

# An Antidote to Violence?

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The cruelties committed in the war in former Yugoslavia profoundly shock us. Villages are completely destroyed, children, women and men, even their cattle, are killed. Women are raped and forced to give birth to the children of their rapists. The perpetrators are ordinary citizens, pleasant people, good neighbours. We do not have to look for violence that far away. Bombs go off in the city of London, children are killed in Warrington, and in revenge innocent young men are massacred in Belfast. Violence exists outside war situations as well. Domestic violence is probably the most common form of violence: incest, beating, or simply bullying. It is often hidden; in spite of everything, loyalty to parents and other members of the family overrules the urge to confide in someone, to complain and to accuse in public. Though violent novels and films may be very popular, articles and books on violence are generally not. The Bible is full of violent events, but there is relatively little literature on violence in Scripture.

Why do we accept violence relatively easily as a part of life? Why do peaceful people resort to violence in certain situations? It seems to me that violence is closely linked with justice. Violence is used to redress wrongs or to prevent injuries. The source of much violence is the thirst for justice. People always try to justify their use of violence by appealing to their right to restore injustices done to them in the past or in the present. Justice is fundamental to human life. We are interested in justice, not in violence. A human being cannot yield his or her right to be treated with justice. It is possible to give up one's life, it is not possible to abandon one's right to exist, the right to give and to receive, the right to have a body that is safe against intrusions from outside. Justice is the right not to be killed and this right is the basis of social justice as well.<sup>1</sup> For a person is a nodal point of relationships that come together in his or her body. These relationships are not accidental, as medieval theologians want us to think, for we exist in and through them. It is romanticism to think that we are autonomous subjects, contained in ourselves, freely deciding with whom we shall relate. Our body is the result of the encounter of a male and a female human being. As soon as we are born we are confronted by other human beings, by a society, by a language. A language is not something that remains outside the core of our being, it forms among other things the core of our being. A foreign language

always remains foreign, and people who live to a ripe age often lose their ability to speak a foreign language even when they are living in the country where this language is spoken. If human beings are nodal points of relationships, it is obvious that human life is not possible without justice. We owe our personhood to just relationships.

We meet with and learn justice first of all in the family (or institution) in which we grow up. Justice reveals itself to us as reciprocity. Children want to pay back both the good things they receive and the injuries incurred.<sup>2</sup> When they become adults they continue doing this: reciprocity is the beginning of justice. This should not surprise us for we may be aware of the role reciprocity and imitation are playing in our lives. We learn a language by imitating other people, we are introduced into a culture by imitating the behaviour of our parents, teachers, television-stars. Being the result of reproduction—an imitative event—we become persons by imitating other people. Our relationships are all marked by imitation. As Aristotle observed, we differ from animals because we are better in imitating one another.<sup>3</sup> Reciprocity is a form of imitation and is itself the cradle of justice.

Children are involved in a kind of accountancy: when the child's debts to his parents and other members of the family or when their debts to the child are not settled in childhood, all the people involved will try to take this out on others: their partner, their children, on colleagues, neighbours and strangers. The latter become their scapegoats through whom they try to find inner peace and justice. The dimension of justice is fundamental in such a way that when something goes wrong between people it always entails the question as to whether justice was done. Justice and injustice trickle down into the deepest layers of a person and either cleanse or poison the source of life. In the case of injustice all other relationships are disturbed, those with oneself, with other people and with God. People who are divorced often lose their friends and even their job; they often give up their religious practice for they feel injured in some fundamental way. When one's body is violated in some way or another, the entire network of relationship is damaged and means are sought to settle accounts and to redress the injustice done.

In relationships between people justice always plays a role. Benefits and injuries determine these relationships. In spite of the fact that a father injures his daughter, she will always remain in relationship to him whether she likes it or not. This relationship is not in the first place a feeling, but a series of interconnected rights and duties which always exist between parents and children. The relationship with a parent (or child, partner or the Transcendent) can be denied, or may not be expressed in words and deeds, but it is still there, though invisible.

