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The Sacrament of Reconciliation Its Socio-Political Implications

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Abstract: After analysing the dynamics of reconciliation, the author traces the social and communitarian dimensions of the sacrament of reconciliation. Urging us to support initiatives taken in the direction social-political harmony, the author affirms that the communal strife will not prevail!

Keywords: Sacrament of reconciliation, society, community, forgiveness, justice.

During New Testament times, Jesus' message of salvation was stated in the words: "repent and believe in the gospel." (Mark 1/15). This called for a change of heart, mind and action and was understood as conversion. In time, the defining moment of conversion was identified with the celebration of baptismal initiation symbolizing the forgiveness of sins and insertion into a community of believers in Jesus Christ. The Church was seen to be this community of believers who came together to celebrate the Eucharist and to pray, as we find in 1 Corinthians 11/18 and 14/19. The church community gave its members a continuing sense of Christian identity by the celebration of sacraments in and for the community. Every sacramental celebration—more particularly the sacrament of reconciliation that is in evidence from the second century—reiterated Jesus' message of salvation that called for a continuing process of conversion. Each sacramental celebration highlighted the moment of baptismal initiation once again so that a person could reaffirm his/her deepening relationship to God in and through the Church. At the same time, it expressed the unity that the Christian community experienced in living out the values proclaimed by Jesus in his 'words and deeds, signs and wonders' (DV 4).

When the early Church had to cope with members who had sinned after baptismal initiation, it understood that the unity of believers had been broken when individuals transgressed God's law. The early Church understood sin as an evil that did violence to relationships between persons and the community to which they belonged. Initially, three major areas were identified in which serious sin was recognized: apostasy (one's alienation from the community of faith), adultery (wounding a community relationship established through marriage) and murder (cutting off a person from the community of the living). The healing of community relationships that were broken along with a conversion of heart towards God was the primary reason for celebrating the sacrament of reconciliation.

Being in a relationship with another is the starting point for building up community. Relationship between persons, groups and peoples ensures the building up and preservation of community. The secular state is also a community in which relationships need to be built up and sustained so that the body politic can reflect unity in diversity. The recent past has raised questions about the very possibility of community as envisaged in the Indian Constitution and by the founding fathers of the nation. Will the unity of India be achieved through coercive efforts where one group is subjugated by another, or will it be born through the free choice of persons who actively foster the unity of the Indian polity as an essential condition for their own wholeness?

In understanding the true meaning of sacramental reconciliation, one recognizes specific dynamics in it that bring healing and wholeness to a fractured community. These dynamics are relevant to our situation in India today where a Godhra-type incident as well as the carnage that followed could happen again. The essay begins by tracing the development of the sacrament of reconciliation and noting some of the dynamics it includes. Next, it reflects on these dynamics and their function in building an integrated secular society.

Part I: The Dynamics in Sacramental Reconciliation

In the Christian tradition, religion is seen as expressing a relationship that is lived out between God and his people. This relationship gives the people a special status; they become a nation, a

community that traces its existence to a founding experience in which God is seen making a covenant with them. The Vatican II term 'People of God' that derives from the biblical images found both in the Old Testament (e.g. Ezek. 37/26-27) and the New (e.g. 1 Pet. 2/9-10) calls attention to a people who responded to the call of God and lived according to his will. This response created and shaped the tradition (Judaism) of Israel's people.¹

1. Reconciliation in the Scriptures

As a community, Israel had its moments of success and failure. The promises of God's fidelity to his people were met often with acts of infidelity and betrayal. Repentance was part of Israel's life for it was reminded of its true vocation: to be a people united in their response to God's promise. The community of Israel acknowledged its sinfulness and performed cultic acts to purify itself from the guilt incurred by sin. While collective celebrations of the people's repentance were observed in the community, the prophets also called on persons to acknowledge and repent of their individual guilt. Repentance brought about a conversion which included a change of heart that showed in a changed way of life.² Both the internal conversion of the individual as well as his/her reconciliation to the community featured in overcoming the sin committed by a person.

But to know that an individual had sinned required an externally observable norm, a standard by which his/her actions were seen to be right or wrong. That norm or standard was supplied by the Torah that comprised all the laws, norms and regulations which taught the people of Israel about God's expectations of them. While the most telling part of the Torah is reflected in the instructions that God gave to Moses on Sinai, the Torah as a whole was understood as the ensemble of the different stipulations present in the covenant that God had made with his people. Those who sinned could be forgiven their sins and wrongdoing through different sacrifices or expiatory offerings (Lev. 4-5), yet a change of heart or disposition on the part of the individual was required (Is. 1:18-19; Hos. 12:2-3; Joel 2:13). Breaking God's covenant meant breaking one's relationship with God and, to that extent, resulted in a person's being separated from the community that had agreed to follow God's instructions.

