

COVER STORY

"I Spoke . . . As a Brother"

*A pardon from the Pontiff, a lesson
in forgiveness for a troubled world*



Pope and terrorist at Rebibbia prison, left; John Paul after shooting

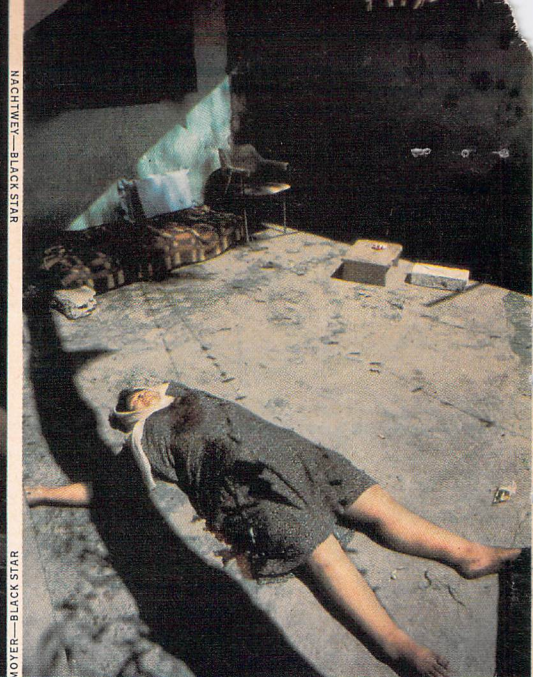
Usually it is the images of the immediate aftermath that are imprinted on the mind, the fragments of a normality shattered just a moment ago. The smoke from the bomb has scarcely cleared. Bodies on stretchers are jounced frantically toward the ambulances, and an arm waves at the camera to clear the way. Plaster clouds and torn clothes everywhere, the neighborhood blown out of its shoes. All in the same viewfinder: rescuers scramble in the chaos, a mother screams as if in *Guernica*, the stunned survivors move off with a slow, blank stare. The dead lie abruptly motionless wherever the latest outrage has deposited them.

Spectacles of terror and revenge occur so regularly that they seem to be scheduled into the routines of the world. They have become a way we punctuate our time. History unfolds as a sequence of detonations, a portion of the nightly news given over to psychosis. The scenes define a distinct style of politics in the world today, politics in a ski mask, violence dramatizing an unappeasable rage. Faceless, and morally depthless, the zealots crash truck bombs into their targets in Beirut or Tyre, go night riding with the Salvadoran death squads, or set the timers for the I.R.A. One sees their work—the almost daily deposits of bodies in the roads of Central America, for example. Or, in London, the innocent blown up to make an awful noise for Irish unity—horses of the Queen's Household Cavalry blasted while on parade, or Christmas shoppers at Harrods department store.

The memory keeps one picture in particular: St. Peter's Square in May 1981. It shows Pope John Paul II in white robes, capsized backward on his seat, stricken, in a posture vaguely



BEIRUT: chaotic aftermath of a terrorist car-bomb explosion



SABRA REFUGEE CAMP: massacre victim

reminiscent of the *Pietà*. There is an adrenal burst of motion in the scene as the security men spring alive and the Pontiff's white Popemobile lurches off through the crowd.

Ordinarily, the spasm of savagery simply passes and recedes in time, an ugly, vivid memory. But last week, in an extraordinary moment of grace, the violence in St. Peter's Square was transformed. In a bare, white-walled cell in Rome's Rebibbia prison, John Paul tenderly held the hand that had held the gun that was meant to kill him (*see cover*). For 21 minutes, the Pope sat with his would-be assassin, Mehmet Ali Agca. The two talked softly. Once or twice, Agca laughed. The Pope forgave him for the shooting. At the end of the meeting, Agca either kissed the Pope's ring or pressed the Pope's hand to his forehead in a Muslim gesture of respect.

