

“The Road to Reconciliation”
Symposium at Boston College School of Theology and Ministry
April 16, 2009

remarks as written by Robert J. Schreiter
of the Catholic Theological Union

Introduction

Three commemorations being held this year make the theme “The Road to Reconciliation” especially timely. In November, we will mark twenty years since the fall of the Berlin Wall, an event emblematic of the collapse of Communism in Europe. It was perhaps this event more than anything else that set off a renewed and intense interest in reconciliation. While the theme of reconciliation had been explored intermittently in the decades before, much of the advances in our understanding of reconciliation can be traced back to what happened in Berlin and throughout Eastern and Central Europe in those days. The undoing of forty years of repression – in many instances a repression that was built upon a prior history of fascism – seemed a daunting task then, and continues to be so today.

2009 has been designated by the United Nations as the International Year of Reconciliation. This proclamation was prompted by the awareness that that protracted armed conflict has devastated and continued to devastate so much of the world. A renewed effort to overcome the trauma of war and to build a different kind of society – both locally and globally – seemed a particularly apt undertaking at the end of the first decade of the 21st century.

Focused more closely on a single continent, a third event brings the theme of reconciliation into the foreground of our attention. In October of this year, the Second Special Synod for Africa will be celebrated

from a church perspective, is that the instrumentum laboris appears to take the theme of reconciliation beyond its more traditional theological boundaries of sin and penitence.

All in all, a good time to be sojourners on the “road to reconciliation,” as this symposium is intended to be. I want to thank the Paulist Reconciliation Ministries and the School of Theology and Ministry of Boston College for staging this very timely symposium and inviting me to be a part of it. “The Road to Reconciliation” as a metaphor suggests that we are indeed on the move, and that there is a certain directionality to our movement. I would like to take this road metaphor and use it to pose two questions.

The first is: Just where have we come on the road to reconciliation? Taking the International Year of Reconciliation as an opportunity and invitation, I would like to take stock of where we have come and what we have learned over these past twenty years about reconciliation. The learning curve has been a steep one, in many ways – both in the sheer number of events that have called out for reconciliation, and in the density of questions that have emerged from those events. Much of this presentation, therefore, will be given over to charting that road to reconciliation as it has unfolded before us over the past twenty years.

The second question is contained in the title of this presentation: Is the “road to reconciliation” principally about looking backward – healing the past – or looking forward – building the future? Responding to this question will require a different perspective than the one needed to answer the previous one. It will involve stepping aside, as it were, and trying to locate the multiple discourses of reconciliation within the larger landscape of the past two decades. Why did interest in reconciliation emerge as such a compelling topic when it did? What does it say about what preceded it and what we hope will follow? The final part of this presentation will be devoted to suggesting some responses to that question.

As can be seen from the breadth of these two questions, all I will be able to do here is point to signposts along the road, and not give any thorough treatment of any specific topic. While there is a measure of frustration built into such an approach, this attempt to grasp the big picture has the advantage of offering a wider perspective that might help us address some of the thorny issues involved in reconciliation and perhaps throw some light on puzzlements we experience along the way.

Where Have We Come on the Road to Reconciliation?

“Map is not territory,” religion scholar Jonathan Z. Smith reminded us some years ago.¹ A map is an attempt to understand better a terrain, and the relationships between its various parts. A roadmap is not the road itself, but a stylized representation that is intended to help us navigate a road’s twists and turns, its smooth and its rough parts.

Before embarking on tracing the road to reconciliation, however, it behooves us to consider a bit the territory itself, the terrain that has created the need to chart roads to reconciliation. I have already noted that there was a dramatic increase in events that drew attention to the theme of reconciliation. Just what were those events, and how did they engage the theme of reconciliation in those years? Let me trace briefly some of those events, and note how they provide the contour and texture of the landscape of reconciliation.

I have already mentioned what might be considered the inaugurating event of that period, namely, the

reconciliation, where they encounter chasms of alienation and suffering that they cannot bridge. Let me turn to them now.

First Roadmap: Reconciliation is about the Human Heart

The first roadmap sees reconciliation achieved principally by a conversion of the human heart. Only when we have changed the individuals in a society will there be any hope of changing society itself. Put another way, it is reconciled individuals who will make a reconciled society.

On this view, reconciliation is not something we do, but rather something that God is doing to us. This is certainly the central point of St. Paul's message of reconciliation, our principal source for thinking about a Christian understanding of reconciliation. As he sets forth eloquently in the fifth chapter of the Letter to the Romans, we are reconciled to God because while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Rom 5: 8) Paul reminds us here and elsewhere that all reconciliation comes from God (cf. 2 Cor 5:17), and this reconciliation not only frees us from alienation from God, one another, and the entire cosmos; it also makes of us a "new creation," something utterly transformed.