In the New Testament, in his efforts to proclaim the gratuitousness of God's action, Paul views the functioning of the law like that of a thermometer. Just as a thermometer tells us the extent of a fever, so too the law made the people of Israel aware of the enormity of their sinfulness and wrongdoing: "...if it had not been for the law, I should not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet'." (Rom. 7/7) Persons become aware of their wrongdoing and their subsequent alienation from God and their fellow human beings by measuring themselves against a law, a norm, a standard. At the same time, Paul points out that, through their own efforts, such persons are unable to overcome their alienation and be reconciled to God and to each another: This reconciliation takes place through Jesus Christ and continues in his Church: "All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation..." (2 Cor. 5/18) Reconciliation was understood as originating in God's action and not in human endeavour.

2. Reconciliation in the History of the Church

In the early Church, a sinner who sought God's forgiveness approached the Church through the penitentiary. The penitent was barred from sharing in the Eucharist and was officially grouped with those who were excommunicated.³ Until the penitent was received back into the community, he/she was obliged to perform a penance so that the perfect love of God could grow in his/her heart and repair the moral order that had been broken. In this pattern of forgiveness requiring several steps before the final act of reconciliation, the communitarian dimension was very prominent. However, because of the cumbersome nature of such a celebration and the migration or movement of persons from one place to another, this pattern gradually fell into disuse. Its place was taken by the Celtic pattern of reconciliation where a penitent could be absolved privately in a single ceremony by an ordained minister with faculties. In this substitution, the communitarian dimension of reconciliation became blurred. In spite of initial resistance from the bishops in Europe to this form of forgiveness, private reconciliation gained ground and remained the standard practice in the Church until recently. In the seventies when the post-Vatican II reform of the sacrament of penance took

effect, the community dimension of sacramental reconciliation was given prominence in the second and third modes of celebration. The communitarian aspect appears especially in the celebration of the word of God at the start of the sacramental action.

Private confession, as the Celtic practice of reconciliation was referred to, was seen by the Church as part of spiritual direction. The pursuit of a holy life implied that a person sought instruction from the ministers of the Church to know God's will and be healed when one acted against it. As a result, reconciliation became a private interaction of one person with another and the social dimension of one's relationship to God through the community was practically lost sight of. With the efforts of the scholastics to determine the nature of sacramental causality in the context of the ordained ministry, stress was laid on contrition, confession and satisfaction or penance which were seen as the acts of the individual penitent in the celebration of reconciliation. The ordained minister's function was seen to be that of a judge in the sacrament of 'penance'.⁴ (Evidently the role of a judge in a forensic situation and in the confessional is very different. In a court of law, the function of the judge is to decide whether the accused is guilty or not. This is not the function of the minister in the confessional.) In the wake of Vatican II the communitarian dimension was once again given prominence.

The penance or satisfaction that is assigned to the penitent is not meant to pay God back but to give expression to the forgiveness freely given by God and freely received by the penitent. The persons who have suffered from the penitent's wrongdoing—here we understand the church community itself—must also receive justice if the penitent has truly been forgiven. Justice presupposes a world order in which rights and duties exist and each person receives his/her due. If sin or wrongdoing does violence to another then, in justice, one should make amends to the other for the harm he/she has suffered. Forgiveness is complete when the penitent commits him/herself to a purpose of amendment even though it can happen that other circumstances prevent him/her from fulfilling it.

The Catholic practice of sacramental reconciliation is wedded to the central tenet in Christianity: love of God and love of one's neighbour. (Mat 22/37-38; Mk 12/30-31; Lk 10/27) This central tenet

is seen as the foundation of community-building in the family and in society at large. In loving the other, he/she becomes an extension of oneself. Hence, when violence is done to the other and a person sins and incurs guilt, sacramental reconciliation reminds the violator that it is still possible to affirm the other person as one's own self and offers a means to repair the broken relationship.

