

Forgiving is a way of healing: Theological approximations¹

Geiko Müller-Fahrenholz²
Bremen, Germany

Abstract

By interpreting a contemporary forgiveness story this article seeks to provide a fresh understanding of the classical penitential theology in “non-religious” terms (D Bonhoeffer). The “exegesis” of the story shows that forgiveness is a process of truthful encounter with the burdens of the past and of mutual liberation both for the perpetrator and for the victim inasmuch as it enables both sides to move beyond the bondage of past guilt and traumatization. Restitution and compensation are seen as an indispensable element in such a process, with the emphasis being not so much on “repairing” the past than on “preparing” a more just and harmonious way forward.

1. INTRODUCTION

“I just had to walk that road one more time”, said one of the old Germans as they went back to Belorussia in order to do some work there. They had been there once before, but then it was war, and they were young soldiers in Hitler’s “Wehrmacht”.

Fifty years later these old men went back. They were by now all retired, and so they decided to do something worthwhile in a country to which they had done much evil. They built a home for children who had got sick as a result of the radioactive fallout following the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. In the course of the weeks they also built up

¹ The following is a slightly changed version of the James-Hair-Memorial-Lecture that I gave on March 2, 1999, in Belfast, Northern Ireland.

² Geiko Müller-Fahrenholz is a Lutheran theologian from Germany with a varied career in ecumenical work. In the seventies he worked for the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches; in the eighties he was Director of one of Germany’s Protestant Academies before he went to Costa Rica, Central America to teach Ecumenical Theology and Ethics. He now lives in Bremen, Germany and works as an ecumenical consultant and freelance journalist with frequent teaching requests in many countries. Among his recent publications is *The art of Forgiveness*, Geneva 1997. His forthcoming book with the title *The Kingdom and the Power* is on the theology of Jürgen Moltmann (SCM/Fortress Press, 2000)

contacts with the Belorussian families in that village. Slowly they grew to like each other.

Towards the end of their stay the men went on an excursion to Chatyn, close to Minsk, not to be confused with Katyn, close to Smolensk. When they were back they sat down with their hosts for supper. Let me quote from the report by Martin R:

The toasts were all very personal. And then one man from our group got up and struggled to say a few words. I noticed that he was still overwhelmed by what he had seen at the memorial in Chatyn. He talked of his own history, that he had been in the war, that he had been a prisoner of war in a Belorussian camp, and then he stopped somehow, and all knew: Now the moment had come that it wouldn't do simply to look back, but that something redeeming might happen. And it did happen. This man excused himself. He said that he was deeply sorry for what he had done personally, and what the Germans had done in Russia, and then he tried to say that this must never happen again, but his voice broke and he had to sit down because he was weeping so hard. And around him there sat young people, they were overwhelmed, they wept, too. An old woman got up, she walked over to this man, she was a Belorussian woman, she put her arms around him and kissed him.³

Forgiving is about healing. Let me suggest some approximations.

2. MEMORIES STAY ALIVE

The Germans had made their careers, founded families, tried to get their share of the German "economic miracle", and for many years they will have attempted to forget their years in Russia. But they had to go back, presumably because those years haunted them time and again in their dreams. Maybe they knew that since their lives were coming to an end there was something that needed to be put right.

Memories are the medium in which our past stays alive within us – for better and for worse. When we are fortunate enough to remember a happy childhood, something bright and warm stays within us, even in dark and bitter days. Happy memories are like a warm stream that sustains our present and protects us even in deep suffering. This

³ Translated by author from D Weber, *Publik Forum* 24, 1994, p 48.

applies equally to those occasions on which we experienced happiness and to those when we made others happy; for to give or to receive happiness is really one and the same thing.

Painful memories, however, grab us with icy hands, undermine our joy of life. Even when we live under comfortable conditions, as we like to say, they have a way of giving us an abject feeling of insecurity and dread. If we are the subject of an evil deed, we are bound to be haunted by a sense of guilt. And when we are object and victim of something evil we are haunted by feelings of hurt, helplessness and rage. To live with hurt, with the experience of having been shamed, is so particularly difficult because it keeps awake the memories of enforced impotence and dehumanization.

When I say that memories are the medium in which the past is alive in us, I need to add that this applies to us as individual persons and as members of communities. Memories are the matrix of our identity, individually as well as collectively. Therefore it is of the utmost importance for our identity that we should know how to deal with the complex web of our memories. The integrity and wellbeing of our existence depend on whether we are at ease with our past or whether there are things which we anxiously need to store away in some dungeon of our heart, whence they are bound to afflict us with sudden and sickening intensity. This is why I talk about the *economy of memories*.

