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WHEN TO TALK ABOUT RECONCILIATION?

REFLECTIONS ON THE WAR IN UKRAINE





On an abstract level, most people accept conflicts as a part of life, and unavoidable. Conflicts take place in families, in relationships, at work, between organisations and businesses, and among States. Usually, situations of conflict are messy. The distinction between victims and perpetrators is not always clear-cut. Emotions go high, and there is no obvious solution at hand.

Most people in the world have no direct experience of war, and this is good news. But most people know about domestic violence, from their own families or neighbours. When conflicts are ongoing, when do you start talking about reconciliation? When you hear that a woman is beaten up in the neighbouring flat, what do you do?

In Ukraine, I felt that talking about reconciliation would be inappropriate. On the day we arrived, the city of Lviv (750000 inhabitants plus 250000 internally displaced persons) was bombarded with cruise missiles. **The whole day we could hear sirens in the city, and at lunchtime, we heard the explosions. How could we possibly talk about reconciliation when violence was so prevalent?**

From a Christian point of view, we like to speak in these situations about reconciliation. Reconciliation with oneself, with other people, with the environment, and with God. We know from experience and tradition that the process of reconciliation is necessary for coping with the consequences of conflict and for survival after trauma and shock. However, reconciliation is a challenging concept, and it is more a way than just a single moment of decision.

Ukraine is very close to Austria, which is just 600 km away. And so is Bosnia, just 400 km. Distances in Europe are short, compared to Asia. Before I joined the Jesuits, from 1992 to 1999, I worked for the Austrian Red Cross. I did a lot of travelling in Bosnia, during and after the war. Just recently, in February 2023, I went for three days to Ukraine, together with our Provincial Fr. Bernhard Bürgler SJ, to visit the five Jesuits in Lviv.

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My experience in Bosnia in the 1990s taught me the importance of peace, of a peaceful solution to conflicts and of reconciliation. But what can we do during an ongoing armed conflict between States?



Here are five suggestions:

1. Know the situation. Travel there, if possible. Speak with people. Read. Even learn about military issues.
2. Involve yourself in relief work. We all have ways and means to help. Organise accommodation for refugees. Raise funds for medical aid. Use your contacts with authorities to support displaced people. Organise a small language course or a concert.
3. Be near the victims of violence. Where you stand depends on where you sit. Try to stand with the victims. Speak up when victims are blamed. Console as Jesus did. "Observe how Christ, our Lord, fulfils the office of consoler and compare it with how friends are accustomed to console each other." (St. Ignatius, Spiritual Exercises, 224)
4. Keep your soul free from hate and resentment. Know your blind spots. Have partners to talk with.
5. Pray for peace and reconciliation. Ask God how such a situation could occur. Get into a deep conversation with Jesus about what you see, think and feel.

Here are five things to avoid:

1. Do not sit on the fence when victims need your support. Staying silent helps the perpetrators. Do not mix up victims and perpetrators, when the evidence is clear.



2. Do not advocate appeasement. Demand a court for the perpetrators. And compensation for hurt and damage.
3. Avoid generic comments which are below your intellectual standards, e.g. about geo-political views. Know history. Read articles. Use several sources of information. Do not advocate imperial thinking (like 'legitimate spheres of influence').
4. Do not think that this has nothing to do with you. The suffering of others is affecting us. "Ignorance is bliss" is not an acceptable strategy for Christians. Neither is "Leave me alone."
5. Do not underestimate the strength of religious beliefs, church structures and civil society. They are near the people, at the grassroots level, and belong very often to an international network.

The war in Ukraine is a dark shadow in my life. It is difficult for me to live my normal life as if nothing were happening some few kilometres away from where I live. I try to cope with my emotions and inner tensions by using my means to help the victims of this war.

When I asked the people in Ukraine about what we should pray for, their answer was clear: For a just peace, for the freedom of our country, and for the dead.

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A Quest for Peace and Reconciliation

RECONCILIATION

