled by a truly existential starting point. The Book of Sirach provides a very convincing argument for forgiveness:

„Anger and a hot temper are horrible things,  
but sinners have both.

The Lord is taking note of your sins,  
and if you take vengeance on someone,  
the Lord will take vengeance on you.

But if you forgive someone who has wronged you,  
your sins will be forgiven when you pray.

You cannot expect the Lord to pardon you  
while you are holding a grudge against someone else.

You yourself are a sinner, and if you won't forgive another  
person,

you have no right to pray that the Lord will forgive your sins.

If you cannot get rid of your anger, you have no hope of  
forgiveness

– you are only a human being. Think about it!

Some day you will die, and your body will decay.

So give up hate and live by the Lord's commands,  
the commands in the covenant of the Most High.

Instead of getting upset over your neighbour's faults, overlook  
them.“ (Sir 27,30 – 28,7).

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<sup>19</sup> J. KRAŠOVEC, *Nagrada, kazni in odpuščanje*, 838.

Imperfection on both sides, which is clearly grounded in the Bible, is the most evident proof in the eyes of Mr Krašovec that moral hatred towards perpetrators is not justified. A person who would want to judge others under the assumption that he himself is just, assumes the position of an undisputed arbiter and thus places himself next to God. This sort of behaviour is strongly advised against by the silent voice of the suffering servant in the *Book of Isaiah* (Isaiah 52,13-53,12) or by the Apostle Paul: „Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay’, says the Lord.“ (Rom 12,19). Even more evident is Jesus’ encounter with the teachers of the law and the pharisees, who challenge him with the role of the judge for the woman caught in adultery: „Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.“ (John 8,7). The readiness to forgive best corresponds with the basic human dignity and it can easily be considered a distinguished sign of man’s greatness.<sup>20</sup>

#### 4. Reconciliation as the internal liberation

A sense of justice and our desire for reconciliation naturally lead us towards force, which we would like to use in order to right the injustice, pay back and get satisfaction for the inflicted insult. A crime must be punished. Offended honour demands satisfaction, which is obtained if the perpetrator is forced down on his knees. It appears that only violent punishment can satisfy a violent crime. If I am insulted, my anger is not assuaged until the perpetrator receives what I believe he deserves. But the fact is that I cannot find peace even after the perpetrator has been punished. The memory of evil remains a constant source of anger and dissatisfaction. Bitterness and disappointment prevail.<sup>21</sup>

Experience shows that by persisting with hatred and by refusing forgiveness man is disfigured and can eventually become completely depersonalised. Common sense tells us that a man who continuously refuses forgiveness cannot be respected. At the same time, life teaches us a valuable lesson that forgiveness has a healing effect on both the perpetrator and the victim.

The greatest damage done by an insult can be limitation of my personal freedom, so that I can no longer be who I am. Very often this damage is much greater than the insult. Man’s personality continues to be controlled by anger and resentment, which is like spiritual poison,

<sup>20</sup> Cf.: J. KRAŠOVEC, *Nagrada, kazen in odpuščanje*, 840.

<sup>21</sup> Cf.: B. DOLENC, „Sprava kot krščanska obveza in možnost“, 13.

permeating man's entire being and subconsciously determining his life. I become irritated, offensive, I helplessly yield to my inner impulses. When I hate the perpetrators who have inflicted evil upon me, I enable them with my hatred to be masters and controllers of my life. Their life becomes a dominant force which controls my entire life. A person who hates is his enemy's slave, he is dependent on him, and completely defined by his actions, decisions, creations, responses etc. The perpetrator is thus the commander of my life.

We need to live with past events. Who has the right to ask the Jews to forget about the Holocaust? Will prisoners ever be able to forget concentration camps? Who has the right to ask us to forget about Kočevski Rog, or Teharje, or many other mass graves?

The deeper the wound or the insult, the more powerful the controlling influence of the consequences which take away man's freedom, self-respect and inner peace. The real tragedy of sin and crime is in the transformation of the victim, who may not be able to let go of the hatred. The wounds inflicted upon one's heart, memory and soul are in themselves a kind of spiritual cancer, which eats away the victim's life and transforms him into a person he does not wish to be. The Apostle Paul writes about such a state when he says: „I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do... What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?“ (Rom 7, 15. 24).<sup>22</sup>

If man was left all to himself he would probably destroy himself as well one day by paying an eye for an eye. Even after the perpetrator has been punished, we are cursed with remembering the evil deed, which evokes a number of negative emotions. Spiritual cancer does not heal in a wounded heart. So what happens with a person who has suffered great injustice and who has become a victim, does he have to spend the rest of his life in misery, in a certain way a slave to his tormentor?