In general, we are rather bad economists of our memories. If it were otherwise, we would not need to repress and conceal so much. Then the story of the old Germans would not be something special, but an everyday occurrence.

What is happening all the time is a distorted management of memories, by which I mean selective remembering. We will accept what we like to remember, but will conceal what pains us. Again this applies to us as individuals and as peoples. Our heroes we put on high pedestals, for in them we aggrandize ourselves.

It is a sign of a misguided economy of memories when the history of our guilt is hidden and when the voices of those in which the victims of our past wish to speak to us are put to silence. Selective remembering is the basis of wars and schemes of retaliation of all kind. This is the way wars are justified.

3. ONE IS STRUGGLING FOR THE WORDS

The old Germans and their Russian hosts sit together around the dinner table. It is their last supper. They have already been working together for some weeks. They will have even joked together. But the memories must have been the hidden companions of their days. Then, at last, after fifty years, one man stands up. He stands up to face his past. Could he not have done what ex-soldiers of all nations have done at all times, which is to say that he had been under orders? That he had been too young to understand what was going on? That they had been trained to obey their superiors? That in a way they had been victims, and not doers, least of all perpetrators of some evil story?

This one speaks up for himself, however, refers to his story as a soldier and then as a prisoner of war. And although he is not a high general and although he has no official status or political mandate he also speaks for all the Germans. He faces what his people have done to the Russian and Belorussian peoples. He tries to say that this horrible story must not happen again. And breaks down.

Why is he doing this? Could he not simply have contented himself with the fact that, after all, they had built that children's home and that this fact would in itself be a sufficient admission of their guilt? Why does he have to say these words when the good intentions surely speak for themselves?

It needs the words. Memories must be named. They must be identified, or else they continue to linger on as nameless horrors, maintain their hidden powers. In the act of naming this man stands up to his past. In his words he returns to that point in his history at which his guilt and doom began. In these words, in this confession, the long way back to Belorussia after fifty years is at long last completed.

In the classic theology of penitence we call this the *confessio oris*, the explicit expression of repentance. This is often regarded as an act of remorse and contrition, as a sign of weakness. A real guy has got to be tough! But in this case it would seem to me that this man is attaining a greatness he did not know of before. He faces the pain and failure of his life, and in doing so he masters it. He becomes the real subject of his history, at this very moment when he is able to name its deepest and saddest point. He *re-members*. He puts together the broken, the dismembered pieces of his life. This kind

of repentance is not for weaklings. A great inner energy is needed to return to the place of the secret grief.

He had to sit down because he wept so hard. We live in a society which abhors weeping. We would grant that women weep because they are, as we men say, more “emotional” anyway. We men have been trained to hide our tears in the backmost chambers of our soul and to erect around us walls of aggressive or cynical unassailability. For let’s face it: Weeping is a way of becoming naked. Those who have to sit down because they weep so hard are exposing the bitter, unredeemed and painful wound of their lives. And so this man gives himself up, exposes himself, for all to see, a man who has served a criminal régime, a man who has suffered in a Russian camp, a perpetrator, a victim, an old man, disarmed, in tears. *Ecce homo!* Look there, a human being!

4. SHE CAME AND KISSED HIM

If someone had said to the Belorussian woman that one day she would kiss a soldier of Hitler’s army, she would have found this obscene. Never! But as she sees this man, as she sees him struggling with the truth of his life, courageous, disarmed, bare and naked in his tears, he is no longer the member of a repressive army, no longer a stranger, no longer the enemy, but a human being. She “knows” him – and I use this word, as the Bible uses it for that sacred moment of love in which one human being recognizes himself or herself in the other – she recognizes something of her own pain in the tears of that man. So she gets up and walks over to that person who is sitting on his chair, and puts her arms around him and kisses him.

How many women suffer when men go to war? Are not the women the first ones to suffer when strangers invade their homes? This Belorussian woman is one of millions past and present who have to go on living, dragging their hurts along, defiled, raped, dishonored.

I have no way of knowing how she managed to live with her hurts. She might at times have tried to compensate for them with loathing and hating; she might have dreamt about revenge. But in this moment she knows nothing of retaliation. She sees that other human being and kisses him.

That is much more than an easy consolation; this embrace is an absolution. "I set you free" is the message of this kiss.

