

# MESSENGER OF FORGIVENESS



After working for many years with people affected by conflict in Northern Ireland and elsewhere, Fr Brian Lennon SJ is well aware of just how difficult reconciliation and forgiveness can be

*By Sue Leonard*

**B**rian Lennon SJ, has recently published a book on forgiveness. Focusing on those who have been wronged, he explores the difficulties of forgiving for those who have suffered violence, who are filled with anger, and want only revenge. The book is a culmination of Lennon's work in Northern Ireland. It's a powerful and perceptive read.

Bought up in Sandymount in Dublin, Fr Lennon first realised his calling when he was 12.

"At that stage it was like a fantasy of being a fireman or a soldier, but it didn't go away," he says. Lennon attended the Jesuit-run Belvedere College, and went to Mass every Sunday, but says his parents did not have a particularly strong faith.

"When I mentioned the idea of becoming a priest, at 18, my mother nearly dropped the teapot," he says. "Being a priest was not what she wanted for me."

He was full of doubt, too.

"I had doubts about the way of life, about celibacy, and about how I would fit in. But the call was there. It was there outside me and beyond me, and it drew me in. It was always there, and it stayed."

Joining the order as a novice at 18, though, came as a culture shock.

"We were in silence for most of the day. We wore gowns, and conformity was vital. I wasn't good at conformity. So it was a relief when we got out, and went to UCD, where I studied History. We lived in Rathfarnham and the rector gave us the freedom to explore.

"We were able to hang around with the other students, and go off to pubs. And we met girls, and that led to a lot of confusion and doubt. But the crunch came when we left college and studied philosophy in Milltown. There was a more religious context in Milltown, and our friends from UCD had left and got jobs or married. That was a huge conflict.

"But the call was still there," he says. "It drew you back through prayer. And as I've got older, I've realised that the Jesuit way of life is valid and appropriate. It has its struggles, but so does any other way of life."

## MOVE NORTH

Fr Lennon spent two years teaching, first in Gonzaga, then Clongowes. He enjoyed the experience but life as a teacher didn't suit him. He wanted to work in deprived areas, and after a stint studying counselling in America, then theology and ecumenism in Ireland, he got his wish.

"The Jesuits were making a big effort at the time to get back into Northern Ireland," he says. "And in 1980 we got clearance from Cardinal O'Fiach to open a house in Portadown. Against our initial instincts we took a house in Churchill Park, a beat up estate.

"It was the right decision. There was underlying tension between the ecumenism, on one hand, and solidarity with the people who were most deprived, on the other. The two went together. We'd feared Protestants would not visit us there, but they did."

While there, Fr. Lennon became involved in community projects. The Jesuits bought a community caravan, and for a while had a lease on a fish and chip shop. This, he says, was the best way to build up relationships with the local people.

"I learned that you do have a duty to challenge people, but your capacity to challenge them is in direct relationship to your relationship with them.

"We learned to go drinking with them and to become friends. But they would also tell us who we should visit in hospital. We had a dual role."

Everyone, he says, was affected by the Troubles.

"I was going in and out of the prisons saying Mass. I was there during the hunger strikes and the dirt strike before that. In that situation you preach the gospel very differently."

He was also involved in a faith and justice group which reflected on the conflict in the light of the scriptures.

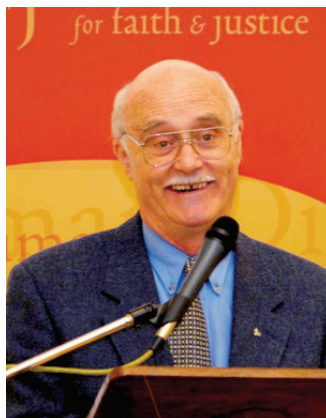
"I taught theology. The group was gobsmacked that theology was something that relates to your life and the situation you are in, and that it is for us to discover rather than something led by external rules that are handed down to you and don't make sense."

#### SABBATICAL YEAR

After 16 years in Portadown, Fr Lennon went on a year's sabbatical to the United States, where he formed a connection with the Peace Studies department at Stanford University.

"And then I went to South Africa to look at the truth and reconciliation commission there," he says.

Now 61, Fr Lennon lives in Armagh, where he continues to be involved in the peace process.



All those doubts are still there, but they are offset by those moments when you realise that God is completely present

"It was obvious that people in the community sector were not being listened to, so we began to hold public hearings for people to tell their stories. We developed a dialogue based on what people really wanted."

He kept that personal approach when he wrote *So You Can't Forgive?*

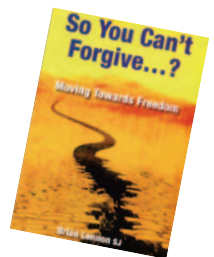
"A friend, who deals with forgiveness from a counselling point of view, said that the religious people she deals with have a much harder time moving to freedom than people who are not religious. Religious people feel guilty, if they have been abused, that they are not reconciled with their abuser. 'Love your enemy,' 'pray for those who persecute you' can be a burden for people."

Does Fr Lennon feel he is doing what God intended for him?

"I'm not sure that God has a plan. I think God walks alongside us and tries to get us to use our brain, or at least limit some of our egoism. He tries to stick some grace into us, and hopes that we will make the right decision in whatever context.

"All those doubts are still there, but they are offset by those moments when you realise that God is completely present. Those times are short, but they are very real."

*So You can't Forgive...? Moving Towards Freedom, by Brian Lennon SJ is published by the Columba Press.*



## Win a Pilgrimage for Two to Rome!

Join the **FAMILY & LIFE** mailing list and be in with a chance to win a Pilgrimage for Two to Rome.

Fill in the form below in **BLOCK CAPITALS** and send it to Family & Life, 26 Mountjoy Square, FREEPOST, Dublin 1, Ireland.

Name: .....

Address: .....

Phone: ..... Mobile: .....

Email address: .....

**Family & Life**, 26 Mountjoy Square, Dublin 1, Ireland.  
 P: 01 855 2790 E: [fandl@iol.ie](mailto:fandl@iol.ie) W: [www.familyandlife.org](http://www.familyandlife.org)  
 Charity number: CHY12245

Rules: Must be over 18 years of age. Forms may be photocopied. One entry per person. Application form must be completed. Draw will take place on July 31st 2009. The winner will be notified by post and that person's name will appear at [www.familyandlife.org](http://www.familyandlife.org). No entries will be accepted after July 30th 2009. Information collected during this draw will not be passed to third parties and will remain confidential; save for the above. [RD 09]