

CHRONICLE

“RECONCILIATION IN INDIA”

Statement of the Annual Meeting of the Indian Theological Association*

St Pius X College, Goregaon, Bombay
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Introduction

“God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God”, wrote St Paul to the Corinthian community (II Cor. 2:19-20). Encouraged and inspired by this assurance given by the great Apostle and Theologian of the early Church, we the members of the Indian Theological Association met at St Pius X College, Goregaon, Bombay, from Oct. 22-24, 1982 to analyse and discuss the various aspects and dimensions of reconciliation in the Indian context, especially because “Reconciliation and penance in the mission of the Church”, has been proposed as the theme for the forthcoming Synod of Bishops in Rome, in 1983. We discussed this theme from the socio-economic and inter-religious perspectives as well as from the biblical, theological and pastoral points of view.

I. Urgent Need of Reconciliation in the Church in India Today

1. *Unjust Socio-Political and Economic Structures*

Situating the Church in the present-day India where there are glaringly unjust and dehumanizing socio-political and economic structures, the urgent need is deeply felt for reconciliation between the have-nots and the haves, the so-called low caste and high caste and the depressed classes and the dominant classes. The Church has yet to become the Church of the poor by divesting itself of its feudalistic and authoritarian structures and its bourgeois mentality by trying to be with the poor, sharing their lives, exposing injustice wherever it exists and fighting for their cause ever keeping in view the gospel values without fear of the consequences.

* For the papers and reports of this Meeting: see, *Reconciliation in India*, edited by Kuncheria Pathil, Bombay: St. Paul Publications, 1983.

2. *Religious Pluralism*

We are becoming more and more conscious of our rich and varied religious heritage and cultural tradition. We have made headway in the study of World Religions in India and have discovered the religious values that can enrich the experiential knowledge of our own religion. Consequently, we have become aware of our estrangement due to our triumphalistic attitudes towards them. Mutual recognition and appreciation of such values in India and mutual enrichment have been accepted as requisites of our reconciliation with them. Hence there is an urgent need for increased dialogue between Christianity and other religions.

3. *Intra-Ecclesial Tensions*

Conflicts, jealous competition and tension conspicuously present among the three Individual Churches, namely, Malankara, Malabar and Latin, which together form the Church in India, are a real threat and danger to its very existence as Christ's Sacrament of universal love. Basing themselves on the equal rights guaranteed to all Individual Churches by Vatican II, the Oriental Churches resent the fact that they are jurisdictionally restricted and are not enjoying the same degree of freedom as the Latin Church with regard to evangelization and pastoral care. They also feel that even after 17 years since the Vatican Council promulgated the decrees, no serious attempt has been made to implement these directions.

Tensions are also felt between clergy and laity, bishops and theologians, bishops and priests as well as between diocesan clergy and religious. Theologians have a prophetic role in the Church and they have an important function to fulfil for the future of the Church in India. However, they feel that this role and function are not sufficiently recognised and more often than not, ignored by the hierarchy.

II. **Towards an Indian Theology of Reconciliation**

Reconciliation is a dynamic reality, ever active in the process of human history both on the vertical level of God-man relationship and on the horizontal level of man to man relationship. Its ultimate basis is the fact of man and woman being created in the image and likeness of God with his mission of stewardship in close partnership with the

whole of creation (Gen. 1: 26–31). Consequently, every time man fell away from His communion, God took the initiative to have him reconciled to Himself and also to form humanity into a community. This we see in the call of Abraham (Gen. 12: 1–3) and later in the making of the covenant on Mount Sinai (Ex. 19: 1–24, 8). The decisive intervention of God in view of the universal reconciliation took place through Jesus Christ who revealed the common Fatherhood of God and brotherhood of all human beings in the reality of the Kingdom of God.

The Church as the communion of those who are committed to this Kingdom has to struggle in order to promote the growth of the Kingdom in the process of history. The unique call of the Church in India is to serve as the leaven in a pluralistic society characterised by the presence of many major World Religions. In this mission the Church has to respect and accept whatever is valuable in them and enrich the wider dimensions of her reconciling mission.

According to Indian tradition personal reconciliation and purification consists in *ātmabodha*, a sharp insight into the oneness of reality and the removal of *avidyā*. This implies self-purification in the form of *satyāgraha*-commitment to truth. This radical conversion of oneself to truth lets one become a source of energy and provocative challenge to the systems of *adharma* and *asatya* demanding conversion and acceptance of truth. This pursuit of truth calls for a struggle, for the one who undertakes the pursuit of truth which is called *tapas*. It demands from him suffering, renunciation, honesty and commitment to others. The Buddhist tradition of vibration of energy and the consequent removal of evil forces from the environment is in line with the same thought.