The gap between what religions are meant to proclaim and the actual way in which religions are lived will always be present. The Christian proclamation was always meant to be an appeal to the freedom of a person, and love and forgiveness were meant to be its core dynamics. Unfortunately, the Christianity that proclaimed love of neighbour as central to its preaching sanctioned the Crusades and Colonialism, and, along with other religions, found justification for waging a 'just' war. John Bowker states that "virtually all the long-running and apparently insoluble problems in the world, in Northern Ireland, Bosnia, Cyprus, the Middle East, Kashmir, Sri Lanka, India and Pakistan, East Timor [till it became independent], the Philippines, have deep religious roots."⁵ Yet, in spite of past happenings, one can still recognize the dynamics in the practice of sacramental reconciliation that reinforce the universal quest for unity—persons in relationship, one to the other.

Part II: Forgiveness, Justice and Community in Secular Society

Three aspects (dynamics) are clearly linked with the process of reconciliation: forgiveness, justice and community. Forgiveness stresses the acceptance of the other through a free act; justice includes the recognition and the bringing about of a moral and social order in the world, and community is the context and condition in which persons experience their essential and constantly re-founded unity.

A. Forgiveness

In sacramental reconciliation, the priest is asked to take on the role of judge. This job description of the priest has often brought him criticism on the grounds that he is not necessarily holier than the penitent and that this role makes him arrogant and condescending towards the person seeking absolution. However, his personal

holiness is not related to his ability to forgive! His authorization to act as judge does not come from himself but from the Church. There is a difference between the judgment that is handed down in a court of law and in the confessional. In a court of law, it is for the prosecution and the defence to make their points and for the judge to listen to each and decide whether the accused is guilty as charged. The judge can exercise either of two options: he can find the accused innocent or guilty of the charge. If innocent, the judge declares the person innocent and sets him/her at liberty. If guilty, the judge has the duty of sentencing the accused to undergo punishment according to the law books or statutes. In a forensic setting, if the accused is found guilty, he/she receives the punishment that is laid down by statute. For the priest in the confessional, however, there is only one judgment that is handed down to the penitent (the accused who voluntarily accepts his/her guilt before God in humility): full forgiveness, complete pardon. In rendering this judgment the priest represents the unconditional love of God that will always be present to a sinner. Jesus draws attention to this aspect of God when he addresses him as 'Abba' (Mark 14/36), a term of respect that also indicates an intimate relationship between two persons.

When forgiveness is seen as unconditional, the understanding is that God freely takes away the burden of the sinner's wrongdoing. For God, love is its own reason and so too is forgiveness. When relationship is restored, it calls for the building up of trust. Attitudes of fear, suspicion and lingering doubt grow between persons when one party has hurt the other. Similar situations exist when peoples of different regions, language groups and religions feel that they have been the victims of unjust aggression or discrimination. Ultimately, one party does not become reconciled to another because the other party can turn back the clock and then recreate a scenario different from that which is already part of history, but because one decides to forgive freely. A classic example occurred when the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was set up in 1995 under Archbishop Desmond Tutu to deal with racial abuse during the era of apartheid in South Africa. Its object was not to try whites who had indulged in racial discrimination but to heal painful memories and exorcise hatred that had grown during the years of apartheid.

Forgiveness brings into human consideration a framework of reference that cannot rest merely on the level of human pragmatism or superior force. A framework that does not leave space for a sense of God, mercy and graciousness is too fragile and incomplete to settle issues and questions concerning injustice and hurts suffered by peoples and political states. Human beings remain stewards of creation and must not assume that human codes of law or acts of jurisprudence discount the need for forgiveness. Forgiveness is the unexpected that happens without warning, the cementing bond between persons or parties that opens new vistas for those concerned. One can recall the historic reconciliation treaty signed between Charles de Gaulle and Konrad Adenauer in 1963 that paved the way for a new era between France and Germany ravaged by two world wars and at odds with each other for close to a century. No reason can be adduced for both leaders taking a path 'less travelled' and initiating a partnership that has proved to be the backbone of a united Europe.

B. Justice

Justice begins from the premise that there is a God-willed order in the world within which communities can develop and realize their true potential. The same holds for individual human persons. Persons and communities exercise freedom of choice in upholding such an order and creating harmony in society as a whole. However, acts of wrongdoing disrupt this order and prevent persons from developing and realizing their true potential both within themselves and in others. Practising justice that is commutative, distributive and social enables persons to repair that order. Commutative justice deals with a variety of agreements between different parties so that, e.g., just wages are paid, fair contracts made and equitable exchanges prevail between workers and employers. Distributive justice has to do with the way the goods (natural and fabricated) of this world are owned and used for the benefit of all persons. In this regard, the needs experienced by others feature prominently. Social justice is instrumental in bringing about an egalitarian society where workers' rights, ownership of private property and care for the marginalized in society become community priorities. The three types of justice oblige society to make human rights the foundation for the socio-political order that it cultivates.

