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VUKOVAR IN  
THE LIGHT OF  
FORGIVENESS



Time and history are passing much faster than our wounds are healing. Because of that fastness time can never heal all wounds, despite of the popular wisdom that claims exactly the opposite. Time is a universal cure only if we accept wounds to be healed when time runs over everyone who is wounded.

The great evil of war and violence is behind us. Vukovar and all that its name stands for is also behind us. Unfortunately, the time of violence has not passed. Evil that was done still lives. It lives in the hearts of perpetrators and it lives in their victims. As if the evil has created a life of its own, even worse, as if it has multiplied since the primary evil act. It lives in hearts of perpetrators and it is mute, under the veil of denial or justification. It lives in hearts of victims and it wishes to become independent by striking back in equal measure, by revenge. Both ways are fertile grounds for growth and development of evil, awaiting the new opportunity of life, engaging all those it is clinging to.

Evil that has been done does not end with the conclusion of the original evil act. It tries to survive and multiply at any cost. It is prepared to wait, to change disguises and shapes. It is prepared to lay low and to change hiding places. It only cares to survive.

Christianity knows the evil behavior and it knows how to deal with it. It knows how clever it is. However, it also knows the way out of it and is not exhausted by knowing it. It is not enough to know how the evil behaves. It is important to know how to fight it. For the perpetrator the way out is repentance and asking for forgiveness, for the victim it is to forgive.

Repentance and forgiveness are both difficult human acts and rare ones. The outcome is most often that forgiveness comes without the heart and repentance without conversion.

Your neighbor reaches out his hand to his neighbor unwillingly, hiding his hard feelings and saying words that

may be understood as words of forgiveness or an attempt to establish new relations, but somewhere deep inside their hearts, both the former perpetrator and the former victim know that there is no forgiveness, that what has happened is rather a form of forgiveness without the heart, as Jankelevitch<sup>1</sup> calls it, forgiveness that resembles love without honesty. Regardless of many ugly and painful memories, the victim decided to reach out his hand towards his neighbor, the former perpetrator; he has found his reasons for that act, he has reached out a hand that signifies the readiness for the peaceful life, despite the inner repugnance. But, there is no forgiveness, no relation, no heart. And so a minimum of preconditions for life occurs, but co-existence does not. And so the atmosphere is created, in which there is talk of new relations, but they can not be put to life.

The perpetrator mumbles a few words that could be understood as words of repentance, hiding behind the general formulas and superficial justifications, creating the illusion of him being sorry, but knowing in his heart that he would probably act the same way if once again was found in the same or similar situation, and knowing that the only reason for different behavior is that the situation has changed.

Attempts to live side by side, since it is not possible to live one with the other, take place somewhere between the non-forgiveness and the silent non-repentance on one hand, and forgiveness and conversion on another. At first glance, it seems to be the easier way, because it is less demanding, but in the long run it is dangerous and destructive for it represents a fertile ground for nurturing hard feelings of the victim, and malicious joy and readiness for violence of the perpetrator. It is dangerous, because it is almost inevitable that the evil that has not been repented and forgiven for would be formed as the general distrust, which would in time be carried over to the following generations.

In its foundations, Christianity has coded the essential preconditions for the possible liberated life after the committed evil. One of texts that include the description of what is necessary for the new life is the text in the Gospel according to St. Luke,<sup>2</sup> about two disciples who were traveling to Emmaus after Jesus had died on the Cross.

Behind these two disciples there is evil, injustice, putting the teacher to death. Death seems to have the final word. After Jesus' death their life can not continue the way they started it while they were still His followers. He is now gone and now is the time to return home, to where

they started following Him. After the evil has occurred, life can not continue as if nothing has happened. It should be continued, but it can not go in the same direction as before. It will continue by starting over, in another place, under other conditions, often in another language and another country, or will it continue where it was interrupted, if it is still possible.

The conversation between these two disciples points to the way in which the committed evil should be declared. These two were affected indirectly and this is why they are able to talk directly after the violence has occurred. Direct injury by violence takes away words, most often silence is the result of the suffered violence.

To speak of things that have hurt us is the very process of relief. It is most obvious from the opposite case, from the case of impossibility to declare the evil that has been suffered. To suffer evil, which we can not say out loud and which we can not attribute to its author (for example, sexual abuse of children) leads us, against our will and determinate intention not to blame ourselves, into taking over the guilt upon ourselves. However, the suffered evil is not diminished if we exchange its author. In that way it is only multiplying. Therefore it happens that after the victim imputes the guilt upon himself, he begins to do the same to others. He takes revenge without knowing why. Thus the victim becomes the violator, the one that was stolen from becomes the thief.

