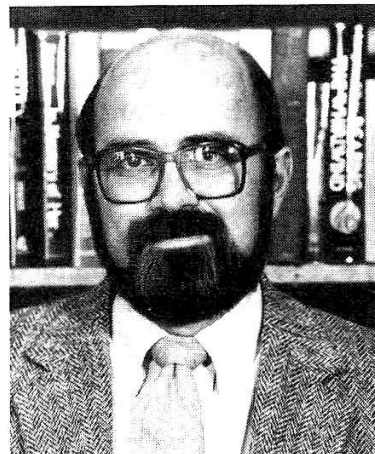


Reconciliation and the Church in China

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Through the many changes that have taken place in and among nations during the last few years, the situations in some places have dramatically improved while, in other places, they have considerably worsened. The new circumstances which such changes create often require people to come to terms with a past marred by violence, oppression and persecution. This has resulted in a call for the renewal of the ancient Christian practice of reconciliation.



In China, too, Catholics are being asked to reconcile themselves to one another and to overcome the harmful divisions that have rent the fabric of the Church there for over thirty years. While the situation among China's Catholics has evolved since 1958, there are still many hurdles to cross. Two questions arise: Is reconciliation possible; and if so, how will it happen?

On the one hand the word "reconciliation" is often used in two different ways. Sometimes it is used easily and quickly -- too easily perhaps. People using it in this fashion think that reconciliation is something that can be effected quickly, if only the offending party would apologize, and the offended party would extend forgiveness. Rarely, if ever, are long and painful histories so easily resolved.

On the other hand, the word "reconciliation" is sometimes introduced into a situation with great care, since the users of that word know what will be entailed. The task can be so daunting that all parties feel paralyzed.

It is probably better to err on the side of caution in these matters. Yet we need not be paralyzed in the situation. There are things that we can do, attitudes that can we cultivate, steps that can we can take. In this article, I would like to explore the

biblical understanding of reconciliation as a basis for looking forward to a time of reconciliation for the Catholic Church in China.

Needless to say, the situation of the Church in China is very complex; it varies from place to place; and is always changing. Nor is it a simple matter of good versus evil, for there are people of good will on both sides, people who have borne the burden of history as best they know how. Yet many divisions remain -- perhaps not as sharp as they once were, but problematic and unresolved nonetheless. And there remain long, painful histories that must be faced and somehow reconciled.

Reconciliation is one of those themes in the Scriptures that is clearly very central to understanding what God has done for the world in Christ, and yet surprisingly little is actually said directly about it. Most of what we do have, is found in the Pauline and Deuteropauline materials. Here we are reminded that the reconciliation of a sinful world unto God is the very reason for Christ's having come among us. We are told, further, that reconciliation has already taken place through the blood of his cross, although the complete achievement of that reconciliation still lies before us. What its full realization will look like is given to us only in glimpses; however, it will take shape and it will involve all things, "whether above the earth, on the earth or under the earth."

I would like to explore this message of Christian reconciliation, since it is the source of a profound hope that can sustain Christians who now suffer from the struggle with their divisions. I wish to do this by looking at three dimensions of the message: first, what reconciliation is not, lest we confuse it with other dynamics in our world and put our hopes in the wrong place; Secondly, what can be distilled from the Scriptures, especially from the Pauline corpus, of the meaning of Christian reconciliation; and finally, what this may suggest for our consideration of reconciliation for the Church in China.

What Reconciliation is Not

There is some advantage in beginning our reflections on Christian reconciliation by stating what it is not, since the word itself can mean so many different things. We speak, after all, of

reconciling bank statements, labor disputes, divorce suits, and arguments.

There are three ways in which the term reconciliation is commonly understood that do not reflect, as such, its Christian or biblical understanding. These three are: reconciliation as a hasty peace, reconciliation as an alternative to liberation, and reconciliation as a managed process.

Reconciliation as a hasty peace tries to deal with a history of pain and suffering by suppressing its memory and ignoring its effects. It tries to put behind us that painful and difficult story and urges a fresh beginning on all sides. Not surprisingly, this version of reconciliation is invoked often by the very ones who have perpetrated the suffering or by those who have quietly stood by as it happened. They want the victims of that history to let bygones be bygones and exercise a "Christian forgiveness."