A general, natural human request for vengeance and retribution makes God's loving mercy seem unnatural, even unjust and unreasonable. Considering this, God's incarnation – by human standards – was the only way to protect humankind from self-destruction. The basic principle of his life was love. Jesus' love endures to the end, and this, in its own way, means the healing of humankind. Because of sin, Jesus died on the cross, but his love for man never died. Jesus did not conceal the presence of evil, as he was tempted himself, but he took away its power to rule and

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<sup>22</sup> Cf.: B. DOLENC, „Sprava kot krščanska obveza in možnost“, 13.

control the lives of people. Mercy and forgiveness are the only way to end the cancerous spreading of sin and violence. The vicious circle, ready to spread, is broken. A new start is made possible.<sup>23</sup>

When we talk about reconciliation as inner liberation in our relationships towards other people, it is vital to realise the importance of forgiveness or self-forgiveness.

„Many people cannot forgive others because they are unable to forgive themselves to have let, one way or another, the injustice being inflicted upon them. They keep pondering upon how the whole thing should not have happened at all. Self-directed anger is very common, people are certain that they should have prevented the injustice. Injustice means insult of a narcissistic image the victim projects upon himself.“<sup>24</sup>

For this reason, the forgiving self faces a task to accept its own self first, with all its limits and vulnerability. Forgiveness can help him achieve a more realistic self-image. It becomes possible to face the truth about himself and face his aggressive emotions, his often exaggerated expectations and his past. Forgiveness is the sort of love which tries to accept the other just the way he is. I try to approach my tormentor with some sort of understanding and compassion, which derive from destructive impulses in my own consciousness. Mutual acceptance is based on the ability to accept oneself first, with all his inner hurt, responsibility, and readiness to face the reality of being. They both need to realise how seriously they have been estranged by the injustice.

If I am capable of receiving the undeserved love of another human being upon whom I have inflicted injustice, I am clearly aware of my own imperfection and limits, and my dependence on the love of the forgiving person. Mutual confession and acceptance can transform the inflicted injustice and make it a firm basis for the new relationship. Forgiveness is very hard mental work, which requires an enormous amount of time and energy. It also contains hidden risks and thus requires a lot of courage.

## **5. Reconciliation as a call to conversion**

Believing in Jesus means conversion from the way we consider natural and normal, towards His way, which is the way of forgiveness. As stated before, forgiveness is not a matter of forgetting or closing one's

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<sup>23</sup> Cf.: V. ELIZONDO, „Ich vergebe, vergesse aber nicht“, 129-131.

<sup>24</sup> B. DOLENC, „Sprava kot krščanska obveza in možnost“, 17-18.

eyes to the injustice. On the one hand, forgetting can mean ignoring the unimaginable pain and suffering that people are able to inflict upon one another. At the same time, remembering can help us to grow and to develop compassion. A wound or an insult, transformed by love, can turn into a source of mercy and a basis for reconciliation. One's decision to follow Jesus, a true conversion, is the beginning of a new way, and not running away from the truth or forced forgetting of facts.

When I forgive another person, I accept into my life God's generous offer of universal forgiveness. When man forgives, he is similar to God in a very special way, he experiences divine qualities in the act of forgiveness. To err is human and to forgive, divine, close to God. Observed with human eyes alone, the life of Jesus may seem absurd and unreasonable, even unjust, but it is the only way to break the destructive, vicious circle which transforms the victim into a new perpetrator. We shall only be able to truly forgive if we convert to Jesus and embark on His journey. Our forgiveness of another person is not a condition to earn God's mercy, it is more of an accompanying act.

Our God-given chance to convert is an excellent opportunity for us. Renowned psychiatrist V. Frankl once stressed in a television interview that a worthless favour is done to perpetrators, convicts and criminals by those psychiatrists who try to convince them that they are not responsible for their own actions, that they are ill, and not sinful or wicked. This deprives of the possibility and logic of conversion. They are forever locked in their crime and left there, instead of being pushed into accepting the guilt. They are not being given a chance to act as free and responsible people, to convert from their crime and become new, different people. God's call to conversion reflects his trust in man, and not God's bitterness.

A true Christian does not behold his broken wings. Judas went away and hanged himself, and Peter went out and wept bitterly (ex. Mt 27,5; Lk 22,62). There is an enormous difference between the two. The first was damned by his sin, whereas the other was blessed. There is a similar comparison between the hero of Greek tragedies, Oedipus the King, and Mary Magdalene from the Gospel. In the Greek tragedy, Oedipus the King plunges long gold pins into his own eyes in despair, while Mary Magdalene keeps her eyes in the Gospel. She needs them too much, so that she can cry and scoop tears from them, which Simon the Pharisee did not pour on Jesus' feet. This is Christianity. The just man Simon considered himself too holy to come close to Jesus, whereas Mary Magdalene came close to Jesus through her sins, which helped her recognise the true God.

A question arises in the end as to whether I am ready to accept an apology in the form of forgiveness, or do I want to give this to myself, so that I can hold my head up high above everyone else, even God? It is the question of whether my sinfulness opens me towards other people or closes me into self-sufficiency, arrogance or even despair, if there are no reasons for me to be happy with myself.

