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A THEOLOGY OF RECONCILIATION

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Abstract

Reconciliation is an important dimension of our mission which is to build communities of love and unity. If we look at Mission as the proper loving human relationship that enriches and empowers everyone, then reconciliation is an essential component of this process. For we live in a divided world, causing and suffering from various forms of divisions. In this paper I shall look first at the world of division, then see the attempts at reconciliation in various cultures and religions, and then look at the essentials of this process of reconciliation and the areas that need reconciliation.

Keywords: Divided World; Forgiveness; Harmony; Process of Reconciliation; Reconciliation

A Divided World

Our world is characterized by many forms of conflicts and divisions. There are divisions between families, groups, cultures, nations, peoples and religions. There are divisions at the personal, national and international levels. Today one notices more and more divisions taking place in the world, especially due to the growing religious fundamentalism in different parts of the world. Exclusivist and triumphalist claims by any one religion also lead to divisions and conflicts. Terrorism is also another factor that causes divisions among

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peoples and nations. The bloody conflicts in Rwanda between two tribes caused the murder of over 100000 people in a short period of time; the Serbian trouble too is basically between two groups of the same country where people had lived in amity for centuries suddenly turned violent. One knows about the violence in Ireland between two Christian groups and the thousands who lost their lives. In Israel the on-going clash between the Israelites and the Palestinians has resulted in the loss of thousands of lives; only too recently did more than 650000 people die in Iraq due to the war imposed on them by the Americans. In Iraq conflict continues between two Islamic groups: the Sunnis and the Shiites. In Sudan, Sri Lanka, Somalia, Lebanon and other places the daily death counts are increasing. In almost no part of, especially the Third world, can we find today people living in total peace and harmony with one another.

In India, we notice moves to divide the States. Only recently have Uttaranchal, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Telangana been formed. We are only too aware of the troubles in Kashmir. In the North Eastern States there are also movements towards division and separatism. There the clash between the military and the freedom struggle outfits continues unabated. There are the Naxalite movements in the Southern States and also in Bihar, MP and Jharkhand. The Churches too experience divisive factors: new Pentecostal splinter groups carry away many followers from mainline Churches, causing opposition and antagonism. In some parts of India this is becoming a serious concern for the Churches.

Efforts at Unification

While moves to divide are alive, there are also efforts at reconciliation. People instinctively feel that division is not helpful for humans, and hence the move towards reconciliation and harmony is also natural. All cultures and religions have ways of reconciling people to the community. Sanctions and rewards are ways used by different groups. National and international groups try ways of Reconciliation; South Africa had set up a Truth Commission for the explicit purpose of Reconciliation after the Apartheid was dismantled. That has certainly helped to move people from mutual hatred and suspicion to some sort of harmonious co-existence. In recent times, East and West Germany were unified; North and South Korea may also unify; there are similar movements in every part of the world. In the Churches too Ecumenical movements, though not as strong as in the post Vatican II period, are alive. Some recent

rapprochement efforts have been made between the Orthodox and Catholics.

Religions see sin as a divisive factor and have worked out ways of reconciliation. The New Testament is quite familiar with this phenomenon: the gospel of Matthew takes up the issue explicitly in chapter eighteen. Matthew suggests mutual correction, the community involvement in correcting one erring member and finally excommunication (18:15ff). In the Catholic Church, for example, an erring member can get reconciled to the community through private individual confessions. The Orthodox too follows a similar pattern. Similar customs are found also in various tribal societies, and cultural groups. Ways of reconciliation in various tribes of Africa are well known. I may just mention a few.

Among the Luo people there takes place a dialogue among elders from both sides; they communicate the decision to the offended parties; they kill an animal; its blood is sprinkled on the two parties; they share a meal and drink beer with straws from the same pot; pour libation for the ancestors; herbs are used for sprinkling both parties; they dance; the two parties shake hands; women break the news to all those not involved.

