

# **A PORTRAIT of POPE JOHN PAUL II**



## **AS AN APOSTLE of RECONCILIATION**

**by Elmer Wurth**

Call it making up, getting back together, conversion of heart, settling differences, agreeing to give friendship or marriage another try, welcoming back a wayward son or daughter, accepting binding arbitration, agreeing to end a strike, involvement in peace initiatives, asking forgiveness from offended friends, or from God in the Sacrament of Penance, what you're talking about is reconciliation.

The word comes from the Latin 're', again, and 'conciliare', to unite. Its basic meaning is to bring back together two parties after a fall-out or estrangement in their relationship. One or usually both parties have to acknowledge certain past mistakes or causes for their separation and agree to approach their relationship with a new understanding and mutual acceptance. There must be certain adjustments in the way they think and act towards each other. The compatibility of their relationship must be pointed out and acknowledged, as well as the mutual advantages of bringing their differences into a state of harmony once again. Once the crisis has been resolved, they are reconciled to each other and can continue with their relationship.

No one can doubt the estrangement and need for reconciliation in our world today on all levels of relationships: individuals between themselves and with civil and divine authority, between communities of peoples, between sovereign states and even between ideological blocks among nations. These estrangements divide and disrupt our world, and weaken the very fabric of society.

Despite the reality of these pervasive estrangements, there is a longing within the human heart for peace and harmony in life's relationships. Most people believe that the world in which we live is meant to be in a state of harmonious order and that the challenge to attain and maintain this harmony of relationships rests with us. We know that laws and the use of force will not bring about reconciliation between conflicting parties. There must be a true conversion of heart on both sides in desiring a peaceful solution to the existing difficulties. Fortunately more and more people of good-will are refusing to live in a world in need of reconciliation without trying to do something to help bring it about. These people are accepting the Good News of love, treasuring their adoption as children of God and hence brothers and sisters to each other. We see historians and sociologists, politicians and civil leaders, philosophers and theologians, psychologists and humanists, poets and mystics, religious leaders and pastors of souls reflecting on the conditions of modern man in our contemporary world and earnestly seeking solutions to the complicated mix of good and evil forces within and about us. They surface many causes for the existing tensions and divisions in human society with which we are all familiar.

We can all name special 'peace-makers' or 'reconcilers' whom we admire, people who dedicate their lives to counseling, arbitration, foreign diplomacy, peace marches and oratory in an effort to convince us that the time is urgent and that each person must do something now because we stand at a magnificent, yet difficult moment of history. Archbishop Robert Runcie, during his historic visit to China in late 1983, graphically expressed this momentous choice that challenges mankind.

*I believe that our generation has been given two signs and we must decide which way to go. These signs are 'the planet' and 'the cloud'. By the planet, I mean the whole earth, sapphire blue and beautiful, seen entire for the first time and photographed from the moon. By the cloud, I mean the mushroom-shaped cloud over Hiroshima. The planet is a sign of unity and harmony in the world community... The cloud is a reminder of the intransigence of conflict and the volcanic forces which threaten to tear the world apart... In such a situation there is no room for complacency, yet there is hope. (China Reconstructs, March 1984, p.35)*

What choice will we make? Christians, though free to act or not, really have no choice if their commitment to Christ is genuine. We are called to continue His mission, that of a mediator. As God-Man He became the bridge between God, the offended One, and man, the offender. As such, He reopened a dialogue of friendship, reminding man that an all-knowing, loving, just and forgiving God could not change, that conversion, repentance and desire for reconciliation rests with man. He became the Father's peace-offering, the olive branch held out to a world in need of reconciliation.

*It was God Who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the work of handing on this reconciliation. (2 Cor. 5,18)*

*So we are ambassadors for Christ; it is as though God were appealing through us, and the appeal we make in Christ's name is: be reconciled to God. (2 Cor. 5,20)*



The special calling of every Christian is to continue this work of reconciliation of all with God and with each other.