And the really miraculous thing about this embrace is that not only is the old man set free, but the Belorussian woman herself is set free too. She is liberated from the history of her more or less acknowledged feelings of hatred and revenge. She transcends the old patterns of being nothing but the victim. She becomes a sovereign person, the master of her story. *Ecce homo!* Look what a human being!

Forgiveness is a double process in which both parties, the doers and the victims, need to return to the point where their pain began. Both sides have to take up the thread of Ariadne which leads them through the meanderings of guilt and hurt back to that point at which their fate is chained together. Only when this interlocking chain is broken can both sides be free from the impact of their burden. Forgiveness is mutual liberation.

I am stressing this because the matter of forgiveness is dealt with most often in a unilateral sense. It is argued that the one who has done wrong must acknowledge his/her deed in order to be forgiven. Such a confession is in fact necessary. But we should not assume that a confession will be followed by an almost automatic absolution. Such absolution can only come from the victims. And anyone who knows something of the hurt and pain of victims will agree that it is by no means self-evident that forgiveness will be granted. For to hear the confession and to see the perpetrator is like opening an old wound, is like having to relive the torturous time when the hurt happened. That explains why many people don't want to even hear someone repent; for they cannot stand the idea of going through all the pain again. Hence, what the Belorussian woman is doing reveals great courage in which she claims the space to be the subject of her story, a greatness of heart in which she re-members, piecing together the fragments of her life – a human being, whole and healed.

With her kiss the old woman has not only brought peace to the heart of the old man from Germany. I dare hope that she has also made peace with her own past. An embrace sealing a liberation that embraces two people.

5. A CONFESSION AND A KISS – PRIESTS IN DISGUISE

One man expresses what is on the mind of his entire group. One man is strong enough to cry for them all. And one woman goes and kisses the one who is crying with the kiss of peace.

It is not necessary for all members of a group or a people to find the disarming words. There is something vicarious in the confession of guilt, just as there is something vicarious in the kiss of the woman. That is the priestly dimension, in the act of confessing as well as in the act of absolving. In that little village in Belorussia that unnamed man and that unnamed woman are serving as priests to their people, without knowing what they do, of course.

I find it important to identify the dimension of the priestly when we wish to understand what forgiveness can do in the healing of our people.

You will remember the gesture of Willy Brandt during his state-visit to Poland. He went to the memorial of the uprising in the ghetto of Warsaw, and, overcome by the momentous sadness of that place, he went to his knees. That was a priestly act. He need not have knelt down for what the Nazis did; for he had himself been persecuted, living in Norway, an exiled man. Yet as the Chancellor of the Federal Republic he accepted the full weight of his high office. Therefore, he knelt down vicariously for all who could not bring themselves to repent.

In October 1945 the leaders of the Protestant Churches in Germany issued the now famous "Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt". It drew much criticism from people both inside and outside the churches. Therefore, one of the signatories, the Lutheran theologian Hans Asmussen, published a commentary in which he stated:

We do not defend the leaders and the followers of the Nazi Party. We do not resist them being brought to court. But we do not deny that they are our brothers. We are ashamed of what they did, but we are not ashamed to call them brothers. For the call of Christ implies that we should be priests. Therefore, those upon whom has fallen the office of leadership in the church, have to take the lead in this priestly mission. And we claim that the Word we spoke in Stuttgart, was a priestly deed.

And then Asmussen adds the following:

I stand as a priest among my people. Therefore I call the members of my people my brothers, including the guilty. Therefore I am the voice of my people, now that it has no voice at all. Therefore, as a priest of my people, I declare myself guilty before God and before my brothers. Priesthood consists in sacrifice. Was our Declaration a sacrifice? I should think so ...⁴

The history of the Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt has taken a highly ambivalent course. Today many would say that the “new beginning” of which the text spoke was never undertaken in earnest. Consequently, the history of the Protestant Church in Germany since World War II has remained in a state of unrepentance. Be that as it may, no priest is beyond fail, and the priestly act of declaring guilt is in itself a courageous act regardless of what happens with it later on.

The vicarious gesture of Willy Brandt has been bitterly contested, too. The category of renunciation which is a basic aspect of Brandt’s “Ostpolitik” has not yet become an acceptable part of politics, neither in my country nor elsewhere.

It is also quite easy to disregard the little story that took place in that small Belorussian village as the sentimentality of some weak old people. Yet these three very different events have one thing in common: that there must be some few who rise to the call of the priestly mission. There must be those who know that such a mission does not consist in sacrificing someone else but to offer oneself and to step into the cleavage which evil, guilt and shame have opened up.