Such a "vertical" understanding of reconciliation, that is, the relationship between God and all that God has created, has been and continues to be at the very heart of the Church's teaching on reconciliation. It focuses upon how individual wrongdoers are reconciled to their Creator. Liturgical texts and practices of reconciliation all give expression to this teaching.

While such an approach to reconciliation is, for Christians, incontrovertible it is often difficult to find ways of translating it into "horizontal" reconciliation – reconciliation among human beings, at both the individual and collective level. Here there is a focus on beginning with the victim and the healing of victims rather than dealing with the perpetrator. While Christians believe

ecclesial and educational ministries of the Church: regular reception of the sacraments and a Catholic education do not inoculate a society against evil practices. The majority of the genocidaires in Rwanda, after all, were Christian – most of them Catholic.

To make the same point in more individual terms: advising a battered spouse to solve the problem of being beaten by praying more and forgiving her spouse does not solve the problem of domestic violence. Some demons may be driven out by prayer and fasting, but others are not. Put another way, the tangled roots of violence and wrongdoing cannot be reduced to individual sin, even though sin is undeniably a part of the equation. Moreover, pastorally, the sole focus on the human heart is likely to sound like advice to endure one's suffering rather than work in some way to overcome it.

So as a roadmap to reconciliation, to see reconciliation only as something about the individual human heart will not in itself get us to our goal. To put it in philosophical language, the conversion of the individual heart is a necessary but not sufficient condition for reconciliation. It provides an important, indeed indispensable resource, and is an important feature for orientation on the road to reconciliation. But we need more.

Roadmap Two: Reconciliation is about Overcoming Injustice

A second roadmap to achieve reconciliation takes a different approach, building somewhat on the perceived shortcomings of the first roadmap. This second approach addresses the complexity of causes that create situations that call for reconciliation. It focuses especially on social factors, and their accumulated, historical effects upon a situation. It tries to discern how different forms of wrongdoing become intertwined and become, over time, nearly impossible to untangle. In nations, histories of colonialism or foreign subjugation are kept in place by endemic poverty and protracted conflict. The dysfunctional systems of families can affect family members for generation after generation. Institutions intended to be beneficent develop repressive and oppressive features that become embedded in their culture. In a word, there are glaring absences of right relations we call together injustice.

The road to reconciliation can be construed as a struggle against injustice. A cry that is often heard in the aftermath of repression in a country is that there can be no reconciliation without an end to injustice, and indeed a punishment of wrongdoers. Pope Paul VI's oft-quoted dictum "If you want peace, work for justice" sums this up succinctly. Especially since the 1970 Synod of Bishops on Justice in the World, and parallel efforts in the World Council of Churches beginning about the same time, the work for reconciliation has often focused on the work for justice.

As well it should. The language of "reconciliation" often can be found on the lips of wrongdoers who want victims to forget the past and the sufferings victims have endured. It is a way of skipping over the issue of justice. The use of amnesty and impunity in Latin America in the 1980s made "reconciliation" a bad word in many of those countries. Justice is clearly understood as one of the central attributes of God in all three of the Abrahamic faiths. The Bible (and the Qur'an) is filled with references to justice.

Without some measure of justice, the wounds of those who have suffered injustice cannot heal. Without the continuing pursuit of justice, efforts and programs of reconciliation will not have authenticity in the eyes of victims. But more important even here than the authenticity that makes for credibility is a faithfulness to God and to God's work in reconciliation. And that work is inconceivable without a continuing pursuit of justice.

At the same time, twenty years in the work of reconciliation has taught us a few things about the pursuit of justice – especially our pursuit of justice as it might be compared to God's own justice. There are three things in particular that we have learned that need to be mentioned here. The first is when justice focuses exclusively on punitive justice, that is, the punishment of wrongdoers, it is inadequate at best and can become deleterious to the entire process of reconciliation and healing at worst. The punishment of wrongdoers can serve a deeply felt human impulse (Jared Diamond and evolutionary psychologists have

ranked it among the basic “adaptive responses” that have shaped human social behavior since we lived in small bands of hunter-gatherers) for retaliation when we have been harmed. Retaliation is intended to deter the wrongdoer from striking again, and fits into a larger social pattern that sees society as an equilibrium among competing, hostile forces. In Western societies, this primitive adaptive response is often depicted as Dame Justice holding a set of scales, herself blindfolded to indicate her impartiality in restoring balance in society. Sociologists studying Western societies have cast considerable doubt on whether punishment for the sake of deterrence actually does create the hoped-for block on future wrongful behavior. Yet it remains an important mechanism at the very least for maintaining the state’s claim to monopoly on violence in society.

