

cousin's husband, and the brief references to his widow, Sheila, and to their five children. I found myself recalling forgotten details of the summer evening in their home in Belfast, the part of the room where I had sat with Sheila, unable to find words, hearing her insisting that there must be no retaliation; the family rallying around, the disbelief in the young eyes, and the word "forgive" spoken in whispers. And then, the funeral and heart-break, the years of unseen grieving, and the effort to stitch life back together again "for the sake of the children."

Last year, not long after the publication of *Lost Lives*, Sheila Maguire died after a sudden illness. At her funeral I listened to the parish priest as he made the links in his homily between the Gospel reading from the Beatitudes announced by Jesus and the story of Sheila's life. "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. . . . Blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy. . . . Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Matt. 5:4ff). He went on to highlight the Christian witness of a woman who had followed in the way of Jesus as a woman of peace. He told of that July day in 1972 when her world was horribly shattered by the murder of her husband by a Loyalist gunman as he went about his day's work. Sheila had struggled to cope with her terrible loss. To those who looked on, the idea of forgiving the killer seemed an act beyond human possibility. For Sheila, the impossible was a necessity. The act of forgiving expressed her will to overcome evil with good and to protect her children from the anonymous sectarian hatred that had fired the bullets into Phil's head. Forgiveness was the only way she knew to disarm that hatred and prevent it from wreaking further destruction on her family. The message of the preaching was simple and direct. It bore witness to a Christian woman and man who had lived and died in faithfulness to Christ's example. In the ritual of remembering Sheila and Phil were reunited in the bond of life beyond death, at one with the Risen Christ.

The preached word brought comfort to those who mourned. Through it, the congregation could sense the simple power of personal suffering related to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. They could also grasp the connection between that bond of suffering and the contemporary public efforts on all sides to hold together the fragile peace. A few hours later I commented separately to a son and a daughter on how truly the priest had

portrayed Sheila as the great Christian woman she was, and particularly her courage in forgiving. Each of the two agreed—the priest's words had been a comfort—but with a reservation: "I wish he hadn't said it was a Loyalist who killed my Father. None of us in the family told him that it was a Loyalist." One of them added, "That doesn't add anything to Dad's death, and somebody might make it an excuse to be bitter." They were also concerned in case some of their mother's Protestant bowling friends who had come to the funeral would be embarrassed by the reference to a "Loyalist gunman." Their mother would not have wanted that. How well the lesson of forgiveness had been taught, how well learned. In the convictions of these adult children the mother's gift of forgiveness was being relived with a passion and grace that was all their own. In the midst of death and sin, forgiveness was once more finding a space. The quality of mercy was not strained.

More than nine out of ten of those killed in the Troubles were men. It was mostly women who watched and waited and were left behind. Ulster poet W.R. Rodger's words are painfully apt:

It is always the women who are the Watchers  
 And keepers of life: they guard our exits  
 And our entrances. They are both womb and tomb,  
 End and beginning. Bitterly they bring forth  
 And bitterly take back the light they gave.  
 The last to leave and still the first to come,  
 They circle us like sleep or like the grave  
 It is always the women who are the Watchers  
 And Wakeners.<sup>2</sup>

It has been observed that one reason why violence was not much greater during the years of the Troubles was "the way that Christians and their Churches have chosen consistently to seek to cut cycles of vengeance by calling for and practising non-retaliation and forgiveness" and the fact that the Gospel message of forgiveness "has significantly penetrated Irish life, and its practice—particularly by many victims and their families—has had social and political effects." But it has also been asserted, "The victims of

2. W. R. Rodgers, "Resurrection: An Easter Sequence," W. R. Rodgers: *Poems*, edited and with an introduction by Michael Longley (Oldcastle, Ireland: Gallery Books, 1993), 66–75, 74.