Actually, reciprocity is not the last word in the relationship between parents and children and between adults: for some time parents cannot expect from their infant that he or she pays them back with benefits. Infants have a right to live without incurring a debt. Young parents have to learn this, and this is not always easy.

Violence is a way of settling accounts. If we see the human body as the place where injuries and other forms of injustice are incurred, violence is the response to injustice that itself is often a form of violence. Violence is not merely a physical force. Words can kill more than acts. Societies are petrified forms of the history of violent clashes with other societies and between their members. Children are born into a world in which there is already injustice and in which violence is present invisibly in language, cultural customs, tradition, the relationship between men and women, politics, economics and religion. This violence does not remain outside a person for a person lives in and through relationships. As a victim of violence, or at least as an heir of injustice, a child cannot help using violence himself, in this way continuing the tradition in which he was born. The theological term 'original sin' may be an unfortunate one, but the reality it refers to is real. We are born in a violent world and violence becomes a part of our own being.

Nations, clans, families and groups all have a history of which injustice and violence are an integral part. This history is often hidden, invisible, seemingly forgotten. When new injustice is incurred—either real or imaginary—the past comes alive and violence erupts to the astonishment of everybody involved, often even of the person who uses violence. In other cases the past is cherished: victory and defeat are remembered in songs, stories, myths and rituals. The myth of a defeat can be even more poisonous than the celebration of a victory, for rancour and the desire to win next time can make people look for the possibility of exacting revenge and to settle the accounts, while a victorious nation can be generous as long as it can be sure that the victory continues bearing fruit. The defeat of the Serbs at the 'Blackbird Field' in Kosovo in 1389 against the Turks, and the victory of King 'Billy' at the Boyne in 1689, annexed by the Ulster protestants, are examples of this, while the use of the pejorative word 'Dutch' in numerous English expressions reminds us of the rivalry between England and Holland in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It may not matter very much that the original enemy does not even exist any more or is not a threat at present: the new enemy is endowed with all the demonic qualities the old foe had.

The reciprocal character of justice is well expressed in the ancient formula 'you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for

hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, bruise for bruise, wound for wound'. (Ex. 21:23-25) Originally this 'law' regulated violence and set bounds to it: the victim is not allowed to ask for more than the eye, the tooth or the hand he lost himself. In Gen. 4:23-24 Lamech is asking for much more: he promises to kill a man for wounding him, a young man for a blow. In the Old Testament, revenge—a word that is much closer to 'justice' in biblical Hebrew than in modern languages—only entails the death of the perpetrator in the case of murder, of manslaughter and of bearing false witness that results in the death of the accused. In all other cases the perpetrator is not punished with bodily harm but has to pay a fine and make good the damage. For instance; 'When a man strikes his slave or slave-girl in the eye and destroys it, he shall let the slave go free in compensation for the eye.' (Ex 21:26) Murder is always murder; this rule applies to killing a slave as well.

Scripture is full of violence. In the Old Testament we find more than six hundred places in which we are told that individuals, kings and nations destroy other individuals, kings and nations. The violence used seems sometimes not to be restricted by anything. God himself rages, punishes with death and destruction, and takes revenge. The centre of the New Testament is the execution of Jesus. This atmosphere of violence is not a privilege of the Bible. The origin and rise of early Islam is surrounded by violence. The Baghavad Gita is a dialogue on a battlefield. The presence of violence is never denied in Scripture, on the contrary Scripture tries to confront its readers by violence and to make them reflect on it. We can read the Bible as a long drawn out discussion between individuals and groups about justice and violence. That justice is to be done belongs to the heart of the Bible; God is seen as the guarantee that justice will be done.

In ancient texts God himself takes revenge and restores the order of justice. During the persecution of the Jews by the Hellenist rulers of Antioch in the second century BC, the death of the just person posed an almost insoluble problem. Job wrestled with the question why a just person may have to suffer. If there is no justice in this world, God is dead, and the only way to survive in the world is to use more violence than potential or real rivals. The metaphor 'resurrection' confirms that God can be trusted and will be faithful to those who do justice themselves: even death cannot limit God's faithfulness. In this sense resurrection is not a compensation of losses suffered in this world, but guarantees that justice will be done. Without a faith that justice will be done our world becomes the history of the survival of the fittest. If one cannot believe in the resurrection, one has to respond in some other way to the question how justice is to be done to the innocent victim.