Those who have suffered the most find it the hardest to speak about what they have suffered. And at the same time, they are in the greatest need of speaking and forgiving. Forgiveness is the victim's way out of clinging to violence.

If we take into consideration that perpetrators hate those they have hurt and if we consider it absurd that the victim himself is searching for the perpetrator in order to forgive him, it will become clear to us that it is possible for the victim to speak of the suffered evil, without saying it to the perpetrator, and that it is possible to part from the attachment to the suffered evil, without waiting for the perpetrator's request for forgiveness. Naturally, by forgiveness we do not only mean the forgiveness of the victim to the perpetrator, but also forgiveness to oneself, parting from the attachment to the suffered evil.<sup>3</sup> It is correct that no one can forgive oneself, just as no one feels obligated to fulfill the promise given to oneself.<sup>4</sup> But by forgiveness we primarily mean to part from, to separate from the suffered evil, freeing the space for forgiving the perpetrator in case he asks for forgiveness and meets other conditions

(repentance, compensation for the damage done, promise of a change).

In Christianity, and Christianity made the biggest step regarding the relation of the victim towards the suffered evil and towards perpetrators – his enemies, forgiveness does not entirely represent the relation with the perpetrator or the re-establishment of the relation between the victim and the perpetrator. In Christianity, forgiveness primarily represents the relation between the victim and God.

It is also obvious from the Gospel of Luke. However, those two disciples are talking to each other, but their conversation flows into the conversation with Christ, whom they do not recognize while they are telling Him about what has happened in Jerusalem.

The fact that those two are talking about the violence that has happened is still not enough. To be true, it is necessary to put the suffered evil to words, to form it into language, but not every conversation is curable. There are conversations, which create the illusion of relief, but which are attaching us even more to the suffered evil, in an invisible manner. Those two are nurturing their own torment to each other. While they are talking, the depressed condition of their souls is not diminishing. On the contrary: such conversation does not cure. It is thus coded in Christianity that the mere speaking of the suffered evil is not enough. To tell one's own torment to someone who carries the same torment and to get the same torment in return does not represent the relief of one's torment, but the duplication of the same. There are strong relations, which are surviving only by mutual nurturing with pessimism. Such relation needs the help from the outside. Conversations, which are not confirming our own pessimistic vision of events are curing us, those are the only ones that can open new horizons to us.

That is why the scene of two disciples meeting their Teacher is highly significant. Those two can not recognize the Resurrected One. Their eyes are too attached to the suffered evil to recognize the liberated life, life without attachment to evil. Until the forgiveness occurs, until the possible horizon of the liberated life after the evil has been suffered opens, our eyes are not able to see and recognize such possibility.

Those two are once again telling the same story. This time not just to each other, but to a stranger, to someone who comes from the outside.

Forgiveness is a word. Forgiveness is primarily related to speech, a word, a story. It does not have to be the entire

psychological process comprising the condition from the injury until the final forgiveness. Forgiveness can be a simple word, which, when said, does what it is saying. It is a word that divides two times. A word that divides the time of evil, in which the victim and the perpetrator exist, time of animosity determined by the perpetrator, in which the victim is passive, from the time, which becomes the new time with the victim's words "I forgive". Forgiveness is a border, interruption of the time of injury and animosity, a novelty, an unexpected word, which creates what it is saying.

The word "forgiveness" is primarily a word which breaks the silence. There is silence between the perpetrator and the victim after the evil has been done. Silence can not be broken by the perpetrator, his speech still represents violence. Even when he is asking for forgiveness, his speech is not freed from violence. In order to avoid additional violence, the perpetrator should listen and search for the situation in which he can speak and for the way he should speak. Only the victim can break the silence. A word that breaks the silence does not erase what has happened, it only lifts the silent cover that lies over the past. The word relieves the burden of silence. And this is why the word of forgiveness is the interruption, a change, a border, a barrier, a time limit.

But, the word is not easy. To form the word of forgiveness is very demanding because the word of forgiveness first requires to form and then to pronounce the suffered evil.

In the conversation between Jesus and the two disciples there are no participants in violence. Jesus does not have the need to discuss the suffered evil with them, nor does he ask them to do the same. Resurrection is happening regardless of those who have participated in violence and the way out of the depression caused by violence is happening regardless of perpetrators. Resurrection and the way out of the depressed condition, as well as the forgiveness, are all happening in the relation with the Father, that is, with the Word.

It is not irrelevant to see how Christianity carries within itself the possibility of getting away from the evil, the possibility of forgiveness through the relation with the Father, meaning in the area of religion, regardless of perpetrators.