It was a startling drama of forgiveness and reconciliation. On one level, it was an intensely intimate transaction between two men. But if the Pope spoke in whispers, he also meant to proclaim a message to the world. The only other people in the cell with Agca and John Paul were the Pope's personal secretary, two security agents—and a Vatican photographer and television crew. The Roman Catholic Church for many centuries has used imagery—paintings, sculpture, architecture—to express its spiritual meanings. The Pope brought the photographer and the cameramen because he wanted the image in that cell to be shown around a world filled with nuclear arsenals and unforgiving hatreds, with hostile superpowers and smaller, implacable fanaticisms.

It is difficult to imagine a more perfect economy of drama. The Pope's deed spoke, not his words, and it spoke with the full authority of his mortal life and the danger to which Agca had subjected it. The meaning of John Paul's forgiveness was profoundly Christian. He embraced his enemy and pardoned him.

All during the past year, the 1,950th anniversary of Christ's death and hence of the Christian redemption, John Paul has preached the theme of reconciliation. The visit to Agca was his culminating gesture on the theme. The sermon that he preached with his visit to Rebibbia was an elaboration of what he had said in a town near Northern Ireland's border with Eire in 1979: "Violence is evil. Violence is unacceptable as a solution to problems. Violence is unworthy of man. Violence is a lie, for it goes against the truth of our faith, the truth of our humanity."

John Paul meant, among other things, to demonstrate how the private and public dimensions of human activity may fuse in moral action. What he intended to show was a fundamental relationship between peace and the hearts of men and women, the crucial relevance of the turnings of the will and spirit. Seeing the

largest possible meanings in the most intimate places of the soul, John Paul wanted to proclaim that great issues are determined, or at least informed, by the elemental impulses of the human breast—hatred or love. Wrote the Milan-based Catholic daily *Avvenire* last week: "In the midst of so many voices raised to ask for negotiations between the superpowers on the basis of pure equilibrium of strength, in the choir of pacifism which proclaims that only peace counts, all else is relative . . . a Pope has the courage to utter the ancient word—the responsibility for each evil rests in man as a sinner. There will be no escape from wars, from hunger, from misery, from racial discrimination, from denial of human rights, and not even from missiles, if our hearts are not changed." Said Italian Writer Carlo Bo: "The Pope intends to say, 'If we really want peace, we must make the first step, we must forget offenses and offer the bread of love and charity.'"

The visit to Agca did not come as a surprise. It had been rumored for at least two weeks that John Paul intended to see his attacker during a Christmas-season visit to the more than 2,000 inmates of Rebibbia, on the northeastern outskirts of Rome. Since his conviction on July 22, 1981, Agca has been serving part of a life sentence in the prison's maximum-security wing. When the Pope arrived in his cell, Agca was dressed in a blue crew-neck sweater, jeans and blue-and-white running shoes from which the laces had been removed. He was unshaved. Agca kissed John Paul's hand. "Do you speak Italian?" the Pope asked. Agca nodded. The two men seated themselves, close together, on molded-plastic chairs in a corner of the cell, out of earshot. At times it looked almost as if the Pope were hearing the confession of Agca, a Turkish Muslim. At those moments, John Paul leaned forward from the waist in a priestly posture, his head bowed and forehead tightly clasped in his hand as the younger man spoke.

Agca laughed briefly a few times, but the smile would then quickly fade from his face. In the first months after the assassination attempt, there had been in Agca's eyes a zealot's burning glare. But now his face wore a confused, uncertain expression, never hostile. The Pope clasped Agca's hands in his own from time to time. At other times he grasped the man's arm, as if in a gesture of support.

John Paul's words were intended for Agca alone. "What we talked about will have to remain a secret between him and me," the Pope said as he emerged from the cell. "I spoke to him as a brother whom I have pardoned, and who has my complete trust." As John Paul rose to leave, the two men shook hands. The Pope gave Agca, who will turn 26 next week, a small gift in a



BEIRUT: devastated U.S. embassy

EL SALVADOR: men executed by death squad near San Salvador

white box, a rosary in silver and mother-of-pearl. The Pope walked out. Agca was left standing alone, and the camera recorded a sudden look of uncertainty on his face. Perhaps he was thinking about the prospect of spending the rest of his life in jail for attempting to kill a man he did not know, a man who now came to him as a friend.

