The Surprise of Reconciliation in the Catholic Tradition

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To Eileen Burke-Sullivan and Mike Griffin,
for your enthusiastic championing
of this book at its genesis.

And to all laboring for peace, justice, and
reconciliation around the world.

CHAPTER 14

The Surprise of Forgiveness in Modern Catholic Teaching and Practice

Daniel Philpott

Forgiveness is not politics as usual. Candidates for public office in developed democracies do not make forgiveness a plank in their campaign platforms. Politicians rarely advocate forgiveness on the floor of parliaments. Forgiveness has virtually no pedigree in Western political thought and little track record as a political practice over most of the history of the modern nation-state.

It has been a great historical surprise, then, to see forgiveness enter global political discourse over the past generation, which it has done in the context of a large wave of countries who have confronted injustices in the aftermath of the enormities wrought by war, dictatorship, and genocide. During roughly the same period, forgiveness rose in prominence in Catholic social thought, especially through the locutions of Pope St. John Paul II, who repeatedly commended forgiveness for politics. The rise of forgiveness in these two settings—globally diverse political orders and Catholic social thought—is in part related. In many settings of transitional justice, it has been Catholic or other Christian leaders who have urged forgiveness for political crimes publicly and urgently but not without controversy.

In this paper I explore forgiveness as a practice of political reconciliation rooted in Catholic social thought. I then seek to develop this teaching further, showing how forgiveness can be situated in an ethic of political reconciliation that can be practiced concretely in political orders. Finally, I aim to show the practicability of political forgiveness by pointing to a major episode of it on the part of victims of political violence in Uganda. In Father Katongole's chapter in this volume, he offers several examples in which forgiveness plays a strong role in social reconciliation: the "*memoria passionis*" of Maggy Barankitse in Burundi; the healing work of Sister Rosemary Nyirumbi in Northern Uganda; and the leadership of Archbishop John Baptist Odama in Northern Uganda. The case of Odama overlaps with my own field research. The practitioners of forgiveness in Uganda very much carried out what Odama was preaching.

Forgiveness in the Social Teaching of the Catholic Church

That popes would preach reconciliation and forgiveness comes as no surprise; both concepts stand at the center of the gospel message. It is far more novel for popes to advocate these practices in the political realm. The first instance of such advocacy in the era of the modern nation-state was Pope Benedict XV's urgent plea for European states to forgive one another in the wake of World War I, voiced in his encyclical of 1920, *Pacem, Dei Munus Pulcherrimum*. Benedict XV appealed to Jesus's teaching of charity and love for enemies and insisted that "the Gospel has not one law of charity for individuals, and another for States and nations, which are indeed but collections of individuals." Presciently he warned that "the germs of former enmities remain" and that "there can be no stable peace or lasting treaties . . . unless there be a return of mutual charity to appease hate and banish enmity."[1]

Benedict XV's teaching of political forgiveness remained isolated and largely forgotten until it was revived by Pope St. John Paul II in his second encyclical, *Dives in Misericordia* (Rich in Mercy), in 1980. True, certain magisterial teachings and actions that belong to the same family as forgiveness arose in the interim years, for instance, statements of repentance toward other Christian churches surrounding the Second Vatican Council. It was John Paul II, though, who taught forgiveness in the political realm. Again, there is nothing surprising about a pope teaching on mercy, except perhaps for the exclamation mark that John Paul II placed on the virtue, insisting that "loud cries of mercy" ought to be the "mark of the Church of our times."[2] Mercy was arguably the most important theme of his pontificate. Even more innovative, though, was his call in the final section of the encyclical for mercy to be practiced in the social and political realms. Mercy would not supplant or negate justice, which the Catholic tradition has long held to be the supreme virtue of political life, but rather would complement and even shape the meaning of justice. In the social and political realm, mercy would be expressed through reconciliation and forgiveness.[3]

The final sections of *Dives in Misericordia* were not anomalous. John Paul II would elaborate and develop his teaching of political forgiveness in his Message for the World Day of Peace in 1997, and then in 2002, only a few months after the attacks of September 11, 2001, when he appended to Pope Paul VI's well-known apothegm, "no peace without justice," the phrase, "no justice without forgiveness." He also urged forgiveness in the context of particular conflicts such as the war in the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. Resonant with the theme were also his many requests for forgiveness for the past sins of the church, totaling over one hundred mea culpas for over twenty-one different categories of wrongs, culminating in a litany of apologies in the years preceding the Jubilee Year of 2000.[4]

No mere Sunday school moralism, John Paul II's teaching on mercy, reconciliation, and forgiveness in the political realm was shaped by his history of living under Nazi occupation and then decades of Communist rule in Poland. In 1965, on the eve of the one thousandth anniversary of Poland's conversion to Christianity, John Paul, who was then archbishop of Krakow, joined Poland's other bishops in inviting Germany's bishops to practice reciprocal forgiveness for the two nations' entire mutual history. For this he earned the ire of Poland's Communist government.[5] John Paul II was also intensely aware of Jesus's revelations of mercy to Sister Faustina Kowalska, whom he later canonized.

