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Life is Worth Giving

THE SCARS OF WAR AND THE NEED FOR FORGIVENESS

by Fr. Kevin Shanley, O.Carm.

The somewhat recent spate of executions in Illinois and other parts of the country, following an almost 30-year moratorium, brought a flood of letters, pro and con, about the issue of the death penalty. Strong opinions filled the "letters to the ^editor" section of our daily and weekly newspapers, the air ~~waves~~ waves of talk show hosts, and the casual conversation of ordinary people.

One letter in particular, written to an area newspaper, struck a deep and resounding cord in my memory. The writer used the centuries-old conflict between the English and the Irish, and especially the 1919-21 Anglo-Irish War (or the Black-and-Tan War as the Irish dubbed it), as a justification for the return to the use of the death penalty. "And even today, the Irish remember and will never forgive the British for turning criminals loose on them." This was the letter-writer's main sentiment. He wanted the restoration of the death penalty in Illinois and elsewhere.

The letter brought me back to reflecting on my own late Father's experience of fighting for independence in the Irish Easter Week Rebellion of 1916, his subsequent imprisonment at Wakefield Prison Camp in England, and his later participation in the Anglo-Irish War. Yet he was a gentle man of peace.

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My Father bore the painful scars of war through the rest of his life, including physical ailments such as asthma. He seldom spoke of those years, even to his immediate family. But my starkest memory of him years ago was when he would pace up and down the kitchen of our flat on the West Side of Jersey City, N.J. The pace and distance were always the same. I later found out that this was the exact distance of his cell in Wakefield Prison Camp.

His reluctance to talk about those painful years was coupled with his refusal to return to the "Ould Sod" years later with the Family.

"It was too ^{much} painful to leave once," he explained, "and I don't want to do that again." He never returned.

Lesson of Forgiveness

One of the most important lessons that I learned from my Father, however, was that of forgiveness. In spite of his own past experiences, he often spoke of the English people who had helped him, who spoke out for justice for the Irish, and who were embarrassed by their Government's policies towards the tiny island nation.

If we seek only revenge, he would say, then we should remember the old Irish saying: "An eye for an eye makes all men blind." He did not wish blindness on either people.

Over the years, I have often reflected on my Father's tolerance and forgiveness, of his ^{WANTING} ~~wanted~~ all men and women to live in peace, and of his great devotion to the person and non-violence doctrine of Mahatma Gandhi of India.

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Down through these many years, my Father's words have echoed on my memory and impeded my involvement with various groups to seek peace, promote life, and to bring about reconciliation for people.

His words, "An eye for an eye makes all men blind," continue to help me to seek peace and forgiveness.