The pursuit of truth and the quest for harmony is not a passive tolerance of any given situation but rather an active involvement in the struggle of those who are victims of a system that embodies *avidyā* and *adharma*. As a result, the often misunderstood concept of *ahimsā* also is to be seen positively as a spiritual struggle carrying with it *anuranjanam* (continuous process of bringing hearts together) and *sahiṣṇatā* (participation in others' sufferings and struggles).

Islamic faith as ideally proposed is also a project to realize universal harmony and peace by active surrender to God and acceptance

of equality in brotherhood. It lays stress on the immediacy of the God-man and man-God relationship. Islam very clearly puts the One God as the source and goal of universal reconciliation. It demonstrates what Vatican II tells us, namely the close spiritual links uniting Christianity and Islam, and this knowledge should help Christians in India to overcome deep-seated prejudices.

The sense of the Sacred among the tribal communities of India which form a sizable part of the Indian population is all pervasive and sin is considered the breaking of the rules and regulations made for the well-being and growth of the tribe. Reconciliation according to their practice means the integration of the offender into the community and the re-establishing of the lost equilibrium of the community. This practice of reconciliation among the tribals is a welcome source of inspiration for the community celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation in the liturgical practice of the Church.

Marxism can provide us with certain insights into the dynamics of a meaningful reconciliation in the Indian context. Seen from this perspective, reconciliation is more than a person to person affair; it is an event affecting the society at large. Marxism illumines for us the idea of structural and social sins and corresponding reconciliatory process that can set right such unjust and exploitative structures. Consequently, Marxism invites us to develop a theology of creative struggle for justice and equality because reconciliation is not a passive co-existence, but rather a dynamic interaction of values held by individuals and groups.

A theology of reconciliation we envisage for India necessarily involves a spirit of constant dialogue with the pluralistic religious tradition and ideologies of this country on the one hand and the socio-political and economic-cultural forces on the other. Moreover, the fact of the Church in India being a communion of individual Churches calls for mutual respect and recognition in view of the very vitality of her reconciling ministry. All this means that reconciliation in the Indian context is to be seen not from a narrow religious perspective, but as an on-going process of transformed and transforming communion by which the Church sees herself as the herald and minister for the emergence of an integrated, authentic and just society.

III. The state of Sacrament of Reconciliation in the Indian Church today

The most alarming reality with regard to the sacrament of reconciliation seems to be the loss of the very dimension of reconciliation itself in the celebration of this sacrament. This can also partially explain the phenomenon of decreasing popularity of this sacrament among the Christians today. An analysis of this situation from a popular, liturgical and theological level will throw much light on the state of the sacrament of reconciliation today.

1. *On the Popular Level*

It is understood by many people as a means for freeing themselves from a state of anxiety regarding their future salvation, or as a means for liberating themselves from a guilt-feeling caused by the violation of some laws. In many cases the celebration of the sacrament does not sufficiently contribute towards the building up of the community because its effect is experienced more often as a means of self-justification and freedom from a certain guilt-consciousness.

2. *On the Liturgical Level*

With the insistence on individual confession, the community dimension which is the characteristic of every liturgical action is totally absent, unfortunately, in the actual celebration of the sacrament. The very form of the sacrament has an exaggerated juridical connotation, thus giving the impression that the sacramental act is reduced to an act of judgement and it is no longer an event of salvation, where Christ's redeeming love is made visible. The absence of the Word of God in this sacrament makes it lose its significance as an event of saving intervention on the part of God and an act of response on the part of man.

3. *On the Theological Level*

The ecclesial dimension of the sacrament is either reduced to the element of jurisdiction to impart absolution or to an abstract concept of action performed in the name of the Church. The reconciliation that is celebrated in this sacrament lacks that revolutionary force which ought to be there in any serious encounter with the Risen Christ. Even the connection of the sacrament of reconciliation with the Eucharist is watered down to a level of mere spiritual preparation of the

Christian to receive the body of Christ, without showing how this sacrament reinserts the individual into the Eucharistic community.

The celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation and its theology today does not very much affect the sinful structures that exist in the Church and society today. The other-worldly orientation of this sacrament has to some extent deprived this sacrament of all the social and communitarian implications that an authentic event of Christian reconciliation ought to have produced. It is quite possible that we have Christians who feel 'freed from mortal sins in their souls', but continue to be partners of sinful structures.

IV. Practical Suggestions

After having established the need of reconciliation and the urgency with which this need has to be met in the light of the principles enunciated above for the theology of reconciliation in India we wish to propose a few practical suggestions in order to make the Church in India become fully a sign and sacrament of the reconciling love of the Father, manifested in Christ.