Persons and communities possess fundamental rights as seen in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations (1948). These rights have their source in “the inherent dignity and (of) the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family” (Preamble). In a world where the fundamental human rights of every person are acknowledged and respected, a Utopia would exist. But this is not the case. The 20th century saw two world wars, a cold war and the collapse of political colonialism. Race, colour and religion continue to be grounds on which persons and communities suffer discrimination. If communities are to be built in which persons are enabled to exercise their human rights, then programmes of affirmative action like those during the Kennedy era in the U.S., special consideration for those suffering because of caste and class discrimination as envisaged by the Mandal Commission and state welfare schemes for the economically backward must feature in the practice of justice.

Reconciliation demands that justice be given especially to those who suffer. Justice to the marginalized and suffering implies not merely affirming constitutional rights for them but also providing the conditions in which those rights can be exercised. If Liberation Theology stresses human liberation rather than human rights, it is because while human rights are easily affirmed for every person, the effort to enable the marginalized to enjoy them does not come automatically or easily. A concern for justice includes a concern for human rights and also a commitment to the human liberation of those persons. The efforts of voluntary organizations, of NGOs and like-minded groups, to bring justice to all peoples must be supported by all who believe that human rights when practised is the foundation of a just and unified society.

C. Community

Reconciliation reminds us of the primal unity that binds all persons together and which can persist even after unity is disrupted. Sacramental reconciliation—beginning with sacramental initiation as the first defining step of turning back to God—builds on the premise that God has called all persons to be part of his people. Even when persons separate themselves from the community through their misdeeds and sinfulness, they are still welcome to return to the community. This understanding is well described in *Lumen Gentium*, no. 13:

All human beings are called to the new people of God. Therefore, this people, while remaining one and unique, is to be spread throughout the whole world and through every age to fulfil the design of the will of God, who in the beginning made one human nature and decreed that his children who had been scattered should at last be gathered into one...⁶

Sacramental reconciliation is the defining moment not of unity that is being broken but of brokenness that is overcome by a stronger sense of unity, a unity willed by God. Brokenness can be understood as a challenge to a unity that is logically primal. The quest for community begins with the presumption that individuals find their true personhood in community. Persons who are members of a community experience their unity by sharing with and responding to the needs of others. At the horizontal level, the reality of unity makes itself felt in the need that persons have to belong to a concrete human community; at the vertical level, this same reality may be described as the divine (God) calling a person to himself through the different persons among whom one is placed.

The pattern of Israel being called to be the people of God is repeated in the histories of nations in their efforts to form polities in the world. Yet, many nations have harboured the notions of the 'insider' and the 'outsider' among their peoples to suit the interests of particular groups. The 'insider' is seen as having a natural right to be treated as a full citizen whereas the 'outsider' must make do with what the 'insider' considers his/her due. As a nation, India can be seen as a socio-political entity that requires no single exclusive criterion (religion, occupation or physical features) for a person to qualify as a citizen of the country. In fact India is a mosaic where many races, different language groups and a variety of religions are found. The secular spirit enshrined in the Indian Constitution and its espousal of efforts to build an egalitarian society truly reflect the values proclaimed in the biblical imagery concerning the Reign of God. One who professes allegiance to the Constitution of India and acts according to its spirit is already nurturing and fostering the unity of the Indian nation. It is here that T. K. Oomen rightly calls into question the presumption that there is one mainstream society and that the others (minorities) are outsiders. He claims that the "artifi-

cially constructed cultural mainstream” is “untenable “ for the following reasons:

India is the third largest Muslim country in the world; 80 per cent of the world’s Zoroastrians live in India; and the population of Christians and Sikhs exceeds the total population of many nation-states in the world. The Indian Constitution unambiguously attests religious pluralism, that is, respect for all religions.

Second, the traditionist perspective stigmatizes Islam and Christianity in India as products of conquest and colonization. But this position is not sustainable. There is adequate historical evidence to suggest that pre-conquest Islam and pre-colonial Christianity existed in India. Third, the traditionist perspective brushes aside the fact that the overwhelming majority of Indians belonging to ‘non-Indian’ religions are converts from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. This is important because these pre-Aryan people define and perceive themselves to be the authentic natives of this country. Only their religion is ‘non-Indian’. Fourth, the traditionist perspective, albeit unwittingly, divides the Indian population into insiders and outsiders without providing any rational basis. Further, it does not provide any acceptable mechanism of incorporating the ‘outsiders’ (except assimilation into the Hindu mainstream) even after several centuries of their nativization in India.⁷

Reconciliation affirms the need to treat the people of the whole world as one community so that a community constituted in one state must itself be seen as a part of a larger whole, the world community. The need for recognizing a world community is seen in political organizations like the Pax Romana, the League of Nations and the United Nations which create patterns of unity. Hence, while accepting that God’s plan for the unity of the peoples in India has been made concrete in the state of India, Indians must be ready to build up community with others who constitute another state.

To claim that a group of persons form a community is to describe a process in which a number of individuals accept a common goal as the object of their striving and possess means in common which enable them to attain the goal. The notion of belonging to a community is not static. It is in the becoming that a community can be recognized. The community that calls itself Church is not differ-

ent. Those who qualify as members of the Church are persons who begin living out the process of conversion in the history of their lives. Sacramental reconciliation marks out the historical points in that process during which the conversion process takes place. Each of those historical points is an occasion that marks a completed phase of the conversion process and can therefore be termed as product. The Church community has felt the need to engage in a process of reconciliation with different groups both inside (ecumenical efforts) and outside (secular and sovereign states) its visible confines.

Community becomes possible when a group of persons gradually realizes that what keeps them apart or in attitudes of overt or covert hostility is less important than what binds them together. But such realization takes place in time and, unfortunately, many are made to suffer oppression and persecution in the process.

One may well ask how the Church community itself views itself as process and product. The Church as Establishment tends to see itself as a 'finished' product. Consequent with such an understanding, the Church saw itself as a 'perfect' society that possessed all the means for the ultimate realization of the Reign of God in the world. Such a society (community) viewed its norms of orthodoxy as set up once and for all time, curtailed the practice of other religions in public—this was the case in Spain before Vatican II—and for nineteen centuries refused to allow more than a grudging tolerance to other religions. The present has seen a welcome shift in the Church's stance vis-à-vis other faith persuasions. By entering into dialogue with a religiously pluralist world, the Church has entered the further process of community building and implicitly recognizes that the final product is still to come. The Establishment Church is not familiar with the type of community that will make up the final product. Along with the understanding that God wills the universal community of persons to be at peace with each other there will have to be many occasions for reconciliation. Such a process takes into account the violence that was perpetrated in the name of religion and the injustice done to those of other faiths. This will call for conversion on the part of the Church community.

But just as the Christian believes that the victory of the Risen Christ is more powerful than the worst sin committed by the be-

liever, so too communal strife and the efforts of fundamentalist groups will not prevail against the valiant attempts of those who strive to bring about a just and humane society. Such a society was proclaimed and inaugurated by Christ, and Christians believe it will endure. In this scenario, the Church can offer its reading of the present situation to bring hope and courage to those who commit themselves to the task of nation building. It can reassure them that the obstacles and difficulties are no more than the oblique side of positive efforts to build up community. Further, it can support the efforts of those who labour and suffer to bring about a society that reflects the values enshrined in the Constitution of India.

Endnotes

1. Paul J. Achtemeier (General Editor): *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, Harper & Row, Publishers, San Francisco, 1985, p. 513: "Judaism, the religion of the Jewish people from the Sinai theophany through the present day... The written and oral Torah perpetually obligated the people to a detailed code of ethical and ritual behavior. The term appears (in Greek) in 2 Macc. 2:21; 8:1; 14:38; and Gal. 1:13-14."
2. *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, p. 861: "The prophets of the eighth century B.C...and those who followed, leveled a strong criticism against merely cultic and liturgical repentance. Amos complains that the people did not turn to the Lord (4: 6, 8, 9, 10, 11). Hosea, after describing a liturgy of repentance (6:1-3), says that Israel's love "is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes early away" (6:4). Isaiah pleads for social justice rather than empty ritual (1:10-17; cf. 58:5-7; Amos 5:21-24). The prophets, therefore, insist upon an interior conversion manifested in justice, kindness, and humility..."
3. This excommunication was not by way of a canonical penalty but meant that the person had to abstain from the Eucharist.
4. It was the Council of Trent that described the function of the minister as that of a judge: "...priestly absolution...has the pattern of a judicial act in which the priest pronounces sentence as a judge." (ND 1628)
5. John Bowker (editor): *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, Oxford, 1997, PP xxii-xxiii.
6. Norman Tanner (English Editor): *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, Volume II (Trent-Vatican II), Sheed and Ward, London, 1990, p. 859.
7. T. K. Oomen: *State and Society in India*, Studies in nation-building, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 1990, PP 126-7.

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