6. THE MEN HAD BEEN IN CHATYN

What they had seen at the memorial in Chatyn had moved them deeply. This place symbolizes the shocking “strategy of the scorched earth” that devastated some 400 villages in Belorussia alone. It showed the men what they had been part of, as tiny particles in the machinery of destruction. Shattered by this experience they return to their

⁴ M Greschat, *Im Zeichen der Schuld. 40 Jahre Stuttgarter Schuldbekennnis. Eine Dokumentation*, Neukirchener Verlag 1985, 55f (translation mine).

host village. Without this experience and without the trusting atmosphere of the evening meal the old man might never have gathered the courage to face his past.

But the reaction could have been quite different. Does not “Chatyn” sound just like “Katyn”? While Chatyn remembers the crimes of the German Wehrmacht, Katyn calls to mind the massacre of more than 4000 Polish officers by Russian troops under Stalin. Does not the very similarity of the two names invite a comparison of the horrors and, thereby, offer an easy way to say that all peoples all over the earth have a lot to feel sorry about?

Chatyn and Katyn. Can my guilt be counted against the guilt of another? Is this a way to relativize it? This is often done. Yet these men do not play this game. They seem to know that each injustice is singular.

One of the signatories of the Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt was Gustav Heinemann, who later became President of the Federal Republic of Germany. He has always stressed that guilt cannot be measured against other people’s guilt. He wrote:

We confess our guilt because no unlawful action of any other party can excuse us. What we have done to the Polish, the Greek, the Dutch, the Jews, will not be taken from us because of what other nations have done or are doing. Nothing justifies our silence ... Guilt negated shuts our mouth and other people’s ears. The only way out is the confession of guilt. About this there can be no bartering ...⁵

When we analyze stories of forgiveness it is remarkable that there seems to be, behind the two active sides, a *third factor* at work. For who is it that opens the mouth of the guilty? Who creates the trust that such a confession will be received in good faith and not taken as a welcome sign of surrender? In our case it was the overpowering experience of Chatyn which prompted the confession, and the kiss and all that followed. It might also well have been the feeling of trust in the village community which made it easier for the old man to speak up.

In other cases there are mediators who meet with sufficient trust from both sides involved in a conflict so that they can make proposals. I think that this “third factor” is

⁵ D Koch, *Heinemann und die Deutschlandfrage*, München 1972, 34.

decisive in providing conflicting parties with new options which transcend the narrow confines of a conflict.

This is much more than a tactical argument. The third factor does not only belong to the hermeneutics of conflict management, it points to something more fundamental. It indicates that our relationships are not determined, but that there is always the element of contingency. This is confirmed by my Christian faith that our world is not closed in itself, but that it contains the element of transformation. There is the Rabbinic teaching: "Before God made creation, he created the *Teschuba*." "*Teschuba*" is the Hebrew word for change and stands for the possibility of turning, of metanoia and transformation. In the heart of history is God's offer to make all things new.

7. THE YOUNG FOLKS WEPT, TOO

It is said that the breakdown of the old man moved the young people around him to tears. That is very remarkable. I assume that they would have sensed that the confession of the old enemy and the kiss of their old "*mamushka*" meant something of a healing, also for them. The "Great Patriotic War", as World War II is called in Russia, is more than a piece of history for these young men and women. The history of victimization which darkened the lives of their grandparents and parents is bound to have impacted on their sense of self, their images of themselves and of the others. As a matter of fact, the unacknowledged and subconscious pains of the older generations have a contaminating impact on the younger ones. We know that from the children of Holocaust survivors, from the children of the victims of apartheid in South Africa, from many other places. The sins of the fathers have a punishing impact on the children to the third and fourth generations. That is sadly true. But also the pains of the fathers – and mothers! – have a deadening impact on the lives of the children to the third and fourth generations.

It is wrong, therefore, to say that only the immediate victims can forgive (if they find it in their power to forgive), and that where the victims are dead, there can be no forgiveness. The victims have and make history. So there are indirect victims who suffer in similar, though often diffuse ways. This intergenerational dimension must be taken into account very carefully.

To speak about me personally: since I was born in 1940 I am not guilty of the crimes of the Nazis, but I have to live with the impact of their atrocities. So do my

children, whether they like it or not. We have to come to terms with the fact that we are implicated.

Why do the young folks in that Belorussian village weep? Because the liberation involving those two old persons has a liberating impact on them as well. The confession and the kiss have broken the deadening lock that chained them to their suffering, that influenced their image of the enemies. The re-membering of the two old persons opens up new ways and makes it a bit easier for the younger folks to move forward than before.