John Paul II's successor, Pope Benedict XVI, took up the message of political reconciliation. It is often forgotten that he named himself not only for St. Benedict of Nursia but also for Pope Benedict XV, who, he told a general audience in St. Peter's Square, "was a prophet of peace who struggled strenuously and bravely, first to avoid the drama of war and then to limit its terrible consequences. In his footsteps I place my ministry, in the service of reconciliation and harmony between peoples, profoundly convinced that the great good of peace is above all a gift of God."[6]

Shortly before becoming pope, on the sixtieth anniversary of the Normandy invasion in June 2004, Benedict spoke of reconciliation between Germany and its allies after World War II in an address at a German cemetery near Caen, France. A Christian notion of reconciliation, rooted in the atoning sacrifice of Christ, he argued, motivated Catholic statesmen like Konrad Adenauer, Robert Schumann, Alcide de Gasperi, and Charles de Gaulle to promote European unity after the war.[7] Benedict proclaimed reconciliation often in political settings, including the war in Lebanon in summer 2006, the relationship between the church and the Chinese government, politics in Africa, and religious freedom. In his exhortation of 2007, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, he explained that justice, reconciliation, and forgiveness in service of social peace are implications of the Eucharist.[8]

Pope Francis has continued these themes. He has followed John Paul II in making mercy the central theme of his pontificate, even declaring a year of mercy. In his apostolic letter closing that year, *Misericordia et Misera*, he wrote of the social character of mercy and elsewhere has commended pardon and reconciliation in contexts of armed conflict.[9] In his 2014 *Message for the World Day of Peace*, Francis taught, "Only when politics and the economy are open to moving within the wide space ensured by the One who loves each man and each woman, will they achieve an ordering based on a genuine spirit of fraternal charity and become effective instruments of integral human development and peace," later adding, "this entails weaving a fabric of fraternal relationships marked by reciprocity, forgiveness and complete self-giving."[10]

Papal teachings on mercy, reconciliation, and forgiveness in the social and political realm amount to a development in the social teaching of the Catholic Church. These teachings innovate not only in their substance but also in their source. Previous papal teachings, at least since the influential writings of Thomas Aquinas, grounded politics and justice primarily in natural law while rendering the church as a contrasting realm of the supernatural. These new teachings, though, are rooted directly in the saving action of God as described in the Bible, not in moral norms known by reason. They envision politics participating in God's ongoing reconciliation of the world to himself.

Opposition to Forgiveness in the Wake of Political Violence

If recent popes have commended mercy, reconciliation, and forgiveness for the political realm, they have also left the world with manifold questions about praxis. Through what sorts of policies and measures, and in what circumstances, are these practices to be enacted in political orders? What is their relationship to justice? To judicial punishment? May heads of state carry out these practices in the name of collectivities?

Posing these questions sharpest are critics of reconciliation and forgiveness who direct their skepticism not usually at papal teachings but rather toward advocates and practitioners of these practices, including religious officials, in the past generation's global wave of political transitions. These critics are most commonly proponents of "the liberal peace," which sociologist Jonathan Van Antwerpen has called the global orthodoxy for dealing with past injustices.[11] Typically, they are officials and staff in the United Nations, Western governments, and NGOs; international lawyers; and academics. Rooted in Enlightenment thought, their vision of peace advances human rights, the rule of law, free markets, and judicial punishment, which they justify either on retributivist or utilitarian grounds. Among international lawyers and human rights activists involved in transitional justice, judicial punishment holds pride of place. If this is their theology, then the glass tower of the International Criminal Court in The Hague is their cathedral. The greatest mortal sin, to them, is blanket amnesty, to which they cry, *Nunca Mas!* (Never Again).

Proponents of the liberal peace and their intellectual allies raise several objections to the practice of forgiveness in the aftermath of dictatorship, war, and genocide. Some hold that forgiveness negates the justice of judicial punishment and contributes to a culture of impunity.[12] A related criticism is that forgiveness chokes off emotions of resentment and retribution, which they argue can be healthy responses to gross injustices and do not necessarily take the form of reckless revenge. Others insist upon the highly personal and inward character of forgiveness, which they say makes forgiveness inappropriate for political processes. Critics took to task the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission of 1996–98, for instance, for pressuring victims to forgive, thereby disrespecting their autonomy, agency, and freedom to decide. Still another criticism is that forgiveness is an inherently religious value and thus should be kept out of the secular, public realm.

Some critics argue even more strongly that asking victims to forgive revictimizes them by placing further burdens upon them. In some versions of this criticism, forgiveness is possible only for the rare saint and it is dangerous to recommend it generally. Even several scholars who have taken reconciliation as their paradigm for approaching past injustices believe that forgiveness stretches the possibilities for reconciliation too far. "Rather than being reasonable and appropriate, urging forgiveness and the overcoming of resentment in contexts where wrongdoing is systematic and ongoing seems at best naïve and at worst a form of complicity in the maintenance of oppression and injustice," argues philosopher Colleen Murphy in a book where she presents a theory of reconciliation.[13] If forgiveness is going to be advocated in political contexts, then, it needs to be situated in an ethic that makes it morally plausible and backed up with evidence that it is actually practicable.

Forgiveness: A Practice in an Ethic of Reconciliation

The ethic in which forgiveness is situated is one of reconciliation. John Paul II made clear the close relationship of forgiveness to reconciliation in the closing sections of *Dives in Misericordia*. I argue further that reconciliation is equivalent to justice. This claim may grate in the ears of modern Westerners, for whom justice is a matter of rights, punishment, and the proper distribution of wealth. That reconciliation is justice, though, finds defense in Christianity's most important written source, the Bible. In this collection, Father Thomas Stegman shows the central place of reconciliation in the writings of the Apostle Paul, who links reconciliation's horizontal and vertical axes: reconciliation between persons flows from God's reconciliation of humanity to himself. For Paul, the fruit of reconciliation is righteousness, which, I argue, the Bible also translates as justice.

