

LCRD Day Three (December 4, 1999)
Address on Forgiveness
by Former French Minister of Health, Georgina Du Foix

Your Excellency, [Mr.] President,
Mr. and Mrs. Ministers (you may observe that I also greet the women who are ministers of this Government),
Your Excellencies, Representatives of brother and friend countries,
Ladies and Gentlemen:

I ask you sincerely, in what capacity am I here today? I am not Bouteflika [president of Algeria, whose message was just delivered], whom I respect and admire—and I'd like to sincerely thank the representatives of the Algerian nation who have spoken on its behalf; it is very touching to speak after them. But as a representative of my country, France, I have to have a special thought about reconciliation and forgiveness with the Algerian nation and with the Algerian people, who have shared our history for so many years—sometimes in good moments, but sometimes in very difficult times; we could even say in bad times. And I believe, be it in the case of Algeria or other situations, we have to face those hard times that have potential to crush us but can also renew us and make us grow. Is it possible? I don't know, but I hope so, I sincerely hope so.

The problem is not talking with you today as a former colonizer or representative of colonization—something that I have already done, and that I will do again, taking on the past of my country both with its difficult and with its great deeds. As a member of my country's government for many years, as a representative of white people and of some Europeans, I assume the vagaries of our history. It is not always easy. And I believe that one of the only means that I could have today is to assume the role with simplicity and regret, and sometimes repentance. Anyway, assuming that particular part of the past is entering into the way, which is, in my opinion, a majestic way: it is the way of forgiveness, of forgiveness given, forgiveness received, forgiveness requested, and of forgiveness accepted.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I believe that if I am speaking to you today, it is above all as a representative of a secular culture. That is not to say that it is a culture that doesn't take into account beliefs and hopes, but it is a culture which tries as it can, and sometimes even achieves, a "universal consciousness." Is it right? Is it wrong? I don't know exactly, but I know that it is from that position that I would like to speak to you today. I am also from that culture, and it is as such that I was appointed in the government of my country where I remained for almost twelve years of public life. Then my life changed: my life changed because transcendence entered my life at a time when I was not seeing beyond what was around me. It was a great personal change to my private life.

Suddenly, you become a different person because you take into account different parameters. At that point in time, I thought that the wisest thing to do was to quit public life. And today, I am no longer a member of my government and I have no public role, not even the one of Chairperson of the French Red Cross that I held for many years. Then, why am I here? You could ask, "What is she doing here, this lady? Is it because she is female, because she is white, because she is

European?" She is here because she is concerned about peace between peoples, and she is here because she has been following up on the process of reconciliation for many years.

But you know, this lady that I am had not understood anything of the drama that still remains in people's minds as far as slavery is concerned. I knew the drama of slavery, of course, though I recall that it did not take up many chapters of my history book. But I knew of it, of course. I thought that I was on the side of Victor Schuelcher—that is to say, on the side of the man who abolished slavery. The English, they talk about Wilberforce. I was talking about Victor Schuelcher, and I thought I was on his side. I said to myself, "Georgina, if you lived in that period, you would have been on the side of Victor Schuelcher;" it seemed clear to me. And I didn't ask myself any other questions; I thought then that it was awful. And it was so awful that a part of my consciousness had overshadowed it like a kind of veil over my consciousness. I was not ignorant of it but it hurt me so much that I preferred not to see it. I am speaking on my own behalf, but I know that for many of you those internal phenomena are realities.

When something hurts us so badly, burns us inside, burns us in terms of suffering, we protect ourselves; and to protect ourselves, we put a veil that can be called a veil of discretion, which blinds painful issues. That is what happened to my consciousness on the issue of slavery. I am speaking of myself but I know very well that we are millions who think like that. And when I was made aware of it by a man who is in this room, who really disturbed me the first time he came to talk to me about the subject—Lawrence Roy—what he said disturbed me terribly. He even, to put it bluntly, irritated me when he came to tell me about it. He told me "Watch out! Slavery is dramatic!" I said he was exaggerating. It took many hours for me to understand what he wanted to tell me. It is a rather recent event. Only four years ago. I took many hours to understand what he wanted to tell me. I said: he is going too far. After all, that man is an American and he should sweep up his own front porch.

As a French person, I was saying to myself: it doesn't concern me. And after one or two hours, I said to myself: What if, despite it all, he were right? And I entered into his way of reasoning. And suddenly, like a veil being torn from my understanding of things, what I didn't want to see became clear. And I noticed that I was misunderstanding an explosive and painful reality, and I hadn't even seen it. I hadn't seen anything.

Today, African American ladies and gentlemen, I ask you sincerely to forgive me for that blindness. That blindness was causing me to consider you—Ladies and Gentlemen, the descendants of those slaves—first as Americans or French (because I also wish to speak to those among you who are the descendants of the slaves who were sent to a French territory).