Later, John Paul spoke to the women inmates of the prison about what had happened on this "historic day." Said the Pontiff: "In the context of Christmas and the Holy Year of Redemption, I was able to meet with the person that you all know by name, Ali Agca, who in the year 1981 on the 13th of May made an attempt on my life. But Providence took things in its own hands, in what I would call an extraordinary way, so that today after two years I was able to meet my assailant and repeat to him the pardon I gave him immediately . . . The Lord gave us the grace to meet as men and brothers, because all the events of our lives must confirm that God is our father and all of us are His children in Jesus Christ, and thus we are all brothers."

Down in the murkier reaches of the affair, meantime, Italian authorities seemed ready to make a decision about whether to pursue the "Bulgarian connection." Agca has insisted that he had three Bulgarian accomplices in the assassination plot. One of them, said the gunman, was Sergei Ivanov Antonov, once the Rome manager of Bulgaria's national airline. Agca has offered detailed but sometimes conflicting recollections of a labyrinthine plot involving the Bulgarians, right-wing Turks and, ultimately, the Soviet KGB. Agca claims that Antonov drove him to St. Peter's Square on the day of the shooting. Italian investigators are trying to decide whether to indict Antonov or dismiss the case.

The scene in Rebibbia had a symbolic splendor. It shone in lovely contrast to what the world has witnessed lately in the news. For some time, a suspicion has taken hold that the trajectory of history is descendant, that the world moves from disorder to greater disorder, toward darkness—or else toward the terminal global flash. The symbolism of the pictures from Rebibbia is precisely the Christian message, that people can be redeemed, that they are ascendant toward the light. In a less exalted sense, the scene may be important because it suggests that human beings can respond to inhuman acts by being sane and civilized and forbearing, more decent, perhaps, than the killers deserve.

The Pope obviously entertained high ambitions for the meeting as an example to the world of the healing powers of forgiveness. But the act of forgiveness is extraordinarily complex. It becomes especially intricate when the spirit of forgiveness is urged as a basis for public policy. John Paul's gesture proclaimed a large exemplary message to the world. Is forgiveness a purely per-

sonal transaction, or can it be applied in a political way to reconcile enemies? What if Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir and Palestine Liberation Organization Chairman Yasser Arafat forgave each other and came to some reconciliation, perhaps in the way Shamir's predecessor, Menachem Begin, and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat did in 1977 when Sadat made his dramatic journey to Jerusalem? If John Paul could forgive the man who shot him, could sit with him and hold his hands, could not Ronald Reagan and Soviet Leader Yuri Andropov have dinner some time? John Paul seemed to be suggesting that such acts could at least dampen some of the more murderous impulses that are loose in places like Lebanon and El Salvador. Is there a larger public and political application of John Paul's example?

The first complexity of forgiveness involves the question of justice. Personal or even divine magnanimity is not public justice, and it should not be permitted to override justice. The Pope forgave Agca, but Agca remains in jail, and should. President Gerald Ford did not seem to have the distinction clear in his mind when, using somewhat sacramental language, he pardoned Richard Nixon in 1974. Said Ford: "I do believe, with all my heart and mind and spirit, that I, not as President, but as a humble servant of God, will receive justice without mercy if I fail to show mercy."

It was one thing for Ford, as a human being, to forgive Nixon, but another for Ford, as President of the U.S., to grant a pardon, thus short-circuiting the judicial process. Says Father Robert Friday, professor of religion and religious education at the Catholic University of America: "Forgiveness doesn't mean that you become some sort of a wimp and forgive without some kind of demand. We are responsible for what we have done." Jesuit Theologian Avery Dulles agrees: "For the ordering of society, there should still be justice. Restraint and punishment are necessary even for forgiveness."