I often wish that there might be more grandfathers and grandmothers daring to break the spell that their tales of hurt and hatred cast on the younger generations. I pray that they might find the courage to face their own traumatic past, to overcome their guilt-ridden self-righteousness in order to stop contaminating their children with the deadening logic of retaliation, the "sorry-go-round" of revenge.

8. THEY BUILT A HOME FOR SICK CHILDREN

It is of symbolic significance that the group of old men returned to Belorussia in order to build a home for children contaminated by the nuclear fallout of Chernobyl. It is what the classic penitential theology calls the *satisfactio operis*, or restitution. In post-war Germany the term used was "Wiedergutmachung", that is, to make things good again. But can that really be achieved? Can there ever be a making good of historical injustice? It is obvious that this term as well as the term "satisfactio" are highly misleading.⁶

These men do not even attempt to repair the damage done by the German army. (although I will not deny that there are aspects and situations in which this can and must be tried). Rather, they attempt to provide a few children with a better future.

Their penitential or retributive deed does not aspire to "repair" the past but to "prepare" a way forward. It is an act of compensation that serves various functions. Firstly, it expresses the seriousness of their repentance. Secondly, it meets some need of

⁶ This is not to belittle the significant compensations that the governments of the Federal Republic have paid to victims of the Nazi time. To quote the American ethicist Donald Shriver: "Through 1986, the Bonn government settled some 4½ million personal claims for a total of some \$ 40 billion. The several compensation laws of this latter decade laid down provisions that by the year 2000, according to a 1988 government document, international payments in excess of DM 100 billion ... would have been made". In: *An Ethic for Enemies*, Oxford University Press 1995, p 89. Yet everyone knows that, whatever the sums, no money can make good for the death and horrors of millions of people.

the other side. So it is an expression of burden sharing. And thirdly, it aims at facilitating a more humane future.

My intention has been to show that processes of forgiveness always include both sides, the perpetrator and the victim. They are processes of re-remembering what has been distorted and broken. But they are also processes of liberation in time. By setting us free from the captivity of guilt, shame and hurt they make space for new covenants. Forgiveness breaks down the vicious circles of violence. It makes us capable of covenanting. As long as we have not really faced the demons of our past all our alliances will be of a merely provisional nature (which is not to say that they are not useful, but that they are in constant danger of breaking down).

There is a profound relationship between forgiving and covenanting which should be taken very seriously. It is not only a vital concern for our churches as we struggle for visible unity; it needs to enter the logic of politics. If politics is the art of the possible, the art of forgiveness makes the art of the possible possible.

9. RETHINKING THE CONCEPT OF SIN

We are products of a long history of Christian preaching and teaching which defines forgiveness as God's gracious action towards us "poor sinners". Hence our concepts of "sin" are seen to be first and foremost a problem in our relationship with God. God needs to forgive our sins, and only as a consequence of that are we then called to forgive those who sin against us.

My questions is: Is this vertical understanding of forgiveness the only possible approach? What does this concept mean for those who are "sinned against"? And, equally importantly, what does forgiveness mean for people for whom God has become an empty word? Are they incapable of asking for, and granting forgiveness?

I have chosen to examine the story of the old men because in it God does not appear and yet, God is present all the time. I have attempted to reflect on the traditional penitential theology in the light of a story of our time; for I am convinced that *God has placed the art of forgiveness as a possibility into the history of humankind.*

One does not have to be "religious" in order to understand the reality of reconciliation; for one does not need to be "religious" either in order to become guilty

or to suffer evil. We know what guilt is. We know what shame and hurt is. In other words, it is important to see the entire sequence of events that springs from an evil action, the process that implicates the doers and the victims, the interlocking chain of bondage that keeps both sides in a deadly embrace. "Sin" is both doing and suffering evil; for "sin" is bondage, is walking in chains, and forgiveness is about walking free.

10. ONE OF THE CRIMINALS HAS UNDERSTOOD IT

Only the Gospel of St Luke tells us something about the two "criminals" who were crucified to the right and left with Jesus. Most likely, they were members of the "Israelite Liberation Front" fighting against the Roman occupation and Jewish collaborators. One of them repeats what all are saying: "Are not you the Messiah? Save yourself, and us!" This is the common understanding of power, the utterly human misunderstanding of power. If you want to be God's chosen One then you must be able to crush your enemies! You must get down from the cross!

So the power of God is defined as the means of ultimate retaliation and perfect destruction.