First, I would like to speak to you and tell you that I first considered you as nationals. In my mind, a black American is an American—the color of his skin is not a problem—and he is an American with the strengths and weaknesses of the great American nation. I admire the vitality, enthusiasm and strength of the Americans. I don't admire all American characteristics but I admire those very much.

And, in my opinion, you were first of all Americans. The color of your skin is different from mine—after all, I try to sunbathe during the summer!—and I was saying to myself, "The color of

skin, where is the problem?” And after all, blood is red for all people. Therefore, I saw no difference if not for the fact that you were Americans.

When I say “Georgina” I’m referring to a lot of people of my generation in my country. I’m not speaking on their behalf. I have no mandate to do so. One thing I know is that we are a great many people who have the same thoughts, who think, “What’s the matter? These women and these men are Americans. And as such, they have a short memory.” To me as a European, the American memory is a short memory. I can talk about my great grand parents. It’s common to do so. I can go up the family line as far as six generations and know where they lived. However, the Americans cannot. They know about one or two generations. That’s all. So I thought that black Americans also had a short memory.

See how I was wrong! I apologize for my ignorance. Me, as a contemporary white European, I understood nothing about what you have on your mind. I did not understand the origin of your pains, your sensitivity and sufferings. I really didn’t understand. But from the moment I started to realize it, I told myself: what can I do? I only have two hands and two feet.

The sad thing when one is no longer in politics is that one loses the position of power. But I still had my mouth and I started talking. I had a heart; I started to love. I had that magnificent thing that for me is called forgiveness, which is a power that gives freedom. The forgiveness that I discovered and discovered recently, is something that is incredible. It is not only in the Bible. It is in our universal conscience as human beings created by the hand of that person who gave us our life and who will take it back. Even if you are not a believer, forgiveness is the most important path to take. Why? For freedom, for freedom. And when I speak to men and women whose minds are broken by slavery and that I speak of freedom, I am aware of some irony. Nevertheless, I think that it is this internal position of forgiveness that leads to the real freedom. And I experienced it in my private life. I experienced it with my husband. It may seem too small at the level of a couple. But it is basic. When one does not get on well with one’s husband, with one’s wife, everything is broken. The momentum is lost. That is the first shattering of our lives. I experienced it with my children.

How much forgiveness do I have to extend to my children? How much? And I experienced how powerful it was to hear a mother say to her children: “I’m really sorry. I’m sorry. I understood nothing about your behavior at times. I totally missed the point as far as you are concerned. I did not realize how delicate you were.” From that day, on the day I started apologizing to my children, our relationship changed remarkably. There are some requests for forgiveness that they readily accepted whereas others they rejected. I still have some of my children who have not yet forgiven me a certain number of things, namely my involvement in politics—although recently in London, one of my daughters publicly extended her apology to me, and her gesture filled me with wonder. But it is difficult. It is hard for children who were broken by the fact that their mother was active in politics to accept the apology that I extended to them. It was not easy.

And then, my biggest apology went to my mother. That one I learned from a psychological culture. In psychological cultures, we are told that a major part of our inner difficulties, namely emotions, come from the fact that our father and our mother, when we were young, were not

what we would wish them to be. I don't know if you get my point. Probably for Europeans living in a psychological culture this goes without saying.

I was telling myself, "I was miserable because my father did not love me the way I wanted him to, my mother did not love me as I would have liked." And all my bitterness would surface. When I discovered forgiveness, the majestic way to freedom, I said that I should do something to correct the situation with my mother. And I felt generous and I told myself, "I will go and forgive my mother."

So I took my courage and went to forgive my mother. My father was already dead. I went to see my mother and I told myself, "I am generous, I will forgive her." I came in front of her. Not a single word came out of my mouth. I couldn't open my mouth. I went to her three days but I was not able to forgive. And yet, I was 45 or 48. I was no longer a child. I had been a Minister, I had held position of power and I had had power, and there I was in front of my mother without being able to say, "Mama, I forgive you." I was not proud of myself. I spent the first, second, third day without having the courage to forgive her. It was on the fourth day; my husband and I were driving home and we arrived near my mother. She was in a very ordinary situation, collecting the laundry. She was taking down the dry laundry and putting it in a bag. And all of a sudden the Spirit of the Lord—for some others, they may call it a brilliant intuition—instead of forgiving my mother, I decided to ask her for her forgiveness. It seemed to me as if the sky were falling down on my head and the ground was giving way under my feet. It was unbearable to hear myself saying that. All my pride said no. My very personality said no. All my culture said no. And I heard myself saying: "Mother, I ask your forgiveness because I was very unpleasant with you." And it was true indeed. But I did not want to admit it to myself. It's a process that human beings go through often when they don't want to see something.