The righteousness to which justice in the Bible is best translated in turn means comprehensive right relationship: the entire set of obligations that people owe to one another, to the community, and to God. This righteousness is captured through Hebrew words, *tsedeq* and *mishpat*, and through various Greek words that begin with the *dik-* stem such as *dikaiousune*.[14] The justice of right relationship, as I will call this justice, in turn is virtually equivalent to the concept of reconciliation as it is found in the New Testament. Reconciliation, then, is a concept of justice.

That reconciliation and, still more, forgiveness would be thought of as justice again confronts the dominant mode of thinking about justice in the West, the mode that the liberal peace embodies. In the transitional justice settings of the past generation, reconciliation has often been posed as a challenger paradigm to the liberal peace; Antwerpen calls reconciliation the "heterodoxy" of transitional justice. If reconciliation is justice, though, how does it differ from the Western liberal conception? The dominant notion in the West, one that has shaped enlightenment liberalism, comes from Roman law, and is stated as "the constant will to render another his due." Due, in turn, implies what someone is owed or that to which he may claim a right, as well as what someone deserves, as with criminal punishment.[15] Rights and desert have each played a central role in Western thought since the Enlightenment.

Reconciliation, the justice of right relationship, need not reject rights and desert. Rights—subjective rights, involving claims to what is owed, are arguably grounded in natural law and arguably found

in certain passages in the Bible, for instance, ones that speak of the rights of the poor.[16] A case can be made that desert, too, has a foundation both in natural law and the biblical texts. If biblical justice encompasses right and desert, however, it is also wider than these concepts and includes obligations and practices that exceed and elude rights and desert—like forgiveness. A wide consensus of philosophers and theologians agree that forgiveness is neither something that a victim owes, nor even more something to which a perpetrator has a right or deserves. In a justice that is wider than these concepts, forgiveness may participate.

There are two senses in which the biblical justice of reconciliation exceeds what is due. First, it entails certain duties that promote right relationship but that enjoy no corresponding right. Many of these are wide duties, definable as ones whose discharge is open-ended with respect to the actions that they involve and the people toward whom they are performed. The biblical duties to love one's neighbor or to serve the poor, for instance, are constitutive of right relationship and involve respecting certain rights claimed by one's neighbor and the poor, but are not limited to respecting these rights and not specified as to how they are to be carried out. Does one expend one's finite resources on giving to the local homeless shelter or to the relief of refugees in war-torn Sudan? How much does one expend in light of other just claims on one's time and resources? The duty to serve the poor alone contains no answer to these questions.

There are other duties that involve no corresponding right but that are not exactly wide duties because their recipients and their constitutive behavior are clearly specified by the duty. Forgiveness is one of these. Again, it is broadly agreed that a perpetrator has no right to forgiveness. A case can be made, though—meaning that I would argue it but cannot fully do so here—that in Christianity, forgiveness is a duty. The Gospel of Matthew recounts Jesus commanding forgiveness at least twice (6:12–15). This command is more fully developed in the parable of a servant whose master forgives him his debt but who refuses to forgive his own servant's debt, a parable through which Jesus elaborates on his answer "seventy-seven times" to Peter's question, "How many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me?" (Matt 18:21–35 NIV). Jesus makes no distinction with respect to the nature or magnitude of the sin when he commands forgiveness. The Christian, it appears, is required to forgive a perpetrator who has no right to be forgiven. Jesus's own utterance of forgiveness from the cross exemplifies the teaching most vividly of all (Luke 23:34).

A second respect in which the justice of reconciliation (or right relationship) exceeds the boundaries of rights and desert is found in the Bible's use of the language of justice to describe the saving actions of God. These actions take place through God's repeated restoration of his covenant with Israel in the Old Testament and then through the new covenant, God's promise of forgiveness and salvation for the repentant sinner, fulfilled through the atoning sacrifice of Christ. Examples of justice language include Second Isaiah's references to a justice that is saving and renewing (see 45:8 or 45:21, for instance) and the Gospel of Matthew's (12:20) direct quotation of Second Isaiah (42:1–4) in its reference to Jesus as the "servant" who "brings justice to victory." The Apostle Paul's concept of justification is also arguably a use of justice language to describe God's atonement for sin and restoration of humanity through Christ. In this volume, Stegman indeed stresses the close relationship of reconciliation and justification in his chapter. Yet both Scripture and the heavy weight of Christian tradition have held that God's salvation of humanity is a gift and not something due: deserved or fulfilling of a right. Stegman, for instance, stresses God's initiative in the reconciling action through which God forgives us our sins. The Bible's most central expression of justice, then, falls decisively outside of the justice that is due. Forgiveness, which is part and parcel of God's saving justice—the justice that restores right relationship, namely reconciliation—thus participates in this justice.