The conversation with Jesus opens new horizons to the disciples. From the perspective of the Resurrected One, violence gains another meaning. The Resurrected One places it into another context. He does not diminish it,

erase it, or deny it, but He gives it some new characteristics, He sees it from the perspective of the Resurrection.

At the moment when the eyes of those two disciples are opened, when they recognize the Teacher in the stranger, murdered and Resurrected, not burdened with evil or hard feelings, the change occurs, the change which those two did not count on. This change is so strong that the Resurrected One can disappear from the visible.

And while, just a few moments ago, they thought that the night is the reason for not allowing the stranger to continue on his own way, now the night does not prevent them from returning to Jerusalem. While they were previously running from Jerusalem, leaving the place of violence and injustice behind them, now that same place becomes the place of hope, the indication of the New. And, as the Resurrected One had to die in order to defeat death, those two must also go to the place of violence in order to become witnesses of life.

Forgiveness does not escape the place where violence has happened, and forgiveness does not start new life in another place. Forgiveness opens possibilities to start a new, different life in the place of violence. Forgiveness is not a continuation as if nothing has happened, it does not represent the return to the old ways. Forgiveness is a fresh start.

Besides, those two are now again telling the same story, with all details, without any changes in the events, but it all now seems different. Forgiveness does not forget or finishes the memory. It remembers differently.

Vukovar is a place of committed and suffered evil. Vukovar can also become the place of insincere repentance and apparent forgiveness, Vukovar can also be the place of avoidance, instead of return, ground for hard feelings, instead for forgiveness, a hidden place of malicious joy, instead of conversion. But, Vukovar can just the same become the place, in which the strength of life and forgiveness will become alive, in which the new beginning, a different life will occur.

Vukovar will definitely not become the place of oblivion, but efforts should be made in order to prevent it from becoming the place of hard feelings. The perspective of Resurrection and forgiveness is required, in order to place Vukovar in the horizon of life. Vukovar can succeed in it, as long as there are hearts that will burn with trust in life despite of death, the hearts that will believe in forgiveness, regardless of the lack of repentance and in the new beginning, regardless of evil that survives under the veil of



silence. Time will not heal the wounds, but forgiveness can heal wounded people and wounded times.

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## FOOTNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> Comp. Vladimir Jankelevitch, *Le Pardon*, Aubier 1967, pp. 46-47.
- <sup>2</sup> LK 24:13 And, behold, two of them went that same day to a village called Emmaus, which was from Jerusalem about threescore furlongs.  
LK 24:14 And they talked together of all these things which had happened.  
LK 24:15 And it came to pass, that, while they communed together and reasoned, Jesus himself drew near, and went with them.  
LK 24:16 But their eyes were holden that they should not know him.  
LK 24:17 And he said unto them, What manner of communications are these that ye have one to another, as ye walk, and are sad?  
LK 24:18 And the one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answering said unto him, Art thou only a stranger in Jerusalem, and hast not known the things which are come to pass there in these days?  
LK 24:19 And he said unto them, What things? And they said unto him, Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, which was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people:  
LK 24:20 And how the chief priests and our rulers delivered him to be condemned to death, and have crucified him.  
LK 24:21 But we trusted that it had been he which should have redeemed Israel: and beside all this, to day is the third day since these things were done.  
LK 24:22 Yea, and certain women also of our company made us astonished, which were early at the sepulchre;  
LK 24:23 And when they found not his body, they came, saying, that they had also seen a vision of angels, which said that he was alive.  
LK 24:24 And certain of them which were with us went to the sepulchre, and found it even so as the women had said: but him they saw not.  
LK 24:25 Then he said unto them, O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken:  
LK 24:26 Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory?  
LK 24:27 And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.  
LK 24:28 And they drew nigh unto the village, whither they went: and he made as though he would have gone further.  
LK 24:29 But they constrained him, saying, Abide with us: for it is toward evening, and the day is far spent. And he went in to tarry with them.  
LK 24:30 And it came to pass, as he sat at meat with them, he took bread, and blessed it, and broke, and gave to them.  
LK 24:31 And their eyes were opened, and they knew him; and he vanished out of their sight.  
LK 24:32 And they said one to another, Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?  
LK 24:33 And they rose up the same hour, and returned to Jerusalem, and found the eleven gathered together, and them that were with them,

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LK 24:34 Saying, The Lord is risen indeed, and hath appeared to Simon.

LK 24:35 And they told what things were done in the way, and how he was known of them in breaking of bread.

<sup>3</sup> Comp. Ante Vučković, *Struktura zla i oprost*, in: *Praštanje*, edited by Bože Vuleta, Split-Sinj, 1995, pp. 19-30.

<sup>4</sup> Comp. Hannah Arendt, *Vita activa*, August Cesarec, Zagreb, 1991, p. 191.