From the point of view of reconciliation, punitive justice runs the risk of not actually stopping cycles of violence, but merely sending them into gestation until the opportunity arises for the punished to retaliate against those doing the punishing. Perhaps one of the most graphic examples of this at a social level in the twentieth century was the punishment meted out against Germany by the Allies at the end of the First World War. The heavy fines, the wresting away of territory, and the military occupation of the Rhineland was intended to punish and to humiliate. Many historians consider this experience as preparing the ground for accepting fascism in that country, so much so that recent histories of the period suggest that the twenty years between 1919 and 1939 was but a truce in one, continuous war.

Enacting punitive justice has the decided positive effect of saying that the state will not tolerate such wrongdoing in the future. But it largely fails to create the conditions for a different kind of society; it can only produce its mirror opposite, of not tolerating such acts. It is in light of this that movements for restorative justice have taken on more valence in peace studies, not only in criminal justice systems but also in thinking about the reconstruction of society as a whole.

the reconstruction of life after grievous harm and irretrievable loss requires a new set of relationships to oneself, the community, to the past, and even to God. The repair of the web of meaning that situates in a life-giving, interdependent world requires all of this. Often in the pursuit of justice there is a sense that change is only something for the wrongdoer. If that change happens, the integrity of the victim is restored. That is, of course, too simple. It rests on the belief that grave injustice and wrongdoing can simply be erased or removed from the lives of victims without any further consequences for the victim, and the victim can then return to a status quo ante and continue life as though nothing every happened. But profound misdeeds change our lives inalterably. We cannot bring back the dead. We cannot restore a way of life and some networks of relationships that have been irretrievably taken from us. To pursue justice without regard for the change that will have to happen in the lives of victims, then, will only eventuate in a one-sided, inadequate enactment of justice.

I raise these points about the limits of justice to show the limits of this kind of roadmap for achieving reconciliation. In circles where reconciliation is being pursued, inadequate and abstract pursuits of justice can actually hamper the longer-term quest for reconciliation and healing. An example would be the 1997 meeting of the European Council of Churches in Graz. The meeting, intended to explore reconciliation, broke down into competing lobbying groups for different causes, each claiming that the injustices that they had suffered were the most grievous and therefore had to have priority of attention. The World Council of Churches, in some of its documents in that period, had made the pursuit of justice such a central priority that it became impossible to make any other move toward a wider reconciliation short of complete justice. Miroslav Volf, one of the most sensitive students of reconciliation pointed this out at the time.²

Like seeing the conversion of the individual human heart as the best roadmap to reconciliation, the pursuit of justice as yet another roadmap carries with it deep truths that we ignore at our own peril. But as the sole roadmap, it may not help us negotiate some of the terrain on the road to reconciliation. When one deals with long-term wrongdoing, and the accumulation of the effects of social sin, the pursuit of justice becomes a necessary, but not in itself sufficient, condition for reaching reconciliation. If left only to

made possible by recourse to ritual, a performance that can link these different dimensions in such a way as to make each and all of them “present” to us.

These spaces have been identified by thinkers such as postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha as “third spaces” wherein reigning patterns of power and domination are deconstructed and even reversed.³ Anthropologist Paul Rabinow speaks of “interstitia

and embed the practices of reconciliation within the social fabric, not as a once-for-all event, but a recurrent (although we also hope, cumulative) process toward an end.

This non-linear quality of reconciliation holds not only for our spatial experience, but also for our experience of time as well. We find ourselves turning back to the past as our present changes, we find ourselves re-imagining an already imagined future. The ritual quality of many alternative social formations helps us negotiate this moving in and out of different experiences of time.

Reconciliation as a goal is only partially imaginable. We cannot envision it entirely ahead of time or project the present experience into the future as such. As such, our experience of reconciliation is always incomplete. From a Christian point of view, we yearn for eschatological fulfillment, when "God will be all in all" (1 Cor 15:28).

I hope these general suggestions give some idea of what I am coming to believe is an important part of the work of reconciliation, namely, attending to the role of alternative social formations as a constituent part of the process. It gives us a different roadmap through the terrain of healing and reconciliation, having as a particular strength an appreciation of the role of the practices of reconciliation as moments of an anticipatory experience of reconciliation, as well as signposts of just how far we have come and still need to go. At the same time, such an approach too has its limitations. One can come to dwell in these alternative social formations as a kind of haven on a painful path, and not want to leave their provisional comforts. One can become transfixed by the moments of healing in such a way as not to be willing to continue the onward journey. As a roadmap, these alternative social formations do change our perception of the contours of the terrain. But again, map is not territory.

Conclusion: Healing the Past or Building the Future?

I return to the title of this presentation: Is reconciliation about healing the past or building the future? In a road that is as much marked by paradox as another other trope, the answer is: yes. Both are essential dimensions. To be sure, depending upon the terrain that needs to be traversed, there may be more