The Luhya community in Kenya: after discussion, etc., the elders hold a calabash filled with water; both the sides wash hands, shake hands and share peace with the whole group; both drink a medicinal drink from the same calabash; a chicken is cut and the gizzard is shared by the disputing parties; and finally there is a meal together.

In Zambia the Bemba tribe follows a similar custom. Both parties assemble and relax; no one may speak about the matter until the leader announces the time for discussion; in major or minor cases, dialogue comes first; a leader and few witnesses or observers are present; after reaching a conclusion, the parties embrace each other and shake hands and finally they share a meal.

In general the offended and offender meet with their people to know their feelings and mood; both parties send their messengers to the other side to decide on the date for reconciliation and about the things to be provided by both the parties (white bull, goat, brewed beer, etc.); on the fixed day both the parties, their representatives and elders assemble; the two parties are questioned as to what happened; all comment; the offended and offender accept the verdict of the group; they shake hands; both parties are involved in the slaughtering of an animal; they are the first to eat the meat together; the elders sprinkle the animal's blood on both the parties; they eat

from the same dish; after these they agree the matter discussed is not to be revealed to anybody. The assembly is officially dissolved. Similar patterns are followed by various tribal groups in India too.

The Process of Reconciliation

While these and similar efforts are worthwhile and often bear fruit, what is it that ultimately happens in reconciliation between two persons or two groups? The basic truth behind the process is that each understands the other side from his/her point of view. I shall describe this process at some length as this is fundamental in this process.

Reconciliation can happen only when one understands the other from his/her point of view. One needs to look at what the other is looking at, i.e., understand the other as s/he understands self when s/he does something. It is often said: you must accept/understand the other as s/he accepts/understands him/herself. This is impossible as we do not know how the other accepts him/herself. Hence I have added 'when s/he does something,' for we know from our own experience that when we do something, we have a justifiable reason for doing it, and so, we see ourselves as not to be blamed, even if the action is wrong. My contention is that we do not act primarily and intentionally against another just for the sake of being against the other, just for doing harm to the other. I do not say that all our actions are done with an explicit justification. In merely thoughtless, instinctual and impulsive actions and mob behaviour, one does not have an explicit justification before acting. However, if confronted or opposed, we defend the action as justifiable, as was clear in the case of the Mosque demolition, etc. (Actions of psychologically abnormal persons are a class by themselves).

People can easily remember the times when someone has hurt them; they can also remember the times when someone has been hurt by them. But no one owns up that s/he has done something *in order to hurt* another, just to cause harm to another, without any advantage for oneself. "I did not do it purposely," or "I did it in order to teach him/her a lesson, to prevent further harm," "I did it as retaliation," etc. To do evil to the other is not the primary and explicit intention of the person. We may be conditioned by prejudice, past experiences, fears, the need to protect ourselves, self-interest, the urge to prevent future harm, profit, ignorance, partial or wrong information, mistaken identity, wrong judgement, etc. One may do something very harmful from an unconscious need to protect oneself, without seeing the harm done to the other. Often also, partial or wrong

information received can be the source of the action and hence can become wrong. And because of our conditioning, we may see only one aspect, namely, what appears good and so we defend our action as justifiable and blameless.

In whatever we do, we normally see only what is good for ourselves, or for the group, and other aspects are ignored. If any harm is foreseen, it is justified as called for by the situation. Later on we may become aware of the unconscious motives and may even apologize for the harm done as if it were done purposely. Being unaware of the unconscious motives, we claim that what we do is right and we are not to be blamed. This happens not only in individual, interpersonal situations, but in general. The high priest Caiaphas held that he was serving the cause of the nation by killing Jesus: "You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed" (Jn 11:50). President Bush was convinced that it was his duty in the service of fighting terrorism to bomb and destroy Iraq. Even most of the Americans had been brainwashed to accept his views, though there had been pockets of opposition. When terrorists kill innocent people, they seem to argue that it is the only way for them to bring pressure on the Government or to get what they want and thus justifying their brutal behaviour. I do not say that because the doer has a justifiable reason, the action is right and good; the action can be quite wrong, as in the above examples. Here I am not talking about the morality of the action, but I am suggesting the attitude with which we ought to live, the way we need to look at the other person if we want to be reconciled to people. That means we see the person as good, even when his/her action is wrong and is opposed. That is, a person is not equated with what s/he does, as our normal interactions imply; a person is a mystery.