By trivializing the suffering of others in this way, these false attempts at reconciliation actually underscore how far the situation still is from genuine reconciliation. By calling on those who have suffered to forget or overlook their suffering, is in fact to continue the oppressive situation by saying, in effect, that the experiences of those who have suffered are not important -- indeed, that they themselves are unimportant to the reconciling process. By forgetting the suffering with such haste, the victim is forgotten and the causes of suffering are never uncovered or confronted.

Unfortunately, church people can easily find themselves implicated in this kind of false reconciliation. They naturally feel constrained to speak a word of peace and bring to bear the resources of the Christian message on a troubled situation. But if those same church people have not been part of the struggle, have contented themselves with standing outside or above the situation while making pronouncements about it, they end up, albeit unintentionally, part of the problem rather than part of its solution. This was the accusation leveled by the authors of the *Kairos* Document at church leaders with their "church theology" in South Africa in 1985.¹ One cannot come into the final act of a drama and expect to play a leading role.

Secondly, reconciliation is not an alternative to liberation. In 1985, a concerted effort was made by some conservative bishops and theologians in Latin America to replace theologies

of liberation with a theology of reconciliation, claiming that this would be more faithful to the spirit of the Gospel. The Los Andes Declaration emanating from a conference held in Chile that year made a case for this kind of thinking.² To the minds of its authors reconciliation captured more fully the finality of the Christian message, and was not as conflictual as liberation. It offered peace to all sides.

This form of reconciliation like reconciliation as a hasty peace does echo something of the Christian message. But it too obscures the very causes of conflict and suffering and therefore does not bring about a true reconciliation. Put simply, liberation is not an alternative to reconciliation, it is its prerequisite. Not: liberation *or* reconciliation. Rather: *no* reconciliation *without* liberation. Reconciliation instead of liberation fails to recognize the dimensions of the conflict, especially when the causes of the conflict are hidden and the violence perpetrated is covert in nature. It also ignores the fact that division is not peripheral or an epiphenomenon arising out of a conflictual situation, but is something that stands at the very heart of it. To ignore the division is to ignore the situation, and no alternative remedies can begin to undo the situation.

Finally, reconciliation is not a managed process, like arbitration. Reconciliation is not conflict-mediation, a process whose goal is to lessen conflict or to get the conflicted parties to live with the conflictual situation. Conflict-mediation tries to get both parties to surrender some claims in the hope of reducing tensions, but not so many that tensions are heightened instead. Such conflict-mediation may be and often is necessary in this fallen world, but it should not be confused with reconciliation just because it brings about a temporary cessation in hostilities. As we shall see, for the Christian, reconciliation is not a skill to be mastered; but rather something to be discovered: the power of God's grace welling up in one's life. Reconciliation becomes more of an attitude than an acquired skill; it becomes a stance assumed before a broken world rather than a tool to repair that world. Or put in theological terms, reconciliation is more of a spirituality than a strategy.

These three ways of misunderstanding reconciliation -- as a hasty process, as an alternative to liberation, and as a managed process -- should alert us to how complex the reality of reconciliation actually is. In a way, we, as Christians, should not be

surprised. For reconciliation stands at the heart of the Good News we preach: God's plan for creation and Christ's central work within that plan. Let us turn now to a distillation of that biblical message.

The Christian Message of Reconciliation

Although the concept of reconciliation is central to Christian understanding of what God has done for the world in Christ, the term "reconciliation" itself does not occur that frequently in the Bible. It does not occur at all in the Hebrew Scriptures, although it is no doubt implied in the concept of atonement. Paul is the principal source of its usage in the New Testament, and even there it occurs in some form only fourteen times. The verb "to reconcile", *katallassein*, was understood in Paul's time in a secular context, meaning a making of peace after a time of war.

This is not the place to engage in a prolonged exegesis of the passages related to this concept in the authentic Pauline and the Deuteropauline letters. That has been done competently and comprehensively elsewhere.³ Let me rather try to distill from these texts five essential elements which give us a picture of how reconciliation is to be understood from a Christian perspective.