How is the justice of restoring right relationship enacted in social and political contexts? Through practices that address the broad range of wounds inflicted on persons and relationships by perpetrators of injustice. This will to restore, motivated by pity, is the essence of mercy, which converges with justice in an ethic of reconciliation.[17]

Forgiveness is one of these practices. A victim enacts it by a willingness to overcome resentment toward her perpetrator and choosing to look upon her as a citizen in good standing. Forgiveness, then, is not merely a relinquishment but also a constructive act through which a victim wills to restore right relationship. It is this constructive dimension that makes forgiveness a practice of reconciliation. To be sure, forgiveness does not itself achieve full reconciliation. It is only one of several practices that restore right relationship, others of which include apology, acknowledgment, reparations, and just punishment.[18] Forgiveness itself might be performed partially. A victim's forgiveness may fail to be reciprocated by a perpetrator's acceptance, for instance, either because the perpetrator is unwilling or perhaps because she is missing or dead.

When forgiveness goes well, or even partially well though, it can contribute to restoring political orders that have been sundered by systemic injustices. As a practice of reconciliation, it does this by addressing several forms of wounds. First, it conspires to defeat what may be called the "standing victory of injustice"—the sense in which a wrong stands legitimated—by naming and condemning a wrong and then willing a future in which the wrong no longer has force or status. Second, forgiveness helps to restore the agency of the victim by enabling her to act as an engaged constructer of a better world and by helping her to overcome anger and resentment, admittedly a long-term process. Third, forgiveness may also help to restore the soul of the perpetrator, an important goal in a Christian ethic—by inviting him to become something other than what he was when he committed the crime. Fourth, when fellow citizens favorably acknowledge forgiveness, they help to overcome the social isolation of the victim and to build peace by commending the act to other citizens. Fifth, by willing right relationship with other citizens in the political order, the victim rebuilds respect for human rights, a critical component of just citizenship, especially in the aftermath of war and repression. Forgiveness can also help to break cycles of revenge and their attendant further violence and contribute to stable peace settlements and nascent constitutional democracies. It is well documented that the Catholic statesmen who launched European federalism (what eventually became today's European Union) in 1950 understood the venture as an exercise in Christian reconciliation and forgiveness in the wake of World War II.[19]

To note these benefits of forgiveness is not to claim that forgiveness is easy or common, especially in the aftermath of widespread violence and injustices. It is rather to outline how forgiveness may be viewed as a part of an ethic of political reconciliation that builds upon the teaching of social reconciliation that recent popes have offered the world. It also points to how some of the criticisms marshalled by skeptics of forgiveness can be answered. It shows how forgiveness can be conceived so that it is not at odds with justice but rather a part of justice. In addition, because forgiveness is one of several practices of reconciliation, it does not supplant other important measures that justice requires in times of transition: the uncovering of truth, reparations, acknowledgment of victims, apologies—and judicial punishment. In an ethic of reconciliation, forgiveness does not negate or call for the abandonment of accountability for war criminals or human rights violators but rather is compatible with punishment both in theory and in practice. In part, this compatibility is achieved through positing a restorative justification for punishment, an argument that I made in *Just and Unjust Peace* and that resembles the restorative justice that Father William O'Neill advocates in his chapter for this volume. Thus conceived, forgiveness and punishment each address a different dimension of right relationship and are often performed by different actors. To cite just one example, the widow of a South African antiapartheid activist offered forgiveness to Eugene de Kock, the head of the apartheid's police unit, the Vlakplass, at a hearing of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission even while de Kock served a 212-year prison sentence. De Kock accepted the forgiveness and expressed remorse even while he remained behind bars.

Objections will remain. Forgiveness wounds victims, is too difficult to ask of victims, and, simply, is rarely practiced. One can answer these objections by taking a close look at forgiveness in the laboratory of a major episode of violence.

The Practice of Forgiveness in Uganda

Resolving the civil war in Uganda was supposed to be a textbook case for the liberal peace. It was here that the first chief prosecutor of the new International Criminal Court (ICC), Luis Moreno-Ocampo, chose to make his first indictments in 2005,

selecting five leaders of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), a rebel group that has fought a war with the armies of the government of Uganda since 1987. The war, which waned when the LRA's leader, Joseph Kony, and his followers were driven out of Uganda in 2009, took the lives of an estimated one hundred thousand people and displaced over 1.5 million. Kony was the subject of one of the world's viral YouTube videos, "Kony 2012," which told of his crimes and, echoing the liberal peace, called for his arrest.[20] As of this day, Kony is still on the run and only one of the five indictees, Dominic Ongwen, is being tried by the ICC.

A very different approach to peace was pursued by a group of religious leaders, the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI), which was founded in the late 1990s to advocate for an end to the war. A central figure in this founding and chairman of the ARLPI from 2002 to 2010 was the Catholic archbishop of Gulu, Uganda, John Baptist Odama. What is the central theme of Odama's and the ARLPI's approach to the conflict? Forgiveness.

Emblematic of the ARLPI's approach and a tangible fruit of its lobbying was the Amnesty Act that the Ugandan parliament passed in 2000, empowering thousands of child soldiers to leave the LRA and return to their homes and proving critical to the peace process. Led by Odama, ARLPI leaders paved the way for peace negotiations, traipsing for miles through the Ugandan bush to meet with Kony in person. ARLPI leaders, which represented Catholic, Anglican, and other Protestant Christians as well as Muslims, regularly urged their people to practice forgiveness and reconciliation.[21]

In an interview, Odama was asked how he could go out and meet with Kony, who had committed so many atrocities. He replied that he looked into Kony's soul and saw a human being there. Rather than punishment at the hands of the International Criminal Court, what Kony needs is repentance and salvation, Odama held.[22] He and his fellow religious leaders looked askance upon the ICC, which they viewed as an imposition on the part of Western powers and an obstacle to a peace agreement.[23]

