

Memory and reconciliation: The story of Guatemala

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While we were doing the Project for the Recovery of Historical Memory,¹ six years ago, at the end of a workshop held in the Kekchí indigenous region of Las Verapaces, a young man came up to me with these words: "Now I understand that if my community had kept in mind its history, it would not have fallen prey to division and hate... We were a tree without strong roots, brought down by the harsh wind of war and calamity...?"

Working with, dealing with, even living with memory can be difficult and painful. Especially when people have lived through traumatic events. Many people in Guatemala who had directly suffered the ravages of the civil war told us: "I don't like to speak about the past, or remember sad situations, because it hurts, because fear, anger and the senselessness of things come back."

The people, in effect, were ill, they cried, they suffered. Something fundamental in that past did not feel comfortable, and that's why they often preferred to forget. The problem was that the majority of times the people involved could not escape from the past. Negating the past was perhaps much more terrible, because it trickled through, like water through a dike, and imperceptibly it ended up ruling the present lives of the people with an iron grip. Alcoholism was one problem we encountered again and again among people, men and women. Other times violence would break out, escalate, as a pattern for social and family relations. Then violence within the family and hostility within the community became a daily event.

Mistrust ended up prevailing among people, both in the indigenous areas and those of mixed race, rural as well as urban. "Her there, she's got two hearts," an indigenous woman told me one day, indicating her lifelong neighbour. "One is the heart she puts on show; the other very different one is what she hides; that's the real one?", she explained. Solidarity gave way to competition, indifference, grievance, social division and moral and political condemnation. In this way, all of us Guatemalans became "guilty" until proven otherwise. Pessimism gained a hold over life and darkened the future. And another past, remote, often un-lived, previous to the tragedy, was turned into an equally escapist refuge. "Under the military dictatorships we were subjugated, but there was law and order, and criminals were punished as an example."

In this land every kind of fundamentalism and religious sect flourished. There was a promise, perhaps false, of freedom. I say perhaps false, because the explanation of Guatemala's history referred to "sin" and "divine punishment" as a means of correction, that's to say of rectification and conversion. Neo-pentecostalism also attracted the perpetrators and persuaded them to a form of conversion that, nevertheless, left untouched their way of thinking and their power structures, often recently acquired in society as a result of the internal war, as a result, sometimes, of injustice and dispossession. Renouncing sin implicitly carried with it renouncing social change, the imperfect human process, searching, doubting, concern for and occupation with earthly life. Certainties were embraced that were not subject to judgement or doubt, although they could not withstand even the minimal interrogation of history. Thus the future could be both promising and alien. Many signs of life were translated into fetishist codes. The devil, that's to say the "enemy", revealed himself in everything human, meaning everything imperfect, contradictory and historical.

What am I trying to describe here? The very complex consequences, of different kinds, of a confrontation that ripped the basic fabric of Guatemalan society. It profoundly disrupted social psychology, induced a censoring of important areas of individual and collective memory, and tried to divest reconciliation of its liberating spirit as a profound act of love and genuine internal reconstitution.

Now I want to tell you "using broad strokes" how we worked on the Project for the Recovery of

Historical Memory, using a pastoral method that was aided technically and scientifically, in order to try to deal with such consequences, rescuing collective memory, seeking to affirm a sense of reconciliation from below in society and from within the human being.

Recovering historical memory

We began work at the beginning of 1996 when the armed conflict in the country was still continuing, although the peace negotiations between the Government and the guerrilla forces of the URNG2 were already well under way. Some months earlier the Government and the insurgents had signed an agreement in Oslo, Norway, under which the Commission for Historical Clarification (CHC) was created. Its task was to investigate acts of violence during the armed confrontation that had affected and caused suffering among the non-combatant civilian population.

The initial aim of REMHI, led by our inspiring pastoral director, Bishop Juan Gerardi, then responsible for the Human Rights Office of the Archbishopric of Guatemala, was to get on with the work of the CHC, taking into account limitations of time and difficulty of access to communities, especially indigenous ones, still dominated by fear.