First of all, *it is God who initiates and brings about reconciliation*. We humans are not in a position, either as victims or oppressors, to recreate ourselves in such a way as to overcome completely the damage done by situations of conflict and violence. While we may surmount these situations, we seem never to be liberated completely. We are never quite able to get things completely right, perhaps because the effects of conflict and division have seeped too deeply into our bones. This is not said to encourage fatalism or quietism, for we are indeed invited by God to cooperate in God's reconciling ways. It is simply to remind us from whence reconciliation comes and who continues to guide it.

Secondly, *reconciliation is more a spirituality than a strategy*. Reconciliation is not brought about by a technical, problem-solving rationality as much as by embracing a view of the world that recognizes and responds to God's reconciling action. Reconciliation is discovered in the justifying and reconciling

grace of God welling up in our lives and in our communities. It is from the experience that we are able to go forth in a ministry of reconciliation. Reconciliation becomes a vocation, a way of life, and not just a set of discrete tasks to be performed and completed. Reconciled communities and individuals do not return to a pre-conflictual state, they live in a new kind of way.

Third, *reconciliation makes of both victim and oppressor a new creation*. What reconciliation is about is more than righting wrongs and repenting evil-doing. These are surely included, but the biblical understanding of reconciliation sees that we are indeed taken to a new place, and become a new creation. Reconciliation is not just restoration; it brings us to a place where we have not been before. This becomes important because we often harbour preconceived notions of what the reconciled state will be like. The Scriptures remind us that we will be more than restored, we will be a new creation.

Fourth, *the story that overcomes the story of division and violence is the story of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus*. In this story, God in Christ enters into the depths of the story of human suffering, of conflict and of division. Body, blood and cross are the symbols that recur over and over in that story, symbols that can bear the paradox of the transformation of suffering and death into a new story of deliverance and life. The violence of our situations is met with the violence of Jesus' death; the dawning of the resurrection heralds that "new place" where the reconciled are gathered. The symbol of Christ's body is the vehicle for restoring the shattered bodies of those who suffer, and for gathering the scattered community of those driven apart in violence and conflict. The symbol of blood carries the memories of violence to be healed. It portends new life to those who have shed their own blood. The symbol of the cross exposes the lie of human power and domination, and the truth of how human designs often go deeply awry. The cross challenges our understandings of what constitutes power in this world, understandings that make violence and oppression possible.

And finally, *reconciliation embraces all dimensions of reality*. Reconciliation breaks down human enmity, and embraces the entire cosmos. It acknowledges that the reconciling process reaches beyond God's reconciling offer. It points to the alienation yet to be overcome. It involves laments for what has been

lost and calls forth a healing memory. It has cosmic dimensions that we only dimly understand.

This, perhaps all too succinctly, tries to bring together an understanding of God's reconciling activity in the world as presented in the Pauline corpus. It remains for us to see what this means for us as Christians and our vocation as the bearers of God's Good News.

Reconciliation and the Church in China

What meaning might all this have for the eventual reconciliation of the Church in China? A number of suggestions follow that are drawn from what has been said above and are offered as possible points for reflection to those who wish to be part of the reconciliation process. They are based on a Christian understanding of reconciliation, and not on the particular experience of someone who knows the China situation well. For this reason, they are offered rather as a resource to those who are closer to the situation than is this author.

First of all, it is important to realize that the reconciliation process usually begins with the victim, not with the oppressor. We usually suppose that reconciliation begins when the oppressor repents of evildoing and seeks the victim's forgiveness. In the Christian view, however, it is the other way around. What happens is that the shattered victim discovers God's offer of healing grace and accepts God's favor as a restoration of an abused and shattered humanity. This is not the blaming-the-victim syndrome. Rather, it represents God's being on the side of the little one, the *anawim*, giving them the strength to overcome the mighty. God rescues the humanity of the victim, a humanity of which the victim has been robbed by violence. The forgiveness that the victim is now able to offer as a result of having experienced God's care and healing, is what will provoke repentance on the part of the oppressor. This is captured beautifully in the words of Joe Seramane, now Director of the Justice and Reconciliation Department of the South Africa Council of Churches. Bearing witness to justice led to his imprisonment and torture. After his release, he was able to meet with his torturer once again and to offer him this forgiveness. He tells us now that "it is through reconciliation that we regain our

humanity. To work for reconciliation is to live to show others what their humanity is."