In public realms, there is very often a tension between justice and forgiveness. The Rev. Roger Shinn, professor of social ethics at New York City's Union Theological Seminary, emphasizes the difference between personal forgiveness and legal or social forgiveness. "Personal relations can be very spontaneous, almost oblivious to rules, to law and order," says he. "Society cannot be. That is the whole problem of Christian political ethics, how to translate the ultimate virtue of love into a social order that has stability, consistency."

There is a certain Panglossian spirit, sweet and fatuous, always at play in the margins of any discussion of forgiveness. Comedian Richard Pryor, in one of his routines, describes how he



LONDON: horses of Queen's Household Cavalry hit by I.R.A. bomb in Hyde Park



ORLY AIRPORT, FRANCE: a victim of a terrorist

went to Arizona State Prison in order to make a 1980 movie called *Stir Crazy*. Before that experience, he said, he had recited a standard liberal line about the injustice of prisons. But after he met some of the homicidal brutes there and found out what crimes they had committed to earn their tuition, he said he was *glad* they had prisons with great big bars to hold people like that. In the real world, forgiveness sometimes makes sense as sentiment, but not as social policy.

That inconsistency can be resolved by assigning the two imperatives, justice and forgiveness, to different functional levels, to that of Caesar and that of God. Justice is a social question, while forgiveness introduces a transcendent element: love. Weighing the injunction in the Sermon on the Mount to turn the other cheek, Martin Luther concluded that an individual ought to obey the command, but a government should not. There are two orders, that of the law and that of the Gospel. One forgives in one's heart, in the sight of God, as the Pope did, but the criminal still serves his time in Caesar's jail. And yet if one assumes that the claims of God and Caesar are parallel lines, and do not connect with each other, then it is futile, or merely sentimental, to talk about how a spirit of forgiveness might come into politics and international affairs. It is in the realm of Caesar that the bombing goes on.

In any case, experience teaches that forgiveness runs somewhat against human nature. The corollary of "To err is human, to forgive divine" is that to forgive is not human, not entirely so. To forget is human, and that eventual fading of a grievance from memory, not direct forgiveness, is quite often the solution.

It is interesting to wonder how, nearly a decade later, the American people see the Nixon case, whether that forgetting, almost a form of pseudo forgiveness, has occurred. Repentance is said to be a precondition for forgiveness, and Nixon has shown no sign that he has ever repented the deeds that forced him to resign. He toughed it out. Now he is a comparatively prosperous man, pursuing his career, writing books, doing serious work.

Consider what has become of some of Nixon's enemies, the people who, over the years, thought that they had left him for dead. John Kennedy, for example, buried 20 years ago, has undergone some savage revisionism that held him to be a second-rate President and an indiscreet philanderer. Pat Brown, who won the 1962 California gubernatorial race that supposedly ended Nixon's career ("You won't have Nixon to kick around any more . . . this is my last press conference") was superseded by an ideological antithesis, Ronald Reagan, and eventually by Brown's son Jerry, who is now in political limbo.

Echo of an Ancient Rite

The extraordinary scene of Pope John Paul II huddled in intense conversation with his would-be assassin had an emblematic quality for hundreds of millions of Roman Catholics. In appearance, if not content, it echoed an ancient tradition of the church: confession of personal sins to a priest.