Once I was visiting a family in Nairobi. Roland, his mother and his two small children (5 and 3) were there. I was told that Isabel, the children's mother, had run away with a married man; they spoke at length about how wicked she was, etc. When I asked them if I could contact Isabel, they strongly dissuaded me, telling me that she had abused so many priests who had tried to contact her. However, at my insistence they gave me a contact number. I called the number and left her a message; she called me back immediately. I began by saying: "Isabel, I believe you have had a hard time which forced you to take such a drastic step of leaving your children; I would be happy to meet you." She asked me when she could meet me. Soon after her office hours she came over. She narrated her side of the story; most of

the incidents were the ones told me by Roland. I agreed that given her way of seeing things, how much she was hurt. Then I explained to her how Roland had seen those incidents; then she saw the point and said, "Now it is too late; if this was done in the beginning I would have gone back to him." Roland saw everything from his point of view, he had his interpretation; Isabel from hers, she had her interpretation. They said they "loved" one another, but not in reality, they failed to understand the other from the other's point of view. The priests, who contacted her earlier, saw everything from Roland's point of view alone—hence she opposed them. As Roland had already got involved with someone, these two could not be brought together again.

This means, in other words, we must avoid judgement of the other person, even when we oppose the action of the other. When you listen to people talking about others, you realise that they pass many judgements as 'truths': "I know s/he is like that," implying a value judgement. Jesus said: "Do not judge" (Mt 7:1). Seeing the other as the other sees him/herself in what s/he does is "not to judge" the other. In judging another, one imposes on the other one's own criteria of what is right and wrong, and thus claims superiority over the other, one looks at the event from one's point of view and refuses to see it from the other's point of view. This creates a wall between the two. Whenever we judge another, we are wrong, for we can see only the external action, while the person's intention and interpretation is known only to that person. By not judging, I do not mean that I approve of the action, or that it is right. There are actions which are wrong and need to be opposed. What I mean is that the person is not judged and blamed; my attitude to the person remains unchanged. If one starts with the assumption that, right or wrong, the person has a justifiable reason for what s/he does, and is not against me intentionally, then there will be no misjudgement against the person and no hurt feelings, even when I have to oppose his/her action. Jesus seems to do precisely this when He tells the woman caught in adultery: "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again" (Jn 8:11).

Once during a retreat, sister Bertha told me that she could not pray as something was deeply disturbing her. She had this distraction for the last five years or so, and had discussed it with many counsellors, retreat directors and the like. Reluctantly she shared her story. She was very angry with her Mother General and her team for dismissing her sister from the congregation. She spoke for a long time about her suffering, anger, etc. As Bertha works in the office of the General, it

was a daily hell for her. When she finished I asked: "So, they sent her away without any reason?"; "They made no investigation, but believed all that was said against her?"; "They knew the accusations were false and yet threw her out?" To all these questions, she answered "No." I asked her: "Then what are you complaining about? They did all they reasonably could and acted the way they thought best for the congregation; you would have done the same if you were in their position." Then Bertha saw and it changed her; she thanked God during the mass that day. She had suffered for five years because she refused to understand others from their point of view; she had misjudged them, and so was against them and so she suffered.

