Kneeling to remember

by Miroslav Volf in the July 1, 1998 issue

It was Memorial Day, and I was sitting in the church of General George S. Patton. Well, it was not quite his church, but his family had erected a monument to him in the churchyard and smuggled in a stained-glass window depicting an object or two dear to the general's heart and indispensable for the general's trade.

A few sentences into the sermon it became clear that the rector, Denis O'Pray, was unintimidated by the "military presence" on the church's premises. In a world drenched in violence, he insisted, the church of Jesus Christ has not condemned violence with sufficient clarity and force. The sermon was heading the right direction, I thought. Being a certain kind of pacifist, I felt comfortable, the general's stained-glass window right above my head notwithstanding. But my mind was unruly and wandered elsewhere—though my bad conscience kept returning it to its proper place. A fine Memorial Day sermon served as an occasion to explore connections between memory and violence.

The first station of my explorations was Elie Wiesel's memoirs, *All Rivers Run to the Sea*, which I had read a year or so ago. Stating the reason for the book, he writes (no, I am not quoting from memory): "I am 66 years old, and I belong to a generation obsessed by a thirst to retain and transmit everything. For no other has the commandment *Zachor*—'Remember!'—had such meaning." Why this obsession with memory? Because the memory of death will serve as a shield against death, argues Wiesel. Salvation, he wrote elsewhere, "can be found only in memory." A bit overstated, I thought, but basically right, provided one understands it rightly.

I was startled, however, to come across the following lines on the next page: "Certain events will be omitted [from the memoirs], especially those episodes that might embarrass friends, and, of course, those that might damage the Jewish people." The "everything" Wiesel is obsessed to retain and transmit explicitly excludes what "might damage the Jewish people." So salvation lies not in memory, but in remembering certain things for the good of certain people and in suppressing other things that might harm them.

But what if some memories are perceived as beneficial by one group and as damaging by another? Inversely, what if suppressing certain things is seen as healing by some people but as wounding by others? Would not then politics be the master of memory? Even more disturbing, would not such a notion of the value of memory blur the boundary between memory as a shield against death and memory as a weapon of destruction?

Wiesel's tying of memory to the good of a particular people led me to the next station on my explorations. By now the rector was well into explaining that a clear and forceful condemnation of violence by the church does not necessarily entail giving up all use of violence. I understood him to suggest a position roughly similar to Bonhoeffer's under the Nazi regime: there are situations—rare situations!—in which you must engage in violent struggle, but when you do so you must repent for having done wrong in the very act of doing what is right.

I said an "Amen" to myself, and my irreverent mind went to the recent Vatican document about the Holocaust, "We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah." The Roman Catholic Church has, through its official organs, engaged in remembering the same events the Jewish people also seek to remember. The document makes a helpful distinction between the general anti-Jewish attitudes and practices over the centuries in "Christian" Europe and the specific form of anti-Semitism practiced with such brutality by the Nazis. But I was disturbed by its unwillingness to admit to a significant connection between the two. The Shoah, the document states, "was the work of a thoroughly modern neopagan regime. Its anti-Semitism had its roots outside of Christianity."

This is right in what it says but wrong in what it implies, or so it seems to me. The disjunction between anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism strikes me as implausible and unfortunate. I could not help wondering whether in this document the Catholic Church is unwilling to remember what "might damage the church." If so, for many Jews that very unwillingness seems damaging to the Jewish people.

By now the rector was talking about remembering those who died in American wars. And again, spurred by the sermon, my mind wandered. Wiesel is right: we must remember, at least for the time being. But how should we remember so that our memory will heal not only us but our relationships with our neighbors? If we must unambiguously condemn violence and yet are sometimes obliged to engage in it, what is the right way to remember violence suffered and violence inflicted?

We must keep in mind that even in the most “just” deployments of violence the triumph of justice is always paid for by the practice of injustice, that bravery goes hand in hand with culpable cruelty, and that great victories involve many small and large moral defeats. And, of course, we must also remember acts of violence committed in shameful and morally abhorrent ways. The only way to remember rightly is not to shy away from remembering what is damaging to us and our own people. If we want memory to heal us and our relationships, we will have to let it wound us, let it speak to us unhindered of the wrongs we have committed.

As we were preparing to celebrate the Eucharist, it occurred to me that the best place to remember violence inflicted and suffered may be at the altar, kneeling in readiness to receive the body that was broken and the blood that was shed—for our transgressions.