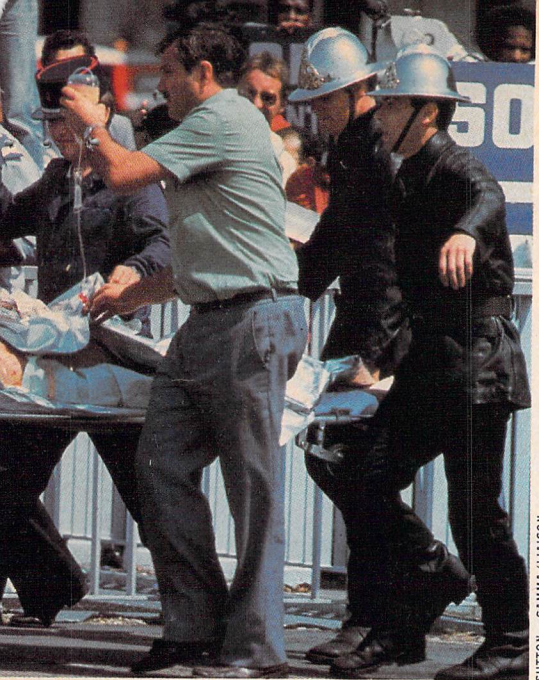
That encounter was not, however, meant to administer the Catholic sacrament of penance. Mehmet Ali Agca's education in his own faith, Islam, apparently is spotty, but he probably has a general awareness of its teaching that God will weigh each person's deeds on the Day of Judgment. A practicing

Muslim invokes the Almighty's mercy during the five prescribed daily prayer sessions. But for John Paul, penance and absolution have very precise meanings. Penance is one of the Catholic Church's seven sacraments. Baptized Catholics, before receiving Communion, are required to confess contritely all their "grave sins" (for example, adultery) to a priest, and they are encouraged to confess lesser misdeeds. The priest absolves penitents on God's behalf. The priest also directs sinners to perform deeds of "penance" (hence the sacrament's name).

The formal practice of confession

goes back thousands of years in Judeo-Christian tradition. Jewish Scripture and liturgy include ancient prayers of confession of sins, and the most solemn period in Judaism's ceremonial calendar is Yom Kippur, the annual Day of Atonement. In Catholic Christianity the sacrament reached its classic form by the 11th century; five centuries later the custom developed of holding confession in a booth, with penitent and priest speaking to each other through an opening in a partition. So strict is the privacy that a Catholic priest is forbidden even to reveal knowledge about crimes acquired under the confessional "seal."

Eastern Orthodoxy shares a similar tradition of sacramental confession before a priest. Anglicanism allows for, but



LONDONDERRY, NORTHERN IRELAND: funeral of a Catholic demonstrator

bombing is carried from the scene by rescue workers

The process of forgetting as a substitute for forgiving may occur most readily in societies with a high rate of change, of physical and social mobility. That could explain why Americans do not on the whole bear enduring grudges, and sometimes find it difficult to understand the profound and centuries-long hatreds that can grip, say, the Middle East, the Balkans or Northern Ireland.

Where ethnic identity remains strong and is fiercely perpetuated, the logic of the blood feud reigns, and it is infinitely harder to forgive or even think of forgiving. An old wrong, a kind of primal atrocity, sits in the tribal memory like a totem, an eternal reminder. For a man to forgive his enemy would mean betraying his father and grandfather and great-grandfather, dishonoring the sacrifices that they had made. It is treason to forgive, inexcusable to forget. So, between Armenians and Turks, Northern Irish Catholics and Protestants, between South Moluccans and Dutch, between Lebanese Maronites and Druze, between Hatfields and McCoys, between Montagues and Capulets, the ancient fury persists. The enemy is timeless. His very existence is unforgivable, but also indispensable.

Not all enmities are unreasonable, either. Timing obviously has much to do with whether or not forgiveness makes any sense. The deed, the source of the grievance, must be some time in the past, and the threat of further injury removed. If someone had taken a shot at a man and then ducked into the woods, still carrying a loaded gun, it would not be reasonable for the man to call after his assailant, "That's O.K.! I forgive you!"

Moreover, in all but the saintliest circles, forgiveness may be a luxury that depends upon a certain surrounding stability. It is more difficult to forgive when there is no protection against a recurrence, when there are no doors or windows on the house and one is at the mercy of every zealot and loon who cares to crawl in with a knife in his teeth. That is the barbarous condition of Beirut at the moment, a place that forgiveness deserted long ago.