However, this pressing on with work soon took on its own dynamic, impelled to a large extent by the communities' own need to recount their experiences. As I said, the REMHI was above all a pastoral process aimed at reflection, education and liberation. We created a wide social network based around leaders of the very communities affected by the political violence. They called themselves 'reconciliation animators' and were the real craftsmen and women of memory and reconciliation.

Covering huge distances, freely giving their time and effort, dealing with terrible stories, some times putting up with indifference, others putting up with incomprehension and both open and veiled threats, these reconciliation animators gathered thousands of testimonies throughout the country at the same time as they brought consolation and helped to rediscover hope. During this process we carried out with them a series of workshops throughout the country in which we reconstructed Guatemala's history, together with the history of the communities. We tackled themes of mental health. We learnt to name fear, to place it openly on the table. We gave it shape. We analysed its causes and outlined strategies to confront it. We attached value to people's courage in the face of calamities, and we discovered very creative ways of resistance and survival that bore witness to love of life and an iron determination not to let hope die, even at the worst times.

Memory was alive, was being regenerated and throwing light on the truth, that's to say on the many stories of life. History was no longer shut away, prisoner. It was shared by means of testimonies and exchange of experiences. But it was not a simple narration of events. It was also reflection on their meaning and the sense of what had been lived through. It was also reflection on human conduct in extreme times, and the values and principles that sustain it. It was an intense and profound apprenticeship about a past that was setting out to conquer the future as a project of social, community and personal reconstruction.

One of the biggest lessons we learnt was perhaps the realisation that human dignity was our greatest treasure, that it was inalienable, despite having allowed it to be trodden on, crushed, dehumanised. We were recovering historical memory at the same time as rescuing our human dignity.

There came a time when we believed ourselves ready to take the next step. We were getting to know, to recognise the truth of the deeds that had led to nearly forty years of war, to violence without limit, to the paroxysm of destruction. We unveiled some of the mechanisms of terror; we saw how they worked, the fears they exploited and the objectives they sought, like a machine responding to a well-drawn plan. We understood our fears and found ways of overcoming them, ways to prevent them from paralysing us. And we saw that there were other fears that could serve us, by making us prudent and even responsible.

But what next? We were seeking the Utopia of reconciliation and we knew there were other steps to be taken: the steps of justice, of forgiveness, of mercy, of conversion. We did not have a pre-established formula, nor did we see clearly a set order to things. We decided to continue exploring and soon came up against certain limits.

Complexity and resistance

The political system and the established economic order did not necessarily move with the hoped for consistency in order to achieve democratisation. The justice system remained prostrate before impunity. The psychology of confrontation weighed too heavily, alongside mistrust and the attitude of seeing in the community a whole cast of turncoat enemies. All this recalled how complex change is and the immense weight of structures and resistances to change.

We were undaunted. Yet there was another challenge posed by the communities. 'You speak to us of reconciling ourselves with the living,' they said. 'But first we need to reconcile ourselves with our dead.' In the indigenous world, the link between the living and the dead is very solid and everyday. But the violence and its consequences had managed to weaken it. The forced migrations, the change of religion and drastic cultural adjustments, including language, brought about by the phenomenon of violence, brutally altered many traditional points of reference.

When civilian populations fled, many children died without ever being given a name. Dogs ate many human corpses left abandoned in villages. Others were buried in communal pits and their graves remained as secret cemeteries, without any identification. Yet others were buried in the mountains during the exodus. Many were reported as disappeared. The wisdom of the grandparents was lost. The authority of the Mayan priests was diminished. And the memory of the 'counters of days' – the oral historians of the Ixil communities – was even disowned for being subversive.

Hence the challenge to be reconciled with the dead and their profaned memory. Soon people began to organise themselves and identified sacred hills where they set up symbols in memory of the dead. These symbolic graveyards were places of pilgrimage, where communion with the memory of the disappeared could be restored. This helped to give sense to the life of the community and let them find company and solidarity. It provided a place for unspoken thoughts and freed many tears so long held back. An important step had been successfully taken.

