

RECONCILIATION: GIFT OF GOD AND SOURCE OF NEW LIFE

A CATHOLIC THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

by **J. Janko Zakar**

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"Reconciliation: gift of God and source of New Life" was the theme of the Second European Ecumenical Assembly in Graz, Austria in June 1997. I thought that this would be an appropriate title for my theological reflection, albeit focusing on the theme more than on the assembly. However, I do hope to make a few applications to the assembly as well.

From a Catholic theological perspective, reconciliation entails a double relationship: a vertical relationship to God as His gift, and a horizontal relationship of human fellowship. Pope John Paul II attributes the failure of Christian unity (horizontal reconciliation) to the failure of the vertical reconciliation. In his words, those who labor for unity "labor in vain" because they attend only to the horizontal dimension. They have forgotten the vertical dimension by which they should have been rooted in God, their Creator and Lord. This is from John Paul's "Exhortation to the World Synod of Bishops," Dec. 1984. The theme of the Synod was "Reconciliation and Penance in the mission of the Church."

This suggests a primary meaning of reconciliation through the Incarnation of Jesus Christ: the Father's greatest gift to the world. The idea is central to St. Paul's theology: "...we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son" (Rom. 5:10). The same idea appears again in Col. 1:20-22, II Cor. 5:18-20, and throughout St. Paul's writings.

While reconciliation with God is a theological priority, it calls for an important "caveat." The danger may be in giving specifically to an organized religious body (i.e., the Catholic Church), an entirely spiritual and other worldly meaning at the expense of human and social responsibility. Charity, or rather perhaps "charities," becomes an escape for justice, as was the case of most Christian social movements of the last century, particularly in France. Secular, anti-religious regimes may use the same interpretation to exclude religion from public life and confine the Church to the "sacristy," as was the case under the communist regimes. Pope John XXIII reacted against such a conception in his encyclical *Mater et Magistra*, emphasizing the Church's double task "...the sanctification of souls" and "solicitude" for the needs of men (and women) in their daily lives. The tasks are distinct but not separate.

Since reconciliation as God's gift is manifested in the gift of His Son who became man, the meaning of reconciliation as a whole is understood in a different light. In this light there can be no reconciliation with God without simultaneous reconciliation among persons and peoples,

because, as St. John writes, "a man who does not love his brother, that he can see, cannot love God, whom he has never seen" (I John 4:20). The implication is that the gift of God given in His Son continues in His mystical body, the Church. In the words of St. Paul again, "God gave us the ministry of reconciliation ... and the message of reconciliation" (II Cor. 5:28). On these grounds John Paul summarizes "the Church's mission, rich and complex as it is, as being the central task of reconciling people with God, with themselves, with neighbor and the whole creation" (from the same "Apostolic Exhortation").

This makes reconciliation on the horizontal level an integral part of our reconciliation with God. The question (I think an ecumenical question) is this: when and how are we reconciled with God, and when and how do we reconcile among ourselves? The answer to these questions rests on some basic theological assumptions (or propositions) and their practical consequences. I would like to mention three such propositions which I think are fundamental to ecumenism.

The first proposition holds that reconciliation with God and among persons is primarily a free act of the individual, a conversion of hearts--not of garments. It begins in baptism by which we become members of the mystical body of Christ, the children of God and coheirs with Christ. And it is maintained through life by faith and sacraments. Hence the Catholic emphasis on the role of sacraments, penance in particular, as a way of reconciliation.

The second proposition holds that supernatural elevation does not abolish the natural human order of things. In theological terms, grace does not abolish the law, it only perfects it. In other words, the horizontal dimension of reconciliation is still very much in human hands, and although supported by grace, our hands are still tainted by sin.

A third proposition holds that the human person lives and acts within two given realities: (1) God as the ultimate human goal, and (2) the fact of human fellowship, the *naturaliter socialis* human existence. Man cannot deny God or His human fellowship without denying himself. Of course this still leaves open the question of what do we know about God, the historical Jesus and His gospel etc., and what is the best form of social organization. These are the questions of human and ecumenical dialogue.

From these propositions the individual emerges as the primary moral agent. Related to this are two morally and ecumenically important questions: the question of conscience and personal freedom, and the question of collective responsibility.