But there is also the other "criminal" and he speaks a different language. "We are paying the prize of our misdeeds", he says. In other words: We meant to kill, now they kill us. We thought we had the right to destroy our enemies, now they take the liberty to crush us. It seems as if this nameless man has understood something of the desperate mechanism of violence and counterviolence, the "sentence" he speaks of, the disastrous cycle of retaliation.

How has this man come to understand this demonic predicament? No doubt, he has heard the One between him and his comrade pray for them saying: "Father, forgive, for they do not know what they do." Have those disarming words disarmed his heart?

He says: "This man has done nothing wrong. "In other words: This man ought not to hang here with us! Everybody else, but not this one! This one transcends the fateful cycle of attack and counterattack. This one suffers the violence instead of heaping it on others. This one is not paying back."

And so the agonizing man asks the dying Jesus: "Remember me, when you come to your kingdom!" And Jesus answers: "Today you shall be with me in Paradise."

What is the meaning of these few words, spoken in deadly exasperation? That this one guerilla understands the marks of the Messiah. That Jesus has to suffer in order to reveal among us the power that is God's. That the Son of Man would have ceased to be God's chosen One had he stepped down from the cross! What all the others are unable to see, including the disciples, is being been revealed to this first witness of the crucified: The cross is the seal of God's power, not of God's defeat. It is by taking up the cross that God's power is mighty among us.

"Remember me!" Take my dis-membered, broken life and unite it with your's. Wherever, whatever your kingdom, take me along! With this plea the violent man steps into the innocence of Jesus and is forever with this Jesus, united and free.

This is the mystery of our faith, the mystery of redeemed humanhood.

In St John's Gospel Pontius Pilate senses something of it. When he sees Jesus, crowned with thorns, the purple cloak on his shoulders, the bloody marks of torture on his body, he says: "Ecce homo". Behold, the man!

11. "DO THIS IN REMEMBRANCE OF ME"

In our churches the eucharist, or the Lord's Supper, occupies a central place. It is the ritual of remembering par excellence. What are we remembering? In the night he was betrayed he took the bread. And then, after the supper, he took the cup. Take and eat. Take and drink! As often as you eat of this bread and drink of this cup you will remember my death and why it had to be.

These two elements are heavy with meaning. For what is bread? In our eucharistic liturgies we say that it is the gift of God and the fruit of our labor. This is a euphemistic way of referring to the harsh and brutal transformation that is happening to the grain and the grapes. The grain is threshed, grinded and crushed. It loses its original shape, its fecundity. The same happens with the grapes. They are trampled upon, treaded and fermented. That must be so in order for them to become bread, nourishment for us, and wine, to gladden our heart (if consumed with moderation!). There is an element of violent transformation that we need to keep in mind as we receive bread and wine. Because of this transformation they are sacramental signs of what Christ went through,

who let himself be killed so that we may live. The love of God appears as the radical being for others.

Whenever we celebrate the eucharist we remember the sacrifice of this life and with it the break through all the accustomed mechanisms of sacrificing others for our ends. As we celebrate this sacrament we say grace for the ending of sacrifices, for the presence of forgiveness in our world. "Dasein für andere", "Being for others", to use Bonhoeffer's famous term, is a eucharistic formula.

Ecce homo! Behold the human being. As we study the passion of Jesus we see what human beings can do to each other: the betrayal of friends, the kiss of Judas, false witnesses, the bending of laws, political bartering, torture, and a gruesome death. Behold, the gruesome mechanism of violence and counterviolence, of power and misuse of power!

But in the passion story we also see the disruption of these mechanisms: the women weeping, the bitter tears of Peter, the plea of the criminal, the confession of the Roman officer: "Behold, this man was the son of God!"

And thus the light of resurrection is spreading out over the world. Behold, this is the way! This is how it might be, how it should be! There is an alternative to the killing and shooting.

It is this remembrance of the crucified God that makes me speak about "deep remembering". It transcends the forms of selective remembering and artful repression. It enables us to see the full scope of the human condition which goes from rage and violence all the way to compassion, mercy and magnanimity.

Therefore, the death of Jesus is for me of universal significance; for it reveals the abysmal anger of the human heart and, at the same time, the presence of God as a love that enters into every abyss and, therefore, the opportunity of change and liberation. Traitors can turn into martyrs, enemies into friends, rivals into neighbors.

It is a special grace that we Christians should have the sacrament of eucharist. It can help us to keep hold of the true image of the human being and never to lose sight of the presence of God in our midst.