Odama and his fellow religious leaders are advocates of the practice of forgiveness in the political realm, as John Paul II and other popes have called for. Have Ugandans taken up their call? One who did was Angelina Atyam, whose daughter the

LRA abducted along with about 130 other girls from a Catholic girls' boarding school in Lira in October 1996.[24] Beset by feelings of helplessness and anger, Atyam and other parents of abducted girls gathered regularly at the local Catholic cathedral to "work together, to pray together, to advocate together," as she put it.[25] Their anger, though, hindered their prayer. One day when the parents came to the words, "as we forgive those…" in the Our Father, they came to believe that God was calling them to forgive their daughters' abductors. Following this call, Atyam became a regular and outspoken advocate of forgiveness, urging it upon the other parents of the abducted girls as well as others who had lost loved ones in the conflict. She even found the mother of the soldier who held her daughter in captivity and, through her, forgave him, his family, and his clan. Subsequently, when this soldier lost his life in combat, Atyam wept and conveyed her sorrow to his mother.

Atyam's commitment to forgiveness did not negate her pursuit of justice. With other parents she formed the Concerned Parents Association, which campaigned for the release of the girls and brought international attention to their plight. When Kony heard about the publicity, he became worried and had one of his underlings communicate with Atyam that he would release her daughter if the organization would cease its advocacy. Atyam refused the offer. She would halt the campaign only if Kony released all the girls. Eventually, after spending seven-and-a-half years in captivity, Atyam's daughter escaped and was reunited with Atyam.[26]

Atyam forgave and became a leader in forgiveness.[27] She enacted what Odama advocated in Uganda and what recent popes have taught to the whole world. But how typical was Atyam among Ugandans? Was she rather a rare saint whom we might admire but whom it would be dangerous to look upon as a model for others? Is the recent teaching on political forgiveness from the Catholic hierarchy a tangible practice for communities on the ground?

I sought to answer this question by conducting a 2014 study of forgiveness in the aftermath of war in Uganda in close collaboration with the Refugee Law Project, a Ugandan NGO.[28] A survey of 640 inhabitants of five districts that have seen war asked them whether they have practiced forgiveness, how they regard forgiveness, what it means to forgive, why they would forgive, and related questions. In each district, two daylong focus groups took place in which about twelve participants discussed forgiveness, adding up to ten groups. Five in-depth interviews were carried out in each district as well, which, when added to interviews of Odama and Atyam, totaled twenty-seven interviews.[29] The five districts provided variation on language, religion, the circumstances of fighting, and many other factors. Of the 640 respondents, 593 identified themselves as victims of some form of violence. Respondents were presented with a long list of forms of violence that included violence against family members, the destruction of homes and other forms of property, as well as more direct assaults against bodily integrity.[30]

What did the survey find about forgiveness? In part, the survey queried respondents' attitudes. One question asked them, "What would you like to see happen to members of rebel groups who committed human rights violations?" as well as a question that was identical except that it substituted "members of the Ugandan military" for "rebel groups." Respondents were presented with a variety of possibilities including "capture and kill them," "have them compensate the victim," "have them confess," "grant them amnesty," and "forgive them," and they could choose more than one option. A solid majority of 60.94 percent answered "yes" to the "forgive" choice, whereas 39.06 percent answered "no." When the question asked about members of the Ugandan military, 53.91 percent answered "yes" to the "forgive" choice and 46.09 percent answered "no." Another question measured attitudes toward forgiveness by asking respondents whether they agreed to the statement, "It is good for victims to practice forgiveness in the aftermath of violence," to which 85.97 percent answered "agree," 8.71 percent answered "disagree," and 5.32 percent answered, "not sure."[31]

Other questions sought to measure the actual practice of forgiveness. One, posed only to victims of violence (593 respondents), asked directly, "Did you personally forgive the perpetrator of the act of violence against you?" Here, 68.3 percent of respondents answered "yes," 28.16 percent answered "no"; and 3.54 percent answered "don't know." A separate question asked people to judge the extent of the practice of forgiveness around them by asking whether they agreed with the statement, "People in my region have practiced forgiveness widely in the aftermath of armed conflict." Answering "agree" were 47.83 percent of respondents; answering "disagree" were 32.31 percent; while 19.97 percent answered "unsure."[32]

What are we to make of these numbers? Much depends on one's prior expectations about people's willingness to forgive. If one believes that only rare saints practice forgiveness, or if one shares in the skepticism or indifference to forgiveness that is widespread in the international community, then these numbers will appear startlingly high. That 68 percent of victims of violence would report practicing forgiveness, or that 86 percent would agree that forgiveness is a good thing in the aftermath of nightmarish war, are difficult attitudes to reconcile with the views of the liberal peace. Those without such prior skepticism may be less surprised by the results. They may note the substantial "noes" to the forgiveness choice toward rebels and even more so toward government troops as well as the 32 percent who disagreed that forgiveness was practiced widely in their region. Still, on balance, majorities favored, practiced, and reported the practice of forgiveness, and on some measures, did so in large majorities.