1. *Radical Approach to Healing Socio-Political Divisions in the Society*

a) Our catechetics, liturgy and moral theology have been focused largely on personal and individual sins. It is high time that we focus our attention equally on the sinful structures and systems of the society, expose the traditional value-system of the people which supports the *status quo* and opposes every change, and make people aware of their share and culpability in perpetuating these unjust structures. Therefore the Church must conscientize the masses to realize that they themselves are the makers of their destiny. It is not the oft-repeated 'God's Will', nor 'fate' nor *karma* that causes these oppressive structures.

b) Given the Indian context of glaring injustice and social inequality, the Church must exercise her prophetic role by publicly protesting against and criticizing the social evils, particularly the unjust socio-economic systems and policies, caste discriminations, corruption, oppression of women, and atrocities against the Harijans and the tribals. In protesting against injustice and oppression the Church should join hands with other non-Christian Organizations and groups that are committed to the same cause. By engaging in a struggle

against these unjust structures and situations we will gradually discover new spheres of reconciliation.

c) The Church must openly align herself with the poor and the oppressed, shedding her minority-right complex and the fear of losing her special privileges. Organizations at parish and diocesan levels should be set up to fight for basic human rights and to work towards the humanization and the integral development of the people. Our mission of evangelizing should not be understood as accomplished with just baptism and 'planting the Church.'

d) Women have a great power to bring about changes at home and in the society at large. In this matter the religious women should assume leadership and play their role of conscientizing and training our womenfolk to fulfil their indispensable role in the society.

The realization that our contribution or lack of contribution to transform the society is closely related to sin and reconciliation would enable us to situate the sacrament of reconciliation in a more concrete, down-to-earth and meaningful context.

2. *Provision for Constant and On-going Dialogue in the Church*

There are several areas within the Church where forums of dialogue are to be provided for. Here we propose some of them:

a) *Between the Individual Churches:* The reality of the various ecclesial traditions in India should be looked upon more as a rich heritage which the Spirit of the Lord has handed to the whole Christian community in India. There should be mutual respect, esteem and appreciation among these individual Churches avoiding all types of domination, exploitation and curtailment of rights. The practical manner in which this has to be realized must be worked out by the Bishops, taking into account the Vatican II directives (Decree on Eastern Churches art. 3, 4, Decree on Bishops art. 23, Decree on Ecumenism art. 15, 16; Constitution on Divine Liturgy art. 4). In this matter the hierarchy should also take into confidence, all the sections of the ecclesial communities – priests, religious, laity and theologians – so that the whole question is seen from a wider perspective. We would recommend as an immediate step a dialogue between the Bishops and theologians and lay leaders of the three Individual Churches on this matter. This would help to clarify many issues of ecclesiology which seem to underlie the present state of tension.

b) *Between Bishops and Theologians* : There is need for a permanent forum of dialogue between bishops and theologians in this country. Instead of the bishops and theologians moving on independent lines or the bishops trying to control the freedom of the theologians and the theologians in their turn exercising their ministry without situating themselves within the concrete pastoral context, the best thing would be for bishops and theologians to come together at various levels (national, regional, diocesan) and think as a group committed to the same cause. This mutual exchange and sharing of experiences and ideas will help enrich both groups and at the same time it will help them to understand and accept each other's point of view.

c) *Bishops, priests and laity* : We propose that greater efforts at shared responsibility between Bishops and Priests and between priests and laity will help the process of reconciliation among these groups. For this we suggest the establishment of forums of dialogue (wherever these do not exist) such as senate of priests, pastoral councils, parish councils, planning commissions etc.

3. *Meaningful and Experiential Celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation*

a) As explained earlier, one of the reasons for the decreasing popularity of the sacrament of reconciliation, seems to be its ritualism, its juridical symbols and its confession-box approach. It is time to adopt other forms of the sacrament like the *guru-shishya* encounter form, the face to face discussion of spiritual attitudes, etc.

b) A better use of the behavioural science such as psychology and counselling should be made realizing that they can throw light on the whole event of the reconciling process that takes place in the sacrament.

c) The distinctive role of the Word of God in this sacrament must be clearly emphasized. The Word of God interprets the results brought about by the behavioural sciences in terms of the Christ event which is re-enacted in this sacrament. Hence it is necessary that the Word of God be proclaimed meaningfully and in an experiential way in the celebration of this sacrament.

d) Another meaningful form of the celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation is the community celebration. We recommend this particularly on occasions like the celebration of group reconciliation,