When the Old Testament emphasizes that justice will be done to all, to the poor, the widow and the orphans as well, and asks for revenge, its aim is not simply to satisfy feelings of hatred and anger. Faith that justice will be done confirms that history and the world have a just order without which life would be meaningless and ethics would rank at the same level as traffic rules at the most. It is possible to renounce taking revenge and instead to forgive. In and after the exile forgiveness increasingly becomes a central theme in the Old Testament; we do not know why this is so.<sup>4</sup> God is willing to forgive sins. Before the exile forgiveness is hardly mentioned: God hopefully does not look at sins and does not remember them. When the concept of forgiveness comes to the fore, the Old Testament is convinced that it will be given on certain conditions: justice has to be done and justice entails reciprocity. The guilty person has to admit his or her guilt, must make good the damage and has to pay an extra one fifth of the value of the damage to the injured party. Subsequently, receiving forgiveness is confirmed in a sacrifice in the temple.<sup>5</sup> (Lev. 6:1-7) Joseph forgives his brothers, but not until he has tested them so as to be certain that they changed their ways. (Gen. 49)

After the exile the Day of Atonement was introduced to ask God forgiveness for the sins of the nation. The rite was borrowed from a very ancient practice, the expulsion of the scapegoat, this may well be the most original form of sacrifice.<sup>6</sup> During this rite, a goat was led from the temple to an abyss—a distance of three miles and was thrown into it to its death.<sup>7</sup> Certain acts such as murder cannot be forgiven for the damage cannot be restored. Forgiveness makes it possible to restore broken relationships and to make a new beginning. It is thus of great importance. It stops the chain of violent deeds which aim at doing justice by using violence. Violence becomes superfluous when forgiveness is a real possibility. Forgiveness is an antidote to violence. In both the Old and New Testaments sin is not an isolated act of some individual; sin is a word that denotes a broken and unjust relationship. Sinners are political collaborators, extortioners, thieves, terrorists, prostitutes. A sinner lives more or less outside the community of those who seek for justice, the true Israel. This community hoped that they would be converted and was willing to accept them again as its members on the conditions stated above.

Jesus was one of those wandering preachers who hoped for a restoration of Israel. For him, as for every just Jew, sinners were people who violated the order of justice and made human life meaningless. In this Jesus did not differ in any way from his contemporaries. Sin was a serious matter; again, here sin differs from the private and often petty faults people tend to ponder on at the beginning of mass or at their

habitual confession in a confessional box. Modern scholars agree that Jesus only departed from the religious and social practice of his time in one aspect: he forgave unconditionally.<sup>8</sup> This seems to be a minimal change; most scholars note it but do not realize that this is the turning point between Old and New Testament. Jesus, for example, accepted tax-collectors—they were both political collaborators and extortioners—into his own group. By this he intended to show how the new and restored Israel should look. Many tax-collectors were excluded from the believing community for ever because they were not able to fulfil the conditions laid down in Leviticus 6:1–7. How to pay back all the money you had extorted and one fifth of this money at top of it? It was an impossible condition, but still it had to be fulfilled for otherwise justice would not be done. How could the broken relationship with the victims be restored without paying them back? However, Jesus accepted these people into his community. He only asked them to follow him and to do as he did. He was not a liberal or a lax Jew, and thus saw his own behaviour as a part of the restoration of Israel. By admitting sinners to his group without first asking them to fulfil the conditions of Leviticus 6, he changed the boundaries of Israel between those inside and those outside. Later this question would also give rise to difficult and fierce disputes in the early Church: who belongs to her and who does not. Justice itself became a matter of discussion because of Jesus' actions, as did the question of how to think about God as guarantor of justice if justice does not seem to be done any more? Other problems also arose: what will happen to temple and sacrifice if forgiveness is granted unconditionally? What is left of the purpose of sacrifice which is the centre of any religion? It is doubtful whether Jesus himself was conscious of the consequences of the seemingly minimal change he was making in the practice of justice. We do not know either how and why Jesus decided to make this change. From the text of the New Testament Jesus turns out to have been deeply moved by the conditions of sinners, tax-collectors, prostitutes, also by people who were somehow associated with sin in the public eye because they are sick or poor, or with uncleanness such as women who were usually supposed to be unclean more often than men because of menstruation. No doubt one of his sources is Scripture, probably the prophets more than the Law. Another source must have been his personal experience of who God is. And finally, his experience of meeting people who could not set themselves free from sins committed in the past may have inspired him.