Might these results be quirks or the product of reporting biases? It is unlikely. The survey posed questions about attitudes and the practice of forgiveness in several different forms, all of which returned positive results regarding forgiveness. The results were also corroborated in the conversation that took place in the focus groups and interviews.[33] Paralleling the numbers, approval for and reports of the practice of forgiveness were far from unanimous. Participants offered reasons both for and against forgiveness. Favor toward forgiveness was widespread, though. Virtually no one argued that forgiveness was beyond the pale, unthinkable, or outside the boundaries of possibility in milieus where war had taken place, contrary to the views of even those Western analysts favorable to a reconciliation paradigm. In Uganda, forgiveness is a normal part of the regular practice of ordinary people in the wake of war.

When Ugandans approve of or practice forgiveness, what do they mean by it? From the focus groups and interviews emerged the common theme that forgiveness is a matter of the heart, a willed, inner act and not simply an outward performance. An interviewee from Luwero said, "Forgiveness comes from the heart. If you don't [forgive], your heart is always full with anger and instead of thinking about development, you are thinking about revenge."[34] In forgiving with their heart, victims performed two major actions. First, they decided deliberately to relinquish revenge, resentment, grudges, and payback. One focus group participant in Gulu commented, "Forgiveness is letting go the wrong things someone has done to you by trying to forget about it. It is [to leave] bad things and start doing good things."[35] Second, participants in the focus groups and interviews commonly voiced their view that forgiveness also involves an act of construction, one that to some degree restores relationship with the perpetrator. One interviewee in Amuria went so far as to say, "I wished the people who did all that to me the very best of luck and some of them died...the perpetrators are now very good friends of mine; we chat and talk about projects. I forgave them."[36] In many cases, forgiveness did not involve full restoration of right relationship. Some victims did not want to go this far. More often, victims were ignorant of the identity or location of perpetrators or else knew that they were dead. The survey showed that of victims who forgave, 71 percent answered "no" to the question, "Did you express forgiveness to the perpetrator in words," while only 28 percent answered "yes." The former victims forgave "from the heart," involving a willed act, but did not or could not express forgiveness to their perpetrator in words. As one interviewee in Amuria put it, "When we speak of forgiveness, I have forgiven them because they don't know me and neither do I know them, and God said that we should forgive wrongdoers."[37]

Other comments from the focus groups and interviews further rounded out the picture of what forgiveness is. One frequent comment pertained to what it is not: forgetting (though this was not unanimous; some thought forgiveness involves trying to forget). Many others stressed that forgiveness is not easy. It is "like swallowing a bitter pill," said one participant in Gulu. Still others stressed that forgiveness "takes time and a lot of courage," to quote the words of a participant in Gulu. Another said, "Years down the line [people involved in the war] forgive and reconcile. Even those who harbor grudges in their deathbed call perpetrators and forgive them. It therefore takes time to forgive." A focus group participant in Luwero also said of the time factor, "If you're hurt less you forgive quickly, but if you are hurt severely it takes you long to forgive." Some victims found forgiveness just too difficult. As one Luwero focus group participant put it, "I have never forgiven; I cannot forgive. To forgive someone who killed my father or mother!" Some focus group participants became more open to forgiveness through the experience of the focus group itself.[38]

One set of questions on the survey probed victims' views of transitional justice measures other than forgiveness: trials, apologies, reparations, truth-telling, and public recognition of suffering. These questions probe to what degree victims favor the priorities of the liberal peace, especially judicial punishment, and help to test the charge that a focus on forgiveness inappropriately places the burden of repair on victims. Ugandans do not reject judicial punishment, the measure for which the international community had made their country a prominent test case, nor do they appear to regard judicial punishment as intrinsically contradictory to forgiveness. To the question, "Is it important to you that persons responsible for abuses in Uganda are tried through the judicial system for their actions," an overwhelming 83 percent of respondents answered "yes," while 10 percent answered "no" and 7 percent "don't know." Respondents favored judicial punishment for leaders more than for ordinary soldiers. In contrast to Archbishop Odama, for instance, they would be willing to see Kony tried for his crimes.[39]

Yet if respondents favored trials and other measures of justice, they were equally of the view that these other forms of justice had not come to pass. Strong majorities of victims believed that perpetrators had not been held accountable; that victims of violence had not been adequately compensated; that leaders of armed groups had not adequately apologized for their crimes; that victims had not been given satisfactory opportunities to tell their stories; that not enough had been done to find out the truth; and that those who committed violence against them had not expressed remorse adequately.

Strikingly, though, victims were still willing to forgive despite other conditions of justice remaining unfulfilled, as the previously reported questions showed. In questions regarding attitudes toward forgiveness, survey respondents indicated favor for forgiveness being conditional upon apology and the telling of truth

about violence. In practice, though, victims of violence who forgave reported doing so without conditions. Eighty-six percent of them reported that their perpetrators did not apologize before they forgave, while 96 percent reported that their perpetrators offered them no reparations and did not perform any act of repair. Ugandans, then, place high value upon forms of justice other than forgiveness yet do not seem to regard forgiveness as excessively burdensome in the absence of these forms of justice.[40]

What motivates high favor for and practice of forgiveness among Ugandans? Survey questions posed a series of questions about motivation to respondents who had practiced forgiveness. By far the strongest factor was religion. No less than 82 percent of respondents answered "yes" to the question, "Did you forgive because of your religious beliefs?" Ugandans are a religious people. Of the survey respondents, 78 percent report attending services once or more every week, while 81 percent report that "prayer is a regular part of my life"—both high readings by international standards. Of those surveyed, 37 percent identified as Roman Catholic, 26 percent as Anglican, and 23 percent as Muslim. To the question, "Which of the following is a good reason to forgive," 62 percent of the respondents to the survey answered "yes" to "because forgiveness is the teaching of Christianity," while 20 percent answered "yes" to "because forgiveness is the teaching of Islam"—percentages that correspond closely to the portion of the total respondents belonging to these religions. Participants in the focus groups and interviewees commonly associated forgiveness with religion.[41]

Ugandans are comfortable with religious leaders encouraging their followers to forgive, of which 97 percent expressed approval. Of those who practiced forgiveness, 70 percent affirmed that a religious leader had encouraged him or her to forgive. Ninety-four percent said that they were not pressured by a religious leader to forgive, in contrast to 6 percent who answered "yes." The fact that religious leaders are commending forgiveness with respect to politically motivated violence does not seem to bother Ugandans or provoke them to complain about the mixing of religion and politics. Ugandans do not seem to expect religion to remain separate from politics in the way that, say, citizens of the United States do.[42]

Those who forgave cited other reasons, too. Tribal traditions and family ranked highly, as did the desire for psychological peace. Many victims reported that they were far less angry and less anxious after they had forgiven. Said one participant in a Gulu focus group, "When you pile up wrongs in your heart, it painfully burns and hurts like heartburn. Forgiveness is good for health and peace of mind."[43] A large portion of respondents favored forgiveness because they believed it would bring peace to the community. A majority of 57 percent said that they forgave because it would help the perpetrator heal. Another factor that led victims to forgive in many cases was their recognition that perpetrators, usually children, were abducted into the LRA and forced at gunpoint to commit violence and atrocities. A total of 44 percent of victims answered "yes" to the question, "Did you forgive because you thought that the perpetrator was not responsible for his/her crime (for example, he/she was forced to commit it)?" While an even higher percentage of 48 percent answered "no" to the same question, 44 percent is still a high number. Combining Ugandans' motivations for forgiveness—religion and the promotion of peace in the community—we can say with confidence that Ugandans see forgiveness as a legitimate and important tool for building peace in the wake of colossal violence and injustice.[44]

Conclusion

Uganda is not the only site of forgiveness in political settings over the past generation. A discourse of forgiveness and at least some documented instances of its practice arose in South Africa, Sierra Leone, Northern Ireland, Germany, Guatemala, Chile, El Salvador, Timor Leste, and other settings. In many of these locales, forgiveness was associated with Catholic and other Christian churches. In many places, forgiveness was also contested and sometimes refused. This is to be expected of a practice that is fresh in political settings, challenges existing orthodoxies, and is loaded with questions, ambiguities, and dilemmas. Still, the fact that forgiveness has arisen unexpectedly in the social thought of the Catholic Church, and even more surprisingly in the actual

practice of politics, testifies to the power of the gospel to spring up ever new as history unfolds. Victims of nightmarish crimes have exercised their Christian faith in following the teaching of Archbishop Odama that "forgiveness is a must for us if we want to heal our society."[45]

Reflection Questions

1. Why did forgiveness enter Catholic social teaching at such a late stage in history? What historical developments in recent years would favor or call for this teaching?
2. How would you evaluate the criticisms of political forgiveness that skeptics offer? Can the ethical practice of forgiveness accommodate these criticisms?
3. Are you surprised by the high rates of favor for and practice of forgiveness in Uganda? How does this compare to your own culture's approach to questions of forgiveness?
4. Do you think you could forgive the perpetrator of an act of wartime violence against you or a loved one? What if any impact would Christian faith have on your response?

Notes

1. Pope Benedict XV, *Pacem Dei Munus Pulcherrimum*, nos. 14, 1, accessed October 5, 2017, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xv/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xv_enc_23051920_pacem-dei-munus-pulcherrimum.html.

2. Pope John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, no. 15, accessed October 5, 2017, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30111980_dives-in-misericordia.html.

3. Pope John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, 14–15.

4. Messages for the World Day of Peace, accessed October 5, 2017, https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_08121996_xxx-world-day-for-peace.html and https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/

messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_20011211_xxxv-world-day-for-peace.html; Luigi Accatoli, *When a Pope Asks for Forgiveness*, trans. Jordan Aumann (Staten Island: Alba House, 1998).

5. Luigi Accattoli, *When a Pope Asks Forgiveness: The Mea Culpa's of John Paul II*, trans. Jordan Aumann (New York: Alba House, 1998), 48–51.

6. Catholic News Agency, "Pope Tells Why He Chose the Name of 'Benedict XVI,'" accessed October 5, 2017, http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/resources/benedict-xvi/life-and-ministry/pope-tells-why-he-chose-the-name-of-benedict-xvi/.

7. Reprinted as "Acting in the Strength that Comes from Remembrance: The Grace of Reconciliation," in Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Values in a Time of Upheaval*, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), 123–28.

8. Pope Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, no. 89, accessed October 5, 2017, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20070222_sacramentum-caritatis.html.

9. Pope Francis, *Misericordia et Misera*, accessed October 5, 2017, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco-lettera-ap_20161120_misericordia-et-misera.html; Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, nos. 227–30, accessed May 15, 2018, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

10. Message of His Holiness Francis for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace, January 1, 2014, no. 10, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/peace/documents/papa-francesco_20131208_messaggio-xlvii-giornata-mondiale-pace-2014.html.

11. Jonathan Van Antwerpen, "Reconciliation as Heterodoxy," in *Restorative Justice, Reconciliation, and Peacebuilding*, ed. Jennifer Llewellyn and Daniel Philpott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 77–117.

12. See the broad criticism of Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, "The Moral Foundation of Truth Commissions," in *Truth v. Justice: The Morality of Truth Commissions*, ed. Robert I. Rotberg and Dennis Thompson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 22–44.

13. Colleen Murphy, *A Moral Theory of Political Reconciliation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 11. See also Rebekka Friedman, *Competing Memories: Truth and Reconciliation in Sierra Leone and Peru* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 49–51; and Ernesto Verdeja, *Unchopping a Tree: Reconciliation in the Aftermath of Political Violence* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 16–19.

14. On the relationship between justice and righteousness in the Bible, see Christopher D. Marshall, *Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 35–59.

15. See, e.g., the arguments in John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980); Thomas D. Williams, *Who Is My Neighbor? Personalism and the Foundations of Human Rights* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2005); Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

16. See Proverbs 31:5, 8, 9; Ecclesiastes 5:8; Isaiah 5:23, and Lamentations 3:35.

17. On the definition of *mercy*, see St. Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*, vol. 3, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1948), 1311; John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, no. 6. On restorative practices in the political realm, see Daniel Philpott, *Just and Unjust Peace: An Ethic of Political Reconciliation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

18. Again, see Philpott, *Just and Unjust Peace*, 4. The practices are not envisioned as necessarily performed in a particular order. Whether ethically justified forgiveness requires a prior apology is a matter of dispute. My own view is that the New Testament sanctions unilateral forgiveness (without prior apology).

19. See Brent L. Nelsen and James L. Guth, *Religion and the Struggle for European Union: Confessional Culture and the Limits of Integration* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2015); and Alan Paul Fimister, *Robert Schuman: Neo-Scholastic Humanism and the Reunification of Europe* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2008).

20. *Kony 2012*, accessed January 25, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y4MnpzG5Sqc. The video received over 1 million hits.

21. More precisely, the ARLPI comprises Catholic, Anglican, Pentecostal, Orthodox, Seventh-Day Adventist, and Orthodox leaders, accessed August 23, 2017, http://www.arlpi.org/.

22. Refugee Law Project, *Forgiveness: Unveiling an Asset for Peacebuilding*, 2015, 30, https://www.refugeelawproject.org/files/others/Forgiveness_research_report.pdf.

23. As we shall see, on this score, Odama's views differ from the majority of survey respondents, who hold that forgiveness and judicial punishment are compatible and mutually desirable. Odama, however, strongly opposes the ICC. My own view echoes that of the respondents: judicial punishment and forgiveness are both important and desirable practices of reconciliation provided that they can be achieved. Although I am a strong admirer of Odama, on this issue, I respectfully disagree with him. Kony needs to repent, to be sure, but he also deserves prison.

24. See Marc Lacey, "Escape from Rebels Leads to a Reunion in Uganda," *The New York Times*, October 10, 2004, http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/10/world/escape-from-rebels-leads-to-a-reunion-in-uganda-953340.html?mcubz=0.

25. Refugee Law Project, *Forgiveness*, 15.

26. Refugee Law Project, *Forgiveness*, 14–15. On Atyam's story, see also Emmanuel Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology for Africa* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 148–65.

27. It's also worth noting that forgiveness was also a key part of Acholi rituals of reconciliation, the most extensive form of which are called *mato oput*. Odama and the other Acholi religious leaders strongly commended *mato oput* to their followers in Acholiland in addition to commending forgiveness on Christian grounds.

28. Refugee Law Project, *Forgiveness*. Field research took place between March and September, 2014.

29. The five districts included (1) Gulu, the city at the heart of Acholiland and the war in the north; (2) Yumbe of the West Nile region in northwest Uganda, which is heavily Muslim and has seen several insurgency movements since the fall of President Idi Amin in the 1970s; (3) Amuria, a city in the Teso subregion of Eastern Uganda; (4) Luwero, a region in Central Uganda where intense fighting took place in the early 1980s between the forces of Milton Obote's government and those of the guerilla army commanded by

Yoweri Museveni, who won the conflict and became president in 1986. See Refugee Law Project, *Forgiveness*, 5–9.

30. Refugee Law Project, *Forgiveness*, 11–13.

31. Refugee Law Project, *Forgiveness*, 13–14.

32. Refugee Law Project, *Forgiveness*, 14.

33. It should be noted that all ten of the focus groups and twenty-five out of the twenty-seven interviews were carried out by fellow Ugandans. The same was true for the survey, which was conducted completely by Ugandans. I, a Westerner, was present for only two of the focus groups and was not the primary leader of them. This eliminates the objection that the participants changed their message for a Western interviewer.

34. Refugee Law Project, *Forgiveness*, 15.

35. Refugee Law Project, *Forgiveness*, 16.

36. Refugee Law Project, *Forgiveness*, 16.

37. Refugee Law Project, *Forgiveness*, 15–18.

38. Refugee Law Project, *Forgiveness*, 18.

39. Refugee Law Project, *Forgiveness*, 18–25.

40. Refugee Law Project, *Forgiveness*, 21–22.

41. Refugee Law Project, *Forgiveness*, 25–32.

42. Refugee Law Project, *Forgiveness*, 27, 30.

43. Refugee Law Project, *Forgiveness*, 35.

44. Refugee Law Project, *Forgiveness*, 32–39.

45. Refugee Law Project, *Forgiveness*, 28.