There are in Catholic theology "the sins against the Holy Spirit." These include such offenses as despairing of salvation and obstinacy in sinning. As long as they persist, they are in some sense unforgivable. The doctrine raises interesting questions of unforgivability. If it had been 6 million Catholics who were exterminated in the Nazi death camps, would the Pope have forgiven Adolf Eichmann? Or would he have had Eichmann hunted down, taken to Rome for trial and executed,

does not require, private confession, in addition to the general confession and priestly pronouncement of absolution in liturgical rites. Although Martin Luther advocated private confession, Protestantism rapidly abandoned it, on the ground that the individual should confess sins directly to God in public worship or personal prayers, without the intervention of clergy.

The Pope is required to confess his sins in private, just like the humblest of his parishioners. John Paul not only visits Rome's prisons and parishes but hears confessions at St. Peter's Basilica on Good Friday; he is the first modern Pope to do so.

John Paul designated penance as the topic for last October's synod of bishops,

not only because he stresses the sacrament's importance but because its practice nowadays is in a state of flux and confusion. Theologians disagree over what sort of sins require absolution, and whether young children should confess before making their First Communion, as the Vatican desires, or a few years later when they may have a better understanding of the nature of sin. A majority of U.S. parishes now offer face-to-face confession with a priest as an alternative to the austere, anonymous meeting in a booth. The Vatican allows a communal rite of "general absolution," but only in extraordinary circumstances (for example, on battlefields or in mission areas that lack priests).

After the Second Vatican Council

(1962-65), American Catholics "walked away in droves from the sacrament of penance," says Russell Shaw, a layman who is public affairs secretary of the U.S. Catholic Conference. Shaw speculates that some of the defectors are married couples who use birth control, and "they don't want to confess it, but they don't want to *not* confess it." More generally, though, the dwindling attendance at confession seems to suggest that lay Catholics have a diminishing sense of their own sinfulness and of the redemptive power of the sacrament. As Shaw puts it, "They don't believe they've sinned seriously, or if they do, they believe penance is not necessary. Or they believe that nobody goes to Hell."

as the Jews brought Eichmann to Jerusalem for judgment and hanging?

The theme of the unforgivable offense reverberates up and down the 20th century, perhaps because such a crime is thought to be more against man—or more accurately, more against the tribe—than against God. Harold R. Isaacs, a journalist and political scientist, observed in his 1975 book *Idols of the Tribe*: "We are experiencing on a massively universal scale a convulsive ingathering of people in their numberless grouping of kinds—tribal, racial, linguistic, religious, national. It is a great clustering into separatenesses that will, it is thought, improve, assure, or extend each group's power or place, or keep it safe or safer from the power, threat, or hostility of others." But such fragmentation does not open people up through the offices of tolerance and forgiveness; instead it closes them in upon themselves and promotes the logic of revenge.

The 20th century has been one of enormous tribal slaughter, much of it distant from the world's eyes. As many as 200,000 Tutsi and Hutu tribesmen massacred one another during tribal warfare in Burundi in the early 1970s, for example. Some 3,000 Bengalis were murdered in Assam, India, last February. More than 100,000 Iranians and Iraqis have been killed in their war, which is now three years old. And each slaughter enforces upon the survivors in the tribe the imperative to take revenge.

Yet in a sense, the greater the sin, the more the forgiving is necessary—even indispensable. Consider the American South, the scene of an enormous historical wrong that persisted for centuries. In 1982, when he was running for re-election for Governor of Alabama, George Wallace knew that he would need the black vote in order to win. He appeared before the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and apologized for his behavior toward blacks in the past. He had once vowed that he would never be "out-niggered" again by a white opponent, and he had stood in the door of the University of Alabama to prevent two black students from enrolling. But after his apology, the black voters of Alabama forgave him, and voted for him in large numbers.