Those who came into contact with Jesus wondered who he was. 'Who but God alone can forgive sins?' (Mark. 2:7) For forgiveness is not a feeling but is the creation of a new set of relationships. It is re-creating

the world, putting an end to violence, bringing about new and just relationships. Granting forgiveness unconditionally is beyond ordinary human possibilities, for human beings grow up and become adults having learned to act on the basis of reciprocity. Anthropologically speaking, Jesus refers to the situation between parents and infant: in this relationship an infant is cared for without demands on him or her to pay back this benefit in any way. This, so Jesus seems to suggest, is the way God cares for people. A restored Israel is a community in which people deal with one another as God does with them. In the offer of unconditional forgiveness the kingdom of God becomes already present. He counsels the victims to act like God:

'You have learned that they were told: "Eye for eye, tooth for tooth". But I tell you this: Do not set yourself against the man who wrongs you. If someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn and offer him your left... You have learned that they were told: "Love your neighbour, hate your enemy." But what I tell you is this: Love your enemies and pray for your persecutors; only so can you be children of your heavenly Father, who makes his sun rise on good and bad alike, and sends the rain on the honest and the dishonest... And if you greet only your brother, what is there extraordinary about that? Even the heathen do as much. There must be no limit to your goodness, as your heavenly Father's goodness knows no bounds.' (Matthew 5:38-39, 43-45, 47-48)

The principle of reciprocity is rejected here in favour of a limitless goodness. In St. Luke's gospel Jesus himself forgives those who crucify him: 'they do not know what they are doing' (Luke 23:34); they do not know for they are used to acting on the basis of reciprocity. A criminal, possibly a murderer, is forgiven not because he is paying for his life but because he is asking to be remembered. (Luke 23:40-43) Jesus's reception of divine titles in the Christology of the New Testament was based on his power to forgive. For a human being is never so much an image of God as when he forgives unconditionally. When a victim forgives without making preconditions, he or she acts in a sovereign way like the sovereign God. It is sharing in a new creation.

Jesus's opponents, contrary to age-old, popular Christian assumptions, were not scoundrels. They had a case against Jesus. He threatened the existence of the boundaries of the Jewish people and with them Israel itself, he undermined justice and the way people have to deal with one another in a just world. What he did was blasphemous, because he seemed to deny that God was the guarantor of justice. The gospels suggest that Jesus was lynched and that the court case against him was a

simple cover-up. They want to make clear that everybody was against Jesus, that they were as the builders who threw unanimously away a stone that does not fit into the building. It may well be that the court case against him was conducted in the proper way.

The Jewish philosopher E. Lévinas has protested against unconditional forgiveness. According to him evil and injustice can only be destroyed by some kind of violence. Destruction of evil by violence means that evil is taken seriously. The possibility of unconditional forgiveness creates the possibility of limitless evil. In his opinion there is a limit to God's patience. God takes human beings seriously for they are completely responsible for their deeds; punishment entails respect for the person of the guilty one.<sup>9</sup> On the Day of Atonement, Lévinas argues, sins against God are forgiven by prayer; in a sense the forgiveness of these sins depend on myself. However, I can only receive forgiveness from my brother and disaster if they reconcile themselves with me before or on the Day of Atonement; I depend on him, on her. Forgiveness can be refused me!<sup>10</sup> Lévinas's arguments have to be taken very seriously. The freedom from rules and laws, born out of the unconditional forgiveness and the faith in the limitless divine bounty, may partly offer an explanation of the often limitless violence Christians have exercised. Contrary to the Jews Christians found it necessary to declare that people are not completely responsible for what they are doing: they are prisoners of original sin. Although the term 'original sin' is unfortunate for a number of reasons, I share its interpretation of human reality as one of a long history of evil which people inherit when they are born, and which continues, since they can only become true human beings by imitation.