At this point in history we Christians, and I believe also the world, are fortunate to have in John Paul II, as Christ's vicar, a man who has assumed a clear role of leadership in striving for reconciliation in our world and he challenges us often to support his efforts. He has spoken of reconciliation on many occasions. In the spirit of Vatican II's Lumen Gentium he emphasizes that individuals and the Church must first be interiorly converted and renewed before "becoming truly a sign and instrument of unity and reconciliation for the whole community of man." To this end he wrote a special apostolic exhortation entitled "Reconciliation and Penance" for Christians, but his efforts reach out far beyond the realm of Church members. In "Reconciliation and Penance" he said:

*I, by an interior impulse which, I am certain, was obeying both an inspiration from on high and the appeals of humanity, decided to emphasize the subject of reconciliation, and to do this in two ways, each of them solemn and exacting. In the first place, by convoking the Sixth General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops; in the second place, by making reconciliation the centre of the Jubilee Year. (L'Osservatore Romano, December 17, 1984, p.2)*

In proclaiming the Jubilee Year, he said:

*This special time, when all Christians are called upon to realize more profoundly their vocation to reconciliation with the Father in the Son, will only reach its full achievement if it leads to a fresh commitment by each and every person to the service of reconciliation, not only among all the disciples of Christ but also among all men and women. (Ibid, p.16, footnote 7)!*

The precise theme of the Bishops' Synod was "Reconciliation and Penance in the Mission of the Church." (Ibid, footnote 8)

In an effort to put into practice his conviction that the Church must first be reconciled before being ready to act as a mediator to individuals, groups and nations, he summons dissident theologians and church leaders to Rome for dialogue that differences might be resolved and wounds healed. He is most reluctant to allow anyone of good-will to become separated from the unity of the Church.

He has personally supervised the revision of Canon Law to insure that it incorporates the self-image the Church gained through Vatican II as a people constantly in need of renewal, repentance and reconciliation.

He has established, for the first time, the practice of having bishops' conferences make their ad limina visits to Rome as a group rather than as individuals so that he can learn from them about the problems in their societies, and give guidelines for possible solutions. He regularly offers the services of Cardinal Agostino Casaroli, his Secretary of State, or other high church officials to mediate in crisis situations. An example of this is the Beagle Islands dispute between Chile and Argentina which had been going on for more than 100 years. Dante Caputo, Argentinean Foreign Minister, said at the special Vatican signing ceremony presided over by Cardinal Casaroli:

*When John Paul II agreed in 1978 to mediate our dispute, war was nearly imminent. (signing of special accord at Vatican on January 23, 1984)*

John Paul II agreed to visit both countries once the agreement was ratified to show his appreciation for their good-will in working out their differences.

But the efforts of this man go far beyond writing about the need for reconciliation, calling people to dialogue with him, or even sending a peace-maker to mediate some crisis in any part of the world. He goes personally to bring understanding, unity and peace. He is by far the most travelled pope in history, having made some 25 trips abroad to dozens of countries, logging hundreds of thousands of miles. Everywhere he speaks of love, peace, understanding and reconciliation. He has truly merited the frequently used title 'Pope of Peace'. (Hong Kong Sunday Examiner, December 28, 1984)

Just a few references to recent statements in Rome and abroad will suffice to emphasize the priority reconciliation has in all his thoughts, words and actions. On Christmas, 1983, in his Urbi et Orbi message, he said: "Break down the walls of selfishness and hate." (L'Osservatore Romano, January 9, 1984) A week later at dawn on New Year's World Day of Peace, he reminded the world "From a new heart peace is born." (Ibid) To the diplomatic corps of representatives to the Holy See, he said: "Dialogue and negotiation is the only means of achieving a genuine peace." (Ibid, January 30, 1984) To more than 1,000 journalists from many nations, he said: "We travel together in service of peace for mankind." (Ibid, February 13, 1984)

In El Salvador, he said:

*It is urgent to pass from distrust and aggression to respect and concord, in a climate which would permit the loyal and objective examination of the situation and the prudent seeking of remedies. The remedy is reconciliation. (Ibid, April 11, 1983. He quotes from his talk of the previous March 6th.)*

On September 16, 1984, he said during the Angelus in Winnipeg, Canada:

*How great is the need for forgiveness and reconciliation in our world today. (Ibid, October 8, 1984)*

He based his comments on Mt. 18, 21-22 where Christ tells Peter that forgiving the same person seven times is not enough, but rather seventy times seven times, signifying limitless forgiveness. Three days later to the government officials and diplomatic corps in Ottawa, Canada, he said:

*True peace will come only when the hearts and minds of all are converted to compassion, justice and love. (Ibid)*

In his talk to priests on the subject 'Year of Renewal in the Priestly Vocation', he reminded them:

*We are at the service of this reconciliation with God. (Ibid, April 5, 1983)*



On his May 3, 1984 arrival at the South Korea airport, he said:

*Dialogue, reciprocal trust, love are needed to reunite the people of Korea. (Ibid, May 7, 1984)*

Four days later he told the people:

*The suffering of a divided Korea is a symbol of a divided world. (Ibid)*

The previous day he had told leaders of Korean traditional religions:

*In a spirit of reconciliation the Church promotes a deeper fellowship with all religions. (Ibid, May 14, 1984)*

On May 8, 1984, in Papua New Guinea, he quoted Romans 5, 19 'Sin and division entered the world by one man's disobedience; but reconciliation was restored by one man's obedience' and went on to conclude:

*Each of us, according to the gifts received, shares in the ministry of reconciliation. (Ibid, May, 21, 1984 )*

On the following day he said:

*The Church's apostolic life is directed to reconciliation. (Ibid)*

Then on the 11th he told Thailand government personnel and diplomats:

*Only genuine reconciliation can radically solve the refugee problem. (Ibid)*

It is easily seen that John Paul II's desire for peace and reconciliation in the world motivates so many of his actions and discussions. He tries to live out literally his role as Pontifex Maximus or supreme bridge-builder. By establishing full diplomatic relations with the U.S. he has enhanced his opportunities to influence the superpowers

toward peaceful initiatives. He used the commemoration of the 400th anniversary of Martin Luther's death as a new impetus for reconciliation with Lutherans and other non-catholics. He enthusiastically participated in the April 12, 1984 'Sports for Reconciliation and Peace' in Rome. An almost endless list of other efforts on his part toward reconciliation could be mentioned.



A recent answer to a reporter's question in Rome shows clearly that he first encourages others to mediate problems, offering assistance only when it seems necessary and feasible.

*We must make every effort to show our good-will against violence. These efforts in Central America do not currently require papal mediation. I support efforts of the Four-nation Contadora group that is seeking regional solutions to Central American problems. The bishops, especially in El Salvador, are very active. So it is not necessary to introduce the pope. (Hong Kong Sunday Examiner, March 15, 1985, p.5)*

Although John Paul II's efforts at personal mediation are constant and his record noteworthy, one important fact needs to be noted. He is a human leader of a divinely founded, but very human church. And so, like any other leader, as head of the Church and of the Vatican State, he is frequently involved personally in tensions, misunderstandings and differences with individuals, groups and nations. He has made peace missions to much of the world, but except for his native Poland, communist-ruled countries deny him the opportunity to visit his fellow Christians. It is precisely in these tensions and misunderstandings in which he is personally involved that he needs someone else to act as mediator because top-level dialogue is either non-existent or has proven ineffective. China is a case in point. So far he has been unable to enter into dialogue directly



with either the government or the leaders of the independent Catholic Patriotic Association. Due to historical realities and misunderstandings all official overtures on his part have proven to be counter-productive. Cardinal Casaroli admitted this in saying:

*All past efforts to reestablish dialogue or gain any official contact with China has ended in failure. An extremely bold gesture might be needed to establish regular contact. (statement to reporters in Rome on November 19, 1984)*

Many attempts to mediate the China-John Paul II impasse are being made by individuals and groups on their own initiative; others are consulted by the pope and asked for help. Notable recent examples of both types of initiatives would include:

1) In September, 1984, a small group of bishops from Sri Lanka, India, Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines made an historic trip to China. It was the first group of Catholic bishops from Third World countries to go there. They sought open dialogue on problems in China similar to those in their own countries. Because they were not from countries which had in some way been responsible for oppressing China in the past, they were warmly received. They wanted to learn, but also to invite the Chinese church leaders to become involved in dialogue and cooperation with the Asian and universal church. Many misunderstandings were clarified and plans made for further opportunities to explore and dissolve difficulties. Archbishop Henry D'Souza, from India and presently head of the Federation of Asian Bishops, led the group to China. He said:

*They seemed to want to reach out to the real source of unity through our mediation. I believe that the Church in China has a great desire for communion with the Universal Church. I think we should do whatever we can to ease the difficulties that have arisen due to certain facts of history. This is, I believe, one of the challenges for the FABC. (TRIPOD, #23, 1984)*

2) Cardinal Jaime Sin of the Philippines expressed the view that local Asian Churches could help the Vatican - China reconciliation effort:

*The reconciliation of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association and the Vatican could best be done by the local churches of Asia, particularly from those countries which pose no threat of power or domination from outside,\* countries which did not participate in colonial activities in China. The Federation of Asian Bishops must study ways towards gradual rapprochement with the necessary prudence, not pushing beyond what the situation can bear. (Asian Focus January 4, 1985, p.5)*

Although he insisted that he went to China in a private capacity and although he did not mention the idea of reconciliation publicly, he certainly indicated that he intended to serve as a bridge of friendship and dialogue. He said:

*We did not talk about differences. We embraced one another. We did not talk about the Vatican, but this was not important. The most important thing is communication. Discussion will come later. The Chinese way does not talk about all this. They understand one another first, then they will come - to an agreement later on. (Hong Kong Standard, January 6, 1985)*

He said he carried no messages from the Vatican on reconciliation with the CCPA but wanted to explore prospects for a future dialogue. (South China Morning Post, November 2, 1984) He showed clearly that this was his underlying goal in saying:

*Through the many new friends we met new windows could be opened and new beginnings could be instituted... I was fortunate to be able to meet bishops, priests and officials of the Patriotic Association, to pray with them in their churches and to exchange with them views on the communion of churches. (Ibid, November 7, 1984)*

In an interview with UCAN (Union of Catholic Asian News), Cardinal Sin summed up his China trip in saying:

*The past eleven days have been among the most memorable and gratifying in my whole life. They give me hope that, before very long, new beginnings can be made and unity can become a reality. (Hong Kong Sunday Examiner, November 23, 1984, p.12)*

The success of his friendship trip is shown in part by his statement:

*Months after visiting China, church officials there continuously write letters to me and warmly welcome me back for future visits. (Hong Kong Standard, January 6, 1985)*

3) John Paul II sought help from Chinese in Taiwan and throughout the world by saying:

*It is to you catholics of Taiwan and the diaspora that is entrusted this wonderful task of being a bridge-church for your mainland compatriots. (L'Osservatore Romano, March 12, 1984)*

In an attempt to begin to carry out his request for help, the Taiwan bishops issued a special pastoral letter to their people entitled "The Church in China: One Shepherd, One Flock". (*Ibid*, September 28, 1984)

4) The pope has even appealed to China through person-ages in their own history, e.g., in using the Jesuit missioner Matteo Ricci's high standing among the Chinese as a symbol of the need and appropriateness of reopening dialogue. He said:

*The tomb of Matteo Ricci in Peking brings to mind the grain of wheat hidden in the heart of the earth in order to bear abundant fruit. It constitutes an eloquent appeal, both to Rome and to Peking, to resume that dialogue begun by him four hundred years ago with so much love and with so much success. (L'Osservatore Romano, November 22, 1982, p.7)*

The efforts of \*John Paul II continue with energetic enthusiasm. Simply acknowledging or even marvelling at what one man is doing is of little value. Each person of goodwill who truly longs for a reconciled and peaceful world would do well to follow his leadership. If we enter into this divine challenge in a spirit of personal conversion, understanding, concern, forgiveness and love, the Spirit will make it more clear what a bridge-builder is called to do, where the bridges are needed and how they can best be built.

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