And very simply, mother said: "Of course I forgive you." From then on, our relationship, which has been so rough over the years, became simple. The miracle of forgiveness, the miracle of a requested forgiveness, the miracle of a received forgiveness. My everyday life with my mother changed. My life with my husband changed, my life with my children changed.

And later on, I happened to understand the strength of collective forgiveness. I found it a bit excessive. Frankly speaking, let me tell you, at the beginning, I thought it was a trick, a method, something that we use when we face difficulties. I didn't trust it. And one day—let me remind you that I am from the Lutheran Church, a descendant of French Huguenots from the south of France. It was a minority group that was fought against for its faith many centuries ago and that was killed. I have a number of forefathers who were killed in the Galley of the Kings of France because they wanted to read the Bible but it was forbidden. So the Protestants, my ancestors, do not really like the Catholics because there was war between them centuries ago: It is also a question of memory. And I was lucky. I was born into a family where the problem between the Protestants and Catholics was not serious. Therefore I did not realize that in my heart I still had some animosity against the Catholics lying deep in me. I lived like that for a long time saying, "I love Catholics very much."

And then one day, Pope John II, whose action I salute, came to France for an event of the World Catholic Youth gathering. He came. He arrived in Paris on the very day, ironically, that the

Catholic massacre against Protestants took place. That day is called St. Bartholemy. He came on that day of the month of August, a day marking the anniversary of that massacre. And here we have the Pope who, on the radio, in his voice of an aged person, said: “ I would like to ask the Protestants for the forgiveness of Saint Bartholemy massacre.” I was in the kitchen washing dishes, a very ordinary thing, and tears were flowing down my face. I never realized that I still had some animosity lying deep in my heart, in my long, long memory with regard to the Catholics whom I loved very much. My best friends are Catholics. It was then that I understood the meaning of collective pardon. And I understood that what was valid for us in our culture in France, was something that was powerful, powerful, powerful.

Forgiveness is really a power. It does not make us better, but it gives us freedom. Freedom to face any situation. We are free to do right actions, free from the roots of bitterness and feelings of revenge.

Forgiveness does not mean impunity—and here I need to pay attention because I know it will be hard to translate this—it does not mean that there will be no lawsuits or actions for reparations. It simply means that we have an appeased heart, a heart that is free. However, society should express itself. Forgiveness is not impunity. Nor is it to forget. On the contrary, it is a force that allows us to look into our past as free people. With forgiveness we can face the past. When we suddenly forgive, we become free enough to examine our past through our intimate innermost. We are no longer troubled by bitterness and the feeling of revenge. And I dare to hope that the time of reconciliation will come for countries such as Algeria and can come soon for former French colonies. It is not the time yet but it may come. Maybe, maybe. I would like to express to the Beninois people my regrets for the difficult time you went through during the colonial period.

I would like to tell you that not all our parents who lived at that time were bad people. I did not personally experience the life of that period. I refer to those men and women who have had conducts that were not necessarily dictated by domination and wickedness. Although I apologize on their behalf to you, I think it is my duty to honor men and women who were our fathers and mothers. To honor does not mean that we agree with all they have done, all their actions. And yet in my new culture, I have learned that we should honor our father and our mother and that that is the key to our happiness on earth.

So, with forgiveness, we are in an extraordinarily important situation. How can we honor men and women whose actions hurt us so deeply? How? Ladies and Gentlemen, I would like to talk to you now in simple words. Having listened to you over the past three days, and being fully involved in what you are doing, I was thinking about your common ancestors (the African American ancestors and the African ancestors). I was thinking about them and I realized that some of their actions were disastrous, and we can see it clearly. I was also thinking about our ancestors who have been, as our good friend from England said the other day, the slave traders. And I now bitterly regret what they have done. Nevertheless, they were my ancestors, grandparents and great grandparents. Fortunately, I am not one of their direct descendants. I'm not from a family who was made rich that way. But I could have been.

So, how to position myself vis-à-vis these ancestors of mine? Are the criticisms voiced well founded? The answer is obvious concerning their precise action. But is it correct to keep in my

heart the criticism that they were wicked people full of hatred? Certainly not. And I don't know if you share my opinion. For me, the only option left is to find a way to honor, my father, my mother and grandparents and great grandparents while not accepting all that they have done. This is not an easy way to go. I discovered this not long ago, listening to you. Until this morning it was not clear to me in my mind. It was not clear, and yet I think that it is the best way. And I don't forget that in the first commandment, it is said, "Thou shalt honor thy father and thy mother." That is the promise for a happy life on earth.

I thank you.