After Jesus' death his disciples believed that he was risen, i.e. they recognised that God saw Jesus as a just man and was on his side. They discovered that they had received the same ability to forgive unconditionally thanks to his power. (John 20:21-23) The consequences gradually dawned upon them. For a great part the New Testament reflects the discussions on these consequences; especially concerning the boundaries of the community. We ourselves are still wrestling with the consequences of the possibility of unconditional forgiveness, for this forces us to reflect on questions such as the use of violence, the way justice is done, how our judicial system works, how the poor and the strangers are seen, on how Aids patients are treated, the rights of women in the Church, on how to deal with schisms within the Church in the past and in the present, what place to give to divorcees (male and female) in the eucharist, how to relate to priests who have left the ministry. What would happen if we really offered unconditional forgiveness and dared to ask for it for ourselves? The classic doctrine of atonement in which the



sacrifice of Jesus is necessary to restore God's honour, has to be rejected if we believe in God's unconditional forgiveness. The traditional conviction that human beings can only be saved exclusively through a relationship with Christ needs reconsideration. God herself comes down from a high throne from which she judges good and evil, and lives amongst us. From a theological point of view unconditional forgiveness sets people free from violence. Injustice is not responded to with violence according to the law of reciprocity. A new set of relationships is created. The perpetrator is seen as someone who is an heir to and a victim of a history of violence like me. The victim does not make himself dependent on his oppressor, hoping that he will restore the damage, but is sovereign. She is just over against herself in the first place for she is aware that being a person is living in relationships with other people, even when they are her enemies. The perpetrator can refuse the offer of forgiveness and continue living in a world of violence. This refusal affects the victim as well, but by offering unconditional forgiveness the victim already is in the kingdom of peace albeit that this peace is not full. Seeing that unconditional forgiveness exists, a guilty person may be inspired to ask for unconditional forgiveness. This may be refused, but his request, expressed in attempts to live in just relationships, opens doors to freedom for himself and for other people.

Obviously granting unconditional forgiveness is impossible. How can these raped women in Bosnia forgive? Their lot becomes even worse if they are told by some Christian preacher that they are obliged to forgive. They are profoundly shocked and injured for the way they relate to the world has been destroyed. It is only natural and human that they want justice to be done. Moreover, it is unlikely that prosecution of war criminals in former Yugoslavia will be successful. This will undoubtedly make it more difficult for these women to overcome their traumatic experiences. Though it is impossible for these woman to forgive, it may well be that some, perhaps even many, will do so. For in spite of the fact that it is impossible, people who were injured, sometimes forgive, even unconditionally. In Northern Ireland Derek Wilson asked that no revenge be taken on the killers of his daughter in the Enniskillen bombing. Though he did not succeed in convincing the IRA to stop its violence, many people think that his request prevented several new killings at the time. When Willy Brandt, Chancellor of West Germany,—not a Christian himself—knelt down at Warsaw in 1970 and asked for forgiveness for damage that can never be restored, he opened new possibilities for the peoples in Europe. Germans learned under his Chancellorship to accept the consequences of World War II, symbolized in the Berlin wall. Other nations were convinced that this Germany was

no longer a threat to world peace. It may well be that the Berlin wall might not have fallen in 1989 if Willy Brandt had not fallen on his knees in Warsaw in 1970.