In the situation of Catholics, and indeed all Christians, in China, who is the victim and who the oppressor? Those communities that the government has officially recognized are sometimes identified with the oppressors, and those that are still outlawed and persecuted as the victims. But such quick designations may no longer be accurate. What may be more important is to ask: who have felt the reconciling grace of God within their hearts? Who, in experiencing that grace, have seen how they have been diminished by the experience of the last thirty years and yet also see how God is at work healing that history? It is those who are experiencing God's work in their hearts who will be the leaders in the reconciliation process. They will be able to echo the sentiments of Joe Seramane quoted above. No one can appoint oneself as a reconciling agent; only God can do that.

Second, there is no reconciliation without liberation. While there is tolerance of religion in China, there are limits to that toleration. Church people are not yet completely free to act as they choose. For that reason, we should not be surprised if full reconciliation will remain unlikely for as long as certain restraints remain in place. There can be no full reconciliation without truth. It likewise reminds us of how long the reconciliation process may take and, again, that reconciliation is principally the work of God.

Third, reconciliation will make of the Church in China a new creation. It will not be a matter of reverting to a former pre-1958 style, nor of one side assuming the form and style of the other. God's reconciling work makes of us a new creation. I would suggest that one place to look for the newness of creation will be in how the word "Catholic" is understood. The root of the word is "holos," meaning a sense of the whole. What will the "whole" be for Catholics in this new creation? In a sense the very name "Catholic" implies a search for and a responsibility to the whole. Might not such a quest -- to search and care for the whole in order to be truly Catholic -- be our motivation in the reconciliation process?

Fourth, the divisions are only likely to be overcome if they are somehow brought into contact with the three great reconciling symbols of the New Testament: the body of Christ, crucified and glorified; the blood of Christ, poured out in suffering and

now the drink of the everlasting kingdom; and the cross, that exposes the lies of the world and which has become the throne of God. Divisions have within themselves deep paradoxes. The paradoxical nature of the great reconciling symbols of body, blood and cross may be what is needed to overcome the suffering of the past and the divisions the past has engendered.

Fifth, and finally, reconciliation is not merely a moment in the healing of a divided Church. It is as close as we can come to God's very action within and among us. God's work in Christ is described as God's reconciling the world to God's self. We are called to be ministers of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:20), but not on our own power: only as ambassadors on Christ's behalf. In experiencing reconciliation, we experience the most intimate movement of God in our lives. Thus for the Church in China to desire reconciliation is more than a wish to overcome a sad and painful past; it is the yearning to feel the touch of God.

Reconciliation is not an easy process. But if we yearn and pray for it, we can have confidence that God will hear our prayer. We need also to look for signs of hope. John Baptist Jiang reported in *The Clergy Review* (no. 299) that in one place in China two bishops are sharing the same house: one a bishop of the "official" Church recognized by the government, the other from the "unofficial" Church. They are also said to share some measure of "communion" with one another.⁴ Whatever that might mean precisely, it does show that there is indeed hope. But we must seek God's reconciling grace in our lives, face the truth that sets us free from suffering and painful memories, and prepare ourselves to become a new creation.

Notes

1. "The *Kairos* Document: Challenge to the Church," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, no. 53 (1985) 51-81.
2. "Declaración de Los Andes," *Mensaje* 34 (1985) 399-402.
3. See especially Cilliers Breytenbach, *Versöhnung. Eine Studie zur paulinischen Soteriologie* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1989); and Jose Comblin, "O Tema de reconciliação e a Teologia na America Latina," *Revista Eclesiastica Brasileira* 46 (1986) 272-314, upon which the following remarks are based.
4. Cited in Aloysius B. Chang, "The Bridge Church: Christianity in China" *Catholic International* 2 (1991) 924; also *Tripod*, 61 (1991), 6-16.