A Christian is aware of not having any moral right to judge others. He has no right to think himself better than Judas Iscariot or Pontius Pilate or your average Jerusalem dweller who shouted along with the crowd: „Crucify him!“ Whoever takes a close look into his heart, has to admit that he considers nothing that is human alien to him, neither Judas' betrayal, the fear of the apostles, Peter's denial, the crowd mentality of Jerusalem dwellers, Pilate's cynicism and ambition, or the obsequiousness of the Sanhedrin. I can personally take the blame for many hardships in this world, I am responsible for the injustice and violence, even though I do not directly participate in them. I am part of general human sinfulness, and I am responsible for it. K. Gibran made this perfectly clear in his *Prophet*:

„Oftentimes have I heard you speak of one who commits a wrong as though he were not one of you, but a stranger unto you and an intruder upon your world. But I say that even as the holy and the righteous cannot rise beyond the highest which is in each of you, so the wicked and the weak cannot fall lower than the lowest which is in you also. And as a single leaf turns not yellow but with the silent knowledge of the whole tree, so the wrongdoer cannot do wrong without the hidden will of you all. Like a procession you walk together towards your god-self... And when one of you falls down he falls for those behind him, a caution against the stumbling stone. Ay, and he falls for those ahead of him, who, though faster and surer of foot, yet removed not the stumbling stone... You cannot separate the just from the unjust and the good from the wicked; for they stand together before the face of the sun even as the black thread and the white are woven together. And when the black thread breaks, the weaver shall look into the whole cloth, and he shall examine the loom also.“<sup>25</sup>

The whole of humankind, different communities, each society, we are all cloth woven from more or less white and sometimes black threads, and we are thus responsible for each other in the very core of our beings, as well as for the crimes committed by some.

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<sup>25</sup> Kahlil GIBRAN, *Prerok* (Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 1981), 23-25.



## Final thoughts

Man's existence has always been burdened by experiencing guilt. We constantly face the task of forgiveness and asking to be forgiven. Forgiveness as a form of behaviour and as a proper deed belongs to the basic coordinates in one's personal structure. Therein lies the special mission of the Church and of various forms of civil society, as stressed by bl. John Paul II:

„The light and the power of the Gospel, from which the Church lives, have the ability to enlighten and support choices and deeds of a civil society, as if from swelling abundance, in full respect of their autonomy... On the threshold of the third millennium we may hope that the politicians and nations in charge, especially those who are involved in dramatic conflicts, fed by hatred and often memory of very old wounds, will let themselves be led by the spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation, as testified for by the Church, and they will try to resolve the differences with the help of sincere and open dialogue... A truth acknowledged is the source of reconciliation and peace, because, as stressed by the same Pope, 'the love of truth, sought by humility, is one of the great values, capable of re-uniting the people of today....'“<sup>26</sup>

## POMIRENJE KAO ČIN HRABROSTI I UNUTARNJE SLOBODE. POMIRENJE KAO IZAZOV SUVREMENE EUROPE

### Sažetak

*Pomirenje je proces koje ima i filozofske i teološke temelje. Jedno drugo nadopunjuju jer je uz ljudska nastojanja od presudne važnosti pouzdati se u djelovanje Duha Svetoga. Duh Sveti je taj koji može istinski osloboditi ljudsko srce od svih negativnih misli i mržnje. Pomirenje ne podrazumijeva samo zaborav na događaje iz prošlosti, nego se odnosi i na unutarnje oslobođenje koje se očituje u opraštanju, međusobnom poštivanju i iskrenoj želji za stvaranjem novih odnosa. Prema riječima svetog Ivana Pavla II., pomirenje je znak nutarnje snage, slobode i hrabrosti, ali prije svega ono je Božje djelo. I tako ljudska perspektiva pomirenja, koja je jednako važna, nadopunjuje teološku perspektivu, što dovodi do nove razine kvalitete života. Svako ljudsko biće na ovome svijetu, u svoj svojoj krhkosti, očajnički treba oprost. Ta se potreba javlja u njegovoj poniznosti da iskreno prihvatiti oprost i svojih bližnjih i Boga. Istovremeno, od svakog čovjeka se očekuje opraštanje, jer je to jedini način da se zaustavi začarani krug osvetoljubivosti i mržnje. Pomirenje se događa i na osobnoj i na strukturnoj razini. Ako su potonji nepravedni, nemoguće je postići novu kvalitetu odnosa unutar društva.*

**Ključne riječi:** pomirenje, oprost, dostojanstvo osobe, sloboda, teologija, hrabrost

Prijevod: Josip Knežević

<sup>26</sup> MEDNARODNA TEOLOŠKA KOMISIJA, „Spomin in sprava“, 53.