Such an attitude of understanding the other is what leads to true forgiveness without which there will not be true reconciliation. Understanding the other as s/he understands self is forgiveness. Forgiveness, it seems to me, is the same as unconditional love; it is to understand the other. For many years I have helped people to forgive one another showing the example of Jesus praying for His enemies. These days there are many books and seminars dealing with 'healing of memories.' After years of reflection and by analysing many incidents, I have come to realise that if one had not misunderstood, misjudged the other, there would be nothing to forgive, no memory to heal.¹ In other words, when I have something to 'forgive,' it is because I have misjudged that person. To forgive is not to allow the action of the other to affect my relation to him/her. It is like the sun that would not turn away from your windows just because you have closed them and put thick curtains across. God does likewise, as we read in Matthew 5:43-48. If a person acts with a justifiable reason, even when wrong, that person is not against me and is not to be blamed. True forgiveness means that my attitude to the person remains unchanged, even when I oppose his/her action and demand reparation for the material harm done. The material harm done cannot be repaired by forgiveness, which rectifies only the personal relationship. I agree that the word forgiveness may be meaningful in certain situations, for example, a mother forgiving the murderer of her son or daughter, even if the murder was done in a moment of passion, anger, revenge and self defence, etc. Even in such situations, understanding makes a great difference.

¹See J. Mattam, "The Sacrament of Reconciliation," *VJTR* 53 (1989) 421-434, 489-500, esp. 491f.

Even if one holds, for arguments' sake, that one does harm intentionally, what has happened is happened; nothing can be done about it by anyone; the only reasonable thing in that situation is to forgive, as Mrs Staines did. If one does not forgive, then one suffers and uselessly carries along a dead weight. The "wrong doer" does not even know that the other is suffering, as s/he had not intended offending the other. If on the other hand, one responds to that situation with understanding /forgiveness, then the person is free of the past. The only sensible thing to do about a past event is to forgive. That is why Jesus told Peter that he has to forgive seventy times seven (Mt 18:21-22). Here most people seem to fail and hold on to past hurts which are caused by their own misunderstanding. Hence in conclusion, we must always forgive everyone from our heart unconditionally.

One often hears, "I forgive, but I can't forget." Here it is not a matter of memory. The judgement against the other remains and it interferes with the proper relationship between two persons. I suggest that instead of trying to "heal memories" we should eliminate the bad memory caused by the wrong judgement of the other. There is nothing to heal: we must see that we have been wrong in our judgement of the other's motive. If we were in the same position and under the same conditionings, we would have acted in the same way.

I have come across hundreds of cases when a hurt person honestly tried to understand the 'offender' from his/her point of view, the problem ceased. For as I said earlier, no one is doing harm to the other intentionally, just for doing harm [Have you done it anytime?]. This compassionate understanding has to be cultivated through a lot of awareness, so that interpreting the other favourably becomes a sort of second nature. True love (forgiveness) is capable of transcending all sorrow, breaking down all barriers that separate and disunite and bring about true harmony.

Though what I have said above is useful primarily for interpersonal relationships, it can also be useful in relations between groups, peoples and nations. Our mission is to enable people to come to proper relationship; hence the importance of reconciliation in our mission cannot be over emphasised.

Reconciliation with Justice

True reconciliation cannot happen without justice. Various Governments have set up Commissions of reconciliation in order to help the process of reconciliation. In India, one of the areas that needs

reconciliation is the North East; the conflict between the Military and the people is becoming daily worse. The Military will have to recognize the rightful grievances of the people; the militants will have to see that ultimately violence is not a solution to any problem. In the North East often missionaries are accused of instigating violence and sectarian divisions. Though there is often no truth in this, what is important is that we ought to actively contribute towards a process of reconciliation between the various groups.

Another area in which Christians can be actively involved is to bring reconciliation between Hindus and Muslims. We are affected by both, yet we can stand sort of "above" the factions and mediate a process of reconciliation, help both the groups to accept the mistakes of the past without being defensive about the past; there is no denying that mistakes have been made by every side. The prejudices, the conquering mentality and fear, etc. that affected the relationships in the past need not be carried over into the present day.

In the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians, for example, reconciliation cannot happen until the wrongs done to the Palestinians are recognized, corrected and justice is done to them. Earlier when talking about understanding, I said that by not judging I do not mean that I approve of the action of the other; the wrong done to the Palestinians has to be acknowledged and rectified. People will have to want peace and want to be reconciled. Our mission is to help to bring out such attitudinal changes in people, so that, people giving up their hatred for one another, come to understand the other and see that it is better for all if they live in harmony. The olive trees in Palestine were planted by Palestinians many years before the Jews established settlements in the area; when the Jews marked roads "for Jews only," and took control of the springs and closed off the area with checkpoints the Palestinians have been wronged. They will need to want to have a future in which the Jews and Arabs will be able to harvest olives together without fear. They have to look to a future in which Jews will not have extra privileges. A future based on the recognition that, as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights puts it: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood."