In the Christian theological tradition we find two concepts of conscience. There is the habitual conscience, a moral disposition or an abiding "voice" of God in our hearts; and an "act" or actual conscience which means the practical, concrete application or command of reason. Both conceptions reject a purely psychological and behavioristic concept of conscience which still prevails in the secular world. But there is a distinction between the habitual and "act-conscience." The latter understanding is important for understanding the issue of the freedom of conscience, which is a fundamental human right

Such freedom was not always credited to the Church's teaching and practice. *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the modern World* devotes chapter 16 to "The dignity of the moral conscience." It states that "In the depth of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good

and avoid evil, the voice of conscience can, when necessary, speak to his heart more specifically to 'do this', 'shun that.'" Man has in his heart a law written by God. To obey it is the very dignity of man according to which he will be judged. The council document tries to reconcile the two different Catholic conceptions of conscience: habitual or the voice of God, and the actual command to "do this, and shun that." The question of conscience is not whether we have it or not, because we all have it, other things being equal. It is in our heart. The question is, what happens to its application in a concrete situation: "do this, shun that." It is on this level that the freedom of conscience must be tested.

To illustrate this I would like to quote Aquinas whose thought on the subject is, I think, fundamental to the conception of free conscience. First, his concern is not about habitual conscience. This is a question of character formation and the virtue of prudence. Aquinas' concern is the act-conscience, or command of prudence: "do this, shun that." In this regard conscience is the first norm of morality--first, but not ultimate. It is subject to the eternal law of God, man's ultimate goal, and to human fellowship, the two given realities of human existence. When in agreement with these realities, conscience is right. When in conflict with them, it is wrong.

On the assumption that conscience is the first norm of morality, it always obliges when commanding or prohibiting. But what happens if conscience is mistaken? Some theologians (i.e., St. Bernard whom Aquinas probably had in mind in this context) say that a mistaken conscience, if it judges right what is objectively right, obliges; but if it judges right what is objectively wrong, it does not oblige. Acting against a wrong conscience accordingly is not sin. Aquinas calls this view irrational. Either conscience is the first norm or it is not.

To illustrate his point, Aquinas uses a poignant example: "To believe in Christ is good in itself and necessary for salvation; all the same this does not win [over] the will unless it be commanded by reason. If reason presents it as bad, then the will reaches to it in that light--not that it is really bad in itself, but it appears so because of a condition that happens to be attached by reason apprehending it." Reason stands for conscience, and if somebody's conscience tells him that believing in Christ is wrong, for that person to believe in Christ is wrong.

The example reinforces Aquinas' primacy of the agent over the act in morality and is of utmost importance for ecumenical or any other human dialogue. The example stands for the freedom of conscience in all matters, rejecting any kind of forced conversion. As such it is fundamental to religious dialogue.

Although without explicit reference to Aquinas, the "Declaration on Religious Freedom" (Vatican Council II) confirms the principle when it states that "it is by personal assent that men are to adhere to the truth," and "it is one of the major tenets of Catholic doctrine that man's response to God in faith must be free. Therefore no one is to be forced to embrace the Christian faith against his own will."

Unfortunately, the history of the Church has not entirely supported this principle. We remember the frequent persecution of heretics, Jews and other acts of oppression, for which John Paul reminds us of the need for "purification of our historical memory."

We all prefer to focus on the bright side of our past rather than the dark. Last summer I read Paul

Johnson's *A History of Christianity*. Since the author is a Catholic like myself, I expected to hear all positive and good things about Christianity. Instead I was somewhat disappointed and surprised that the author dwells primarily on the negative and dark sides of the Church. He devotes pages to the mistreatment of the Indians by the Spanish missionaries, and makes no mention of da Vittoria, Las Casas, Dominican pioneers of social justice at the time. However, I realized that what is needed, and what Johnson was offering, was not another panegyric of Christianity, but a critical evaluation of the dark side of human interaction as its own argument for the power and providence of God. The author's conclusion gave me that insight. He writes:

Perhaps it is part of the providential plan that the organization of Christianity should be a perpetual source of discord. Who can say? We should remember the words of St. Paul towards the end of his letter to the Romans, the key document of the faith: "O depth of wealth, wisdom and knowledge in God! How unsearchable his judgments, how untraceable his ways? Who knows the mind of the Lord? Who has been his counselor?"

Does this mean that any conscience is as good as any other, and any religion as sound as any other? Not objectively. It only shifts the issue from the area of "good will" and comradeship to the search of objective truth.

"Truth, however, (as the Declaration on Religious Freedom continues) is to be sought after a manner proper to the dignity of the human person and his social nature. The inquiry is to be free, carried on with the aid of teaching or instruction, communication, and dialogue. In the course of this, men explain to one another the truth they have discovered, or think they have discovered, in order thus to assist one another in the quest for truth. Moreover, as the truth is discovered, it is by personal assent that men are to adhere to it."