Granting unconditional forgiveness and receiving it is always something of a miracle. It is a divine event, it is a gracious event in the true sense of the word. Whoever receives this gift is obliged to use it (Matthew 18:35, 6:14-15) but a person who does not receive this gift cannot be forced to forgive unconditionally. The simple fact of having been baptized does not mean that one is able automatically to forgive unconditionally. Preaching may prepare a person to receive this gift, but it remains a free gift of the Spirit. The Church is the place where the possibility of this gift is proclaimed and where God's forgiveness is made visible in signs. Therapies can empower people to manage their lives once again after terrible traumatic events, but they cannot give people the ability to forgive. It is impossible to acquire the power of forgiveness by following a course, or by undergoing therapy, or by forcing oneself to it because the Church tells you to do so. Preachers should be very careful not to force forgiveness on people. In preaching the emphasis is often placed on the fact that people are forgiven by God; this is true and it often becomes a stepping stone to the gift of being able to forgive unconditionally. However, this very gift is the central event in the New Testament. Preaching to people that they are forgiven, may suggest to them that they are guilty in the first place. Such a feeling of guilt may have unhealthy consequences; being born into a world of violence does not mean that a person has committed serious sins him or herself. He or she may be a victim of sin, injustice and violence; suggesting guilt to such a person by telling him or her that he or she is forgiven, may make things worse. The Church has often impressed on people the feeling that they were guilty and had to go to confession, frequently, while the central message of the New Testament that we may receive the gift of being able to forgive unconditionally was obscured. Rightly many people interpret this kind of preaching as just another form of violence and oppression.

In violent situations it can only be hoped that people will be found who can forgive unconditionally for they provide themselves with the antidote to violence. If members of the two cultures in Ireland and Northern Ireland had been able to forgive, violence would not have dominated Northern Ireland today; somehow regulations had been made that had been satisfactory for both parties.<sup>11</sup> The same applies to the nations in former Yugoslavia. Nations as such cannot forgive, but individuals can, and thanks to imitation they can empower other people to forgive as well so that an influential group emerges that is able to

forgive and can change the course of history of a nation though it may well be a minority group. This ability to forgive unconditionally is the greatest gift of the gospel to this world. It is the true antidote to violence.

- 1 Cf. E. Lévinas. *Difficile Liberté* (Paris, 1963, 21).
- 2 I.B. Boszormenyi Nagy and G. G. Spark. *Invisible Loyalties*. (New York, 1973).
- 3 Poetica IV. See for the role of imitation R. Girard. *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. (London, 1987).
- 4 K. Koch. *Spuren des Hebraischen Denkens*. (Neukirchen, 1991) 184-206.
- 5 For the practice of Jewish sacrifice see: E.P. Sanders. *Judaism. Practice and Belief 62 1 BCE-66CE*. (London, 1992) 47145.
- 6 R. Girard. o.c.
- 7 Talmud, Joma VI,1.
- 8 See E.P. Sanders. *Jesus and Judaism*. (London, 1985) and J.D.G. Dunn. *The Parting of the Ways. Between Christianity and Judaism and their Significance for the Character of Christianity*. (London, 1991).
- 9 Lévinas o.c. 168.
- 10 E. Lévinas. *Quatre Lectures Talmudiques* (Paris, 1968) 3637.
- 11 Cf. A.D. Falconer (Ed.). *Reconciling Memories*, (Dublin, 1988)

## Catherine De' Ricci

### Part III

## Domenico di Agresti

[Translated and adapted by Simon Tugwell OP]

### Cheerful balance

'Desire nothing except to be pleasing to him and to do his most holy will' [CRE I 28]. This simple formula, inspired by the relationship between Christ crucified and his Father, and lived ever more intensely in the most radical way by Catherine, provides the key to an integrated reading of her spirituality, of which it is the heart. But how does it actually take shape in practice? Will it not don the emaciated face of renunciation, gloomy earnestness, human frustration, all-enveloping pain, self-denial and deprivation? The reality is in fact quite different. There is not a single letter in which Catherine does not invite people to be 'cheerful' [cf. CRF VII. 3 163-167]. This certainly does not mean a superficial, silly cheerfulness which is only skin-deep and unpredictable in its durability. What Catherine encourages is a cheerfulness which does not exclude the heights and the depths of the various states of spirit people find themselves in as their circumstances vary, whether internally or