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## Building Solidarity through Reconciliation

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*Abstract:* Reconciliation is an important dimension of “Befriending the other.” The recent missiological literature emphasizes “Mission as loving relationship”. If we look at Mission as the proper loving human relationship that enriches and empowers every one, then reconciliation is an essential component of this process. For we live in a divided world, causing and suffering from various forms of divisions. In this paper we shall look first at the world of division, then see the attempts at reconciliation in various cultures and religions, and then look at the essentials of this process of reconciliation and the areas that need reconciliation, and finally relate reconciliation to mission as relation and to “Befriending the other”.

First the author looks at some forms of divisions existing in the world due to various causes; the tendency to divide the States in India, the conflicts between two groups in the same country, for example, in Ireland, Iraq and Rwanda. Then the author examines some of the attempts at unification and reconciliation in various African cultures, as an example of such attempts, in religions and finally in the Catholic Church. The Church has the sacrament of Reconciliation precisely for reconciling the erring members to the community.

The author examines the main theme of what happens in reconciliation. The basic truth behind the process is that each understands the other side from his/her point of view. Reconciliation can happen only when one understands the other from his/her point of view.

Following Jesus' wall-breaking ministry, we must recognize that in the past our mission work has often caused divisions by taking some people out of their groups to be Christians. The Churches have to recognize that their mission is not primarily geared towards increasing the number of members, but being a channel of the working of the Spirit gathering all people into one family of God, into the Kingdom of God, irrespective of their religions, cultures, gender and races.

*Keywords:* Reconciliation; Kingdom of God, solidarity; justice, unification.

Reconciliation is an important dimension of “Befriending the other,” the theme of the Diamond Jubilee of Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth. Besides, the recent missiological literature emphasizes “Mission as loving relationship”.

When we understand “Mission as relationship,” the proper loving human relationship that enriches and empowers every one, then reconciliation is an essential element or component of this process. For we live in a divided world, causing and suffering from various forms of divisions. In this paper I shall look first at the world of division, then see the attempts at reconciliation in various cultures and religions, and then look at the essentials of this process of reconciliation and the areas that need reconciliation, and finally relate reconciliation to mission as relation and to “Befriending the other.”

## **1. A Divided World**

Our world is characterized by many forms of conflicts and divisions. There are divisions between cultures, nations, peoples and religions. There are divisions at the personal, national and international levels. Today one notices more and more divisions taking place in the world, especially due to growing religious fundamentalism in different parts of the world. Exclusivist and triumphalist claims by any one religion also lead to divisions and conflicts. Terrorism is also another factor that causes divisions among peoples and nations. The

bloody conflicts in Rwanda between two tribes caused the murder of over 100,000 people in a short period of time; the Serbian trouble too is basically between two groups of the same country where people had lived in amity for centuries suddenly turned violent. One knows about the violence in Ireland between two Christian groups and the thousands who lost their lives. In Israel the on-going clash between the Israelites and the Palestinians has resulted in the loss of thousands of lives; only too recently did more than 650,000 people died in Iraq due to the war imposed on them by the Americans. In Iraq conflict continues between two Islamic groups: the Sunnis and the Shiites. In Sudan, Sri Lanka, Somalia, Lebanon and other places the daily death counts are increasing. In almost no part of the world can we find today people living in total peace and harmony with one another.

In our own country we notice moves to divide the States. Only recently have Uttaranchal, Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand been formed; now just recently the government has created a Telengana State by dividing Andhra; there are demands for a Bodo Land, Goorkha Land and so on. In the North Eastern States there are also movements towards division and separation. There the clash between the military and the freedom struggle outfits continues unabated. There are the Naxalite movements in the Southern States and also in Bihar, MP and Jharkhand. The Churches too experience divisive factors: new Pentecostal splinter groups carry away many followers from mainline Churches, causing opposition and antagonism. In some parts of India this is becoming a serious concern for the churches.

## **2. Efforts at Unification**

While moves to divide are alive, there are also efforts for reconciliation. People instinctively feel that division is not helpful for humans, and hence the move towards reconciliation

and harmony is also natural. All cultures and religions have ways of reconciling people to the community; sanctions and rewards are ways used by different groups. National and international groups try ways of Reconciliation; South Africa had set up a Truth Commission for the explicit purpose of Reconciliation after the Apartheid was dismantled. That has certainly helped to move people from mutual suspicion and hatred to some sort of harmonious existence. In recent times, East and West Germany were unified; North and South Korea are also trying to unify; there are similar movements in every part of the world. In the Churches too Ecumenical movements, though not as strong as in the post Vatican II period, are alive. Some recent rapprochement efforts have been made between the Orthodox and Catholics.

Religions see sin as a divisive factor and have worked out ways of reconciliation. The New Testament is quite familiar with this phenomenon: the gospel of Matthew takes up the issue explicitly in chapter eighteen. Matthew suggests mutual correction, the community involvement in correcting one erring member and finally excommunication (18.15ff). The Catholic Church, for example, has the possibility of private individual confessions to reconcile the erring members back to the community. The Orthodox too follows a similar pattern. Similar customs are found also in various tribal societies, and cultural groups. Ways of reconciliation in various tribes of Africa are well known. I may mention just a few.