We do not need more inquiry committees; we need truth and reconciliation committees, like those established in South Africa and other countries that chose the way of conciliation, of requesting forgiveness for the past and attempting to build a better and more just future.

Pope John Paul II had shown that asking forgiveness also leads to reconciliation and proper relationship. He had the courage to acknowledge that injustice had been done to Galileo and other scientists, and the Pope asked forgiveness for such injustices. However, the Pope has not acknowledged that the Church had made mistakes in the past, but very ingenuously said: "Another painful chapter of history to which the sons and daughters of the Church must return with a spirit of repentance is that of the acquiescence given, especially in certain centuries to intolerance and even to the use of violence in the service of the Church."² Many more areas are there that need an apology: the dealings with heretics, "witches," sorcerers, crusades, the Inquisition, the suppression of free thoughts and expression, like in the case of the Modernists, theologians like Balasuriya of Sri Lanka, Boff, Curran and many others. The Church has also to revise its self-understanding of itself as the only guardian of Truth and the assumed authority from Christ to suppress any opinion contrary to theirs. An honest acknowledgement that mistakes have been committed in the past will help heal more wounds than all these beating around the bush will do. Justice, however, must not be set against forgiveness, as the case of the good thief also shows. Even after forgiving him, Jesus does not free him from the cross, that is, from the punishment that the wrongdoer himself considered "just." Thus, we must forgive everyone interiorly while we demand that justice be done.

Reconciliation at the Service of Mission as Proper Loving Relationship

Following Jesus' wall-breaking ministry (Eph 2:11ff), we must recognize that in the past our mission work has often caused divisions by taking some people out of their groups to be Christians. There is an element of truth in what Jesus says that he has come to cause divisions (Lk 12:52ff). Even when this happens, namely, some in a group or family decide to become Christian, and others are opposed to it, our efforts would be to help people understand each other's point of view and respect each other's stand and allow each one to follow his/her conscience and path. A proper relation can be preserved even when such divisions are inevitable. Another aspect is to recognize that a division need not necessarily lead to antagonism and opposition, if each side approaches the situation through

²John Paul II (1994), *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, Pauline books, Mumbai, 1994; See also, Fiedler Maureen and Linda Rabben, *Rome Has Spoken, A Guide to Forgotten Papal Statements and How they have changed through the Centuries*, New York: A Crossroad Book, 1998.

understanding of the other side, which leads to reconciliation, even when each one follows a different path either in religion, politics or in personal matters. The Churches have to recognize that their mission is not primarily geared towards increasing the number of members, but being a channel of the working of the Spirit gathering all people into one family of God, into the Kingdom of God, irrespective of their religions, cultures and races.

In order to move in this direction, obviously there is need of a rethinking about the understanding of mission itself, which earlier was understood primarily in terms of Church expansion and numerical growth of the church. While this may still be valid this cannot be the primary understanding of mission. Mission has to be, following the wall breaking ministry of Jesus, geared to building human communities of love, fellowship, justice and mutual respect for each other's rights. Here humans and their concerns come first; they take primacy of place in our mission efforts. Our mission will be to join hands with all those who are concerned about human well being, freedom, justice and respect for human rights, not minority rights, but human rights of all. If we follow what was mentioned earlier about understanding the other from his/her point of view, will enable us to be mediators of reconciliation between peoples and groups. I mentioned above some of the ways people, tribes search for Reconciliation; in every region and culture people have various 'local' ways of handling conflicts and bringing about reconciliation; we will have to familiarize ourselves with these and make use of them for our mission; if we start with people's own ways, then they are more open to it, than if we import something from outside.