All over the South, in a remarkable display of grace, blacks forgave the injuries of the past. Says the Rev. Donald W. Shriver, a native Virginian who is president of Union Theological Seminary in New York City: "I think the decision by descendants of black slaves in this country to become citizens and active members of this society is a remarkable case of forgiveness. By and large, blacks have had a steadier sense of belonging to the United States and of being true citizens than many of those who have oppressed them." Says Atlanta Mayor Andrew Young: "We shared the burden of guilt for past racial abuses and we moved toward reconciliation. And we've grown together as brothers and sisters and we've prospered, mainly because of the ability to forgive and be reconciled."

Christ preached forgiveness, the loving of one's enemies. It is at the center of the New Testament. Stated nakedly, superficially, the proposition sounds perverse and even self-destructive, an invitation to disaster. Those skeptical about the larger uses of forgiveness, in fact, tend to think of that principle as a little weak-minded. Rabbi Neil Gillman, assistant professor of philosophy at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, does not believe that a private impulse toward

forgiveness, symbolized by the Pope's visit to Agca, can be translated into a public policy of reconciliation. Jewish tradition, he says, links forgiveness to behavioral change. "There is a healthy amount of realism in the doctrine," says Gillman. "Forgiveness should be tied to the ability to see a real change in human—or national—action. An inner attitude of contrition on the part of the wrongdoer is not sufficient. Israel's stance [its refusal to reconcile with the P.L.O.] is based on the fact that the P.L.O., for all its verbalizing, still takes responsibility for destroying a bus. There is no evidence of real contrition."

Whatever the political maneuvers one makes with it, forgiveness is actually a profound transaction. It is the working model of the human relationship with God. It is not merely God who forgives man, but in some sense man who also forgives God, or forgives life, for its cruelties and injustices. The essence of the process is dynamic, for forgiveness makes change possible—spiritual change and, as the American South proves, social change.

The Old Testament view of forgiveness was contained in a verb that dominates its penitential literature, the Hebrew word

shuv, meaning to turn, to return. The doctrine implies that man has the power to turn from evil to good, to change, and the very act of turning will bring God's forgiveness. Those who do not forgive are those who are least capable of changing the circumstances of their lives. In this sense, forgiveness is a shrewd and practical strategy for a person, or a nation, to pursue. It is the implacable, retributive tribes, like those of Northern Ireland or Lebanon, that find themselves backwatered, isolated, perishing in their own fury.

The psychological case for forgiveness is overwhelmingly persuasive. Not to forgive is to be imprisoned by the past, by old grievances that do not permit life to proceed with new business. Not to forgive is to yield oneself to another's control. If one does not forgive, then one is controlled by the other's initiatives and is locked into a sequence of act and response, of outrage and revenge, tit for tat, escalating always. The present is endlessly overwhelmed and devoured by

the past. Forgiveness frees the forgiver. It extracts the forgiver from someone else's nightmare. "Unless there is a breach with the evil past," says Donald Shriver, "all we get is this stuttering repetition of evil."

It is difficult to imagine a world willing to follow John Paul's example, ending that stuttering repetition any time in the near future. Too many societies are spiritually incapable of it. Marxism, the political doctrine under which about one-third of the world's population lives, is a stolidly unforgiving system. Stalin did not forgive the Kulaks for being a little too independent, but liquidated millions of them. The Chinese did not forgive their bourgeoisie after the 1949 revolution, but demoralized and decimated it. The Prophet taught that "God is with those who restrain themselves," but Ayatullah Khomeini's Shi'ite regime is in a state of religious intoxication and madness that is unlikely to be overtaken by tolerance.

Forgiveness is not an impulse that is in much favor. It is a mysterious and sublime idea in many ways. The prevalent style in the world runs more to the high-plaints drifter, to the hard, cold eye of the avenger, to a numb remorselessness. Forgiveness does not look much like a tool for survival in a bad world. But that is what it is.

—By Lance Morrow. Reported by Barry Kalb and Wilton Wynn/Rome



REBIBBIA PRISON, ROME: a kiss of reconciliation