Reconciliation is primarily a gift of God extended to human relationship. It springs from faith in God as the ultimate goal, and an objective social order based on justice. A rupture with God, whether explicit like atheism, or implicit like transgression of his laws, becomes also a horizontal rupture among men. Theology calls it sin. Its biblical example is the Tower of Babel. The rupture of the people with God led to the breaking of the bond of human fellowship.

This brings into the picture another aspect of human relationship: the collective responsibility. Although theologically (and morally) every sin is always a personal act of a free agent, there is nevertheless a social ambience whereby it affects the individuals and is in turn affected by them. The sin of Babel was a collective sin with responsibility lying with each participant. Collective or social sins have social repercussions on others as well as the human community as a whole. The most obvious examples are the violations of natural and legitimate positive human rights, such as persecution, discrimination, slavery, murder, and ethnic cleansing (in former Yugoslavia, for example). Such violations contradict not only divine law but also the natural order meant to exist among individuals, communities and nations. It is an order based on justice, the virtue of human relations based on equality.

I conclude that ecumenical reconciliation in countries like Bosnia depends primarily on political reconciliation on the basis of justice. The problem is that religions--Catholic, Orthodox and Muslim--are popularly associated with the Croats, the Serbs and the Muslims (since Tito). Consequently, religious objects, symbols and persons have become the primary targets of war. But in its origin the war was not religious in nature; it was an apolitical war of aggression. What can the theme of reconciliation mean in such a situation?

Reconciliation implies mutual and even unilateral forgiveness: forgiving one another as the heavenly Father has forgiven each of us. Christians of all denominations are called upon to be perfect as their heavenly Father is perfect. This implies a reconciliation which includes forgiveness. "When you bring your gift to the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, go and be reconciled with your brother first, and then come back and present your offering" (Mt. 5:23-24). But what if you don't even have an offering? What if your home was burned down, your property stolen, your family killed, and yourself in exile. In such a situation reconciliation implying forgiveness may appear a punishment of the victim and a reward to the aggressor. This is a frequent comment in regard to international intervention.

How do we reconcile the Christian call to forgiveness with the human call for justice? This was Peter's question to Jesus, when he asked him "how often must I forgive my brother if he wrongs me? As often as seven times?" Jesus answered: "not seven, but seventy times seven" (Mt. 18:21-22). This means always. But this is not our actual social or individual practice. I would like to quote Aquinas again, because I think he offers a socially significant insight. Commenting on St. Matthew's text, he writes, "Our Lord was speaking to Peter about offenses committed against oneself, which are always to be forgiven and the repentant brother spared. His words are not to be understood of sins committed against another or against God, for to forgive such offenses is not left to our discretion. Yet in this matter the law prescribes limits according as God's honor and our neighbor's advantage require" (II-III, 11:4 and 2). This means that as individuals and in virtue of our faith we may and indeed ought to forgive all offenses against ourselves. But offenses against God and against other persons (the common good) are subject to the law of God and to the one in charge of the common good. For this reason it is important to discern the offenses against God and those of human presumptions in the name of God. It is also important that the common good be authentically human and under a legitimate, democratic and just authority.

This may explain to a certain extent why Catholic ecumenism (and the Bosnian Catholic Church) seek social and political justice first, the return of refugees and protection of human life. On the same basis the Church seeks a common Christian platform in its proclamation of the gospel to the world. Thus John Paul wrote to Cardinal Cassidy, his representative at the Graz Assembly:

As followers of Christ we must all be deeply convinced that we have a common responsibility for promoting respect for human rights, for justice and peace, and for what pertains to the sacredness of life. In particular, in the midst of increasing indifference and secularization, we are called to bear witness to the values of life and to faith in the Resurrection which embodies the entire Christian message.

In the same letter John Paul shares his view that Europe holds a special place in regard to ecumenism and reconciliation because of her history and present aspirations. Historically Europe was the place of religious divisions first between East and West, and then within the West itself. It is now becoming a place where serious efforts at reconciliation are beginning to take place. The European continent yearns today for reconciliation and elimination of divisive social and political conditions. A more positive relationship between East and West has emerged since the decline and collapse of the communist regimes. But there are new tensions and problems expressing themselves violently in open conflict.

One of the main disappointments of the assembly was the cancellation by Patriarch Alexis II of Moscow of his meeting with Pope John Paul who was willing to travel to Graz for the occasion. While agreeing on the general usefulness of the assembly, some reports consider it to have unfinished business for failing to address itself to specific problems. In the words of Cardinal Miloslav Vlk of Prague, the assembly had shown "how difficult it is to perceive reality with an open mind. Now we must learn to live with patience." Hopefully also in peace.