Among the *Luo* people there takes place a dialogue among elders from both sides; they communicate the decision to the offended parties; they kill an animal; its blood is sprinkled on the two parties; they share a meal and drink beer from the same pot with straws; pour libation for the ancestors; herbs are used for sprinkling both parties; they dance and shake hands; women break the news to all those not involved.

In Zambia the *Bemba* tribe follows a similar custom. Both parties assemble and relax; no one may speak about the matter until the leader announces the time for discussion; in major or minor cases, dialogue comes first; a leader and a few witnesses or observers are present; after reaching a conclusion, the parties embrace each other and shake hands and finally they share a meal.

The *Luhya* community in Kenya: after discussion, the elders hold a calabash filled with water; both the sides wash hands, shake hands and share peace with the whole group; both drink a medicinal drink from the same calabash; a chicken is cut and the gizzard is shared by the disputing parties; and finally there is a meal together.

In general the offended and offender meet with their people to know their feelings and mood; both parties send their messengers to the other side to decide on the date for reconciliation and about the things to be provided by both the parties (white bull, goat and brewed beer); on the fixed day both the parties, their representatives and elders assemble; the two parties are questioned as to what happened; all comment; the offended and offender accept the verdict of the group; they shake hands; both parties are involved in the slaughtering of an animal; they are the first to eat the meat together; the elders sprinkle the animal's blood on both the parties; they eat from the same dish; after these they agree the matter discussed is not to be revealed to anybody. The assembly is officially dissolved. Similar patterns are followed by various tribal groups in India too.

### **3. The Process of Reconciliation**

While these and similar efforts are worthwhile and often bear fruit, what is it that ultimately happens in reconciliation between two persons or two groups? The basic truth behind

the process is that each understands the other side from his/her point of view. I shall describe this process at some length. Reconciliation can happen only when one understands the other from his/her point of view. One needs to look at what the other is looking at, i.e., understand the other as s/he understands self when s/he does something. It is often said: you must accept/understand the other as s/he accepts/understands herself. This is impossible as we do not know how the other accepts herself. Hence I have added: 'when s/he does something', for we know from our own experience that when we do something, we have a justifiable reason for doing it, and so, we see ourselves as blameless, even if the action may be wrong. My contention is that we do not act primarily and intentionally against another just for the sake of being against the other, or just for doing harm to the other. I do not say that all our actions are done with an explicit justification. In merely thoughtless, instinctual and impulsive actions and mob behaviour, one does not have an explicit justification before acting. However if confronted or opposed, we defend the action as justifiable, as was clear in the case of the Mosque demolition, attack on Iraq and the like. (Actions of psychologically abnormal persons are a class by themselves).

People can easily remember the times when *someone has hurt them*; they can also remember the times when *someone claims to have been hurt by them*. But no one owns up that s/he has done something *in order to hurt* another, *just to cause harm* to another without any advantage for oneself. "I did not do it purposely," or "I did it in order to teach him/her a lesson, to prevent further harm" or "I did it as retaliation". Just to do evil to the other is not the *primary and explicit intention of the person*. We may be conditioned by prejudice, past experiences, fears, the need to protect ourselves, self-interest, and the urge to prevent future harm, profit, ignorance, partial

or wrong information, mistaken identity, wrong judgement and the like. In whatever we do, we normally see only what is good for ourselves, or for the group, and other aspects are ignored. If any harm is foreseen, it is justified as called for by the situation. Later on we may become aware of the unconscious motives and may even apologize for the harm done as if it were done purposely. One may do something very harmful from an unconscious need to protect oneself, without seeing the harm done to the other. And because of our conditioning, we may see only one aspect, namely, what appears good and so we defend our action as justifiable and blameless.

This happens not only in individual, interpersonal situations, but also in general. Caiaphas held that he was serving the cause of religion by killing Jesus. “You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed” (Jn 11.50). President Bush was convinced that it was his duty in the cause of fighting terrorism to bomb and destroy Iraq. When terrorists kill innocent people, they seem to argue that it is the only way for them to bring pressure on the Government or to get what they want and thus justifying their brutal behaviour. I do not say that because the doer has a justifiable reason, the action is right and good; the action can be quite wrong, as in the above examples. Here I am not talking about the morality of the action, but about our approach to bring about reconciliation between people, the attitude with which we ought to live, the way we need to look at the other person if we want to be reconciled to people. That means a person is not equated with what s/he does, as our normal interactions imply, but we see the person as good, even when his/her action is wrong and is opposed.

Such an attitude of understanding the other is what leads to forgiveness without which there cannot be true reconciliation. Understanding the other as s/he understands self is forgiveness. Forgiveness, it seems to me, is the same as unconditional love. For many years I have helped people to forgive one another referring to the example of Jesus praying for His enemies. These days there are many books and seminars dealing with 'healing of memories'. After years of reflection and by analysing many incidents I have come to realise that if one had not misunderstood, misjudged the other, there would be nothing to forgive, no memory to heal. If a person acts with a justifiable reason, even when wrong, that person is not against me and is not to be blