

May 12, 1985

I suppose few of us could have gotten through these last two weeks without being starkly confronted with our own attitudes toward the past. Commemorations of the ending of World War II, which concluded 40 years ago, and the Vietnam War, which ended 10 years ago, scoured out the inclinations of our heart regarding our collective history. And as it happened in my own life, in these same two weeks I was also brought face to face with the phenomenon of middle-aged people who still have not come to terms with the treatment they received, and indeed still get, from their own parents.

What ought to be our attitude toward the grim events of our past, events both collective and personal?

All of this confusion seemed to come together and be magnified by President Reagan's visit to the cemetery at Bitburg. Suddenly the sacred matters of forgiveness, a central concept and practice in the Christian way of life, and of reconciliation, for which we Friends believe ourselves to have a particular vocation, became emeshed in the affairs of state, and in the awesome theatricality of the American Presidency.

What are we to think of the President's statement that, like the Jews, the soldiers and officers of the German armed forces were also victims of Nazism? What can it mean to become reconciled with a dead officer of the Waffen SS?

In the midst of the emotional uncertainties of these weeks, a few simple thoughts kept recurring in mind:

- Reconciliation undertaken in order to bolster one's position with respect to another portion of the human community with whom one is not reconciled has nothing to do with the forgiveness spoken of in Scripture. No Presidential tears, no matter how genuinely felt, can erase this truth. One of the greatest tragedies of the past two weeks is that the leaders of the east and the west used the occasion of these anniversaries not to share a common heritage of suffering, and a common plight of involvement in the good and the evil of the human condition, but simply stridently to reassert their alienation from and their hostility towards each other. Reconciliation extended to former enemies with this larger geo-political agenda in view is flawed; it is not Scrip-

tural forgiveness.

- Forgiving does not mean forgetting. We often say, "Forgive and forget." This is probably a useful maxim in everyday life, where all we are dealing with is assaults upon our own egos by relatives and friends. But forgetting is not an appropriate response where large issues of justice for others than ourselves is concerned. A couple of years ago two Maryknoll sisters were murdered in Central America. The entire Maryknoll community vowed forgiveness for their assailants, but also simultaneously rededicated themselves to the same struggle for justice in which their slain members had been engaged.
- Forgiveness and reconciliation are not dependent upon the rehabilitation of the offender. Jesus Christ, and also Saint Stephen, who was the first Christian martyr, both asked forgiveness for their assailants even before the carrying out of their crimes had been fully completed.
- We cannot forgive by proxy. We can practice forgiveness only with respect to what we ourselves have suffered. There is no way that a person who survived World War II in the security of Southern California can exercise forgiveness and reconciliation in behalf of the Jews, Poles, Gypsies, and homosexual people who were the victims of the Nazis. We survivors can reconcile ourselves with the progeny of the Nazis, but it is not our role either to forgive, or to decline to forgive, what occurred among people now dead. The Maryknollers offered forgiveness for the loss of colleagues which they themselves had suffered. Perhaps, because they could presume to know the minds of their lost sisters, they could also offer forgiveness on their behalf, like members of a family might do for someone they knew very well who was lost to them. But, in general, only God can forgive by proxy.

Although forgiving does not involve forgetfulness, it does materially change the character of our recollection, replacing hatred, despair, and self-pity with a simple, silent awareness of what has occurred, and with a commitment to use every peaceable means not to let it happen again. In this sense forgiveness is even more essential in the life of one who forgives than in that of the offender, and it is especially important for those who would be peace makers. All true freedom depends upon forgiveness. For

without forgiveness we become automatons, destined mechanically to recycle the same kinds of emotions which gave rise to the original evil. We read in the Epistle of James that "True justice is the harvest reaped by peacemakers from seeds sown in a spirit of peace." Forgiveness is the essential foundation of this spirit of peace.