But, reconciliation with the living? 'I am prepared to offer and to give forgiveness,' said a Quiché indigenous woman at a diocesan meeting, 'but I don't know who to, I don't know their face nor if they want to have my forgiveness.' We then realised that we faced an enormous blank in communication with the perpetrators. Some of them, certainly, had come to us and we were able to work on the wounds left by their own traumas. But these were the minority. The great majority saw us with suspicion. They denied that anything had happened and even less that they might be responsible. In any case, they said that they had already been reconciled. For this reason they pointed the finger at us, saying we wanted the violence to start all over again. They condemned our so-called intentions as wanting to open old wounds and encourage vengeance, hatred and resentment. However, at the end of the day some of them could not avoid questions about the past from their own children.

Avoiding stigmatisation

Working on a philosophy of memory, inclusion and reconciliation with the children of perpetrators is the key to not bequeathing to the next generation a legacy of stigmatisation that recreates and broadens the conflicts, or that encourages amnesia, exclusion and rivalry. Of course, as well as having a sense of urgency, in practice it also faces enormous obstacles. One of these comes precisely from the stigmatisation of individuals as victims or perpetrators. While memory is not worked on, while reconciliation is not deepened, the stigma of victims and perpetrators perpetuates itself and paralyses personalities and even communities.

To our eyes the life of these communities may appear normal, but in reality this apparent condition sets up multiple internal barriers, restricts communication and relationships, keeps conflicts latent and threatens to provoke social anomie. Lynchings are a heartbreaking symptom of this risk of lawlessness in society.

In the REMHI project we also made use of experiences of community reconciliation. In the mountains in the north of Guatemala, the community began to get back together. They united their voices and little by little wove together their stories. They identified the causes of their division and discovered that even during the times of greatest cruelty, there was room for compassion. Recognising this was very important to recovering the thread that had been broken and lost. Even so, achieving forgiveness was not easy, and it's like the victims said: 'It was my brother, my neighbour who did me most harm. He knew who I was and where I came from.' Often it was more understandable to offer forgiveness to a stranger, to someone from outside the community who attacked anonymous people, people they didn't know, because they had been given an order by a superior.

In this way we showed that memory is a basic ingredient of reconciliation. There are different forms of justice and the valid one is the one that involves recovering dignity and a way of human rehabilitation: justice that has a lesson for society and doesn't perpetuate conflict. It is always necessary to have an agent in society who contributes towards matching the psychological moment and the psychological need for reconciliation between victims and perpetrators. And for this to happen a favourable political climate has to be created that can only happen, as far as I can see, under democracy.

One of the great shortcomings in the peace process begun in Guatemala five years ago is that more acts of reconciliation are pending than have been carried out. As long as the overall conditions that permitted and multiplied the conflict in society are not altered, not only will the greatest act of reconciliation remain unresolved - which is structural - but we shall not escape the risk and threat of regression.

After three years of work on REMHI, we published an extensive report in four volumes that gathered together the experiences of the people. This report is called *Guatemala: Nunca más* (Guatemala: Never again) and was made public on 24 April 1998. Two days later our pastoral director, Bishop Juan Gerardi, was brutally murdered. A few weeks ago a court sentenced three Army officers and a Catholic priest for the crime and ordered continuing investigations of a dozen more agents and ex-agents of the State, including army chains of command.

The REMHI people, the agents of reconciliation, continue as a basic community that is working at a stage with no definite time line, a stage of giving back to the communities. This stage is translated in education programmes for peace, compensation projects, exhumation of secret burial grounds, and mental health programmes. Others, among them myself, have left REMHI and have thrown ourselves into political projects that seek to change certain unjust power structures and to dismantle their mechanisms of terror.

A few years ago, when we spoke of the future of REMHI, I always liked to use this figure of speech: 'We must be like salt, which dissolves in water but ends up changing the water's taste.' By different paths we carry on working and we do not abandon our dreams of building a Guatemala reconciled to its past and prepared to construct a different future.

Notes

1. The Proyecto de Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica (REMHI) was set up by the Guatemalan Episcopal Conference in 1995 with funding from European governments and church agencies. Its purpose was to record the testimonies of those who had suffered violence during more than three decades of military repression. Media Development (2/1999) published a translation in English of part IV of the report on 'The victims of the conflict'.

2. The Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unit) was the umbrella group created by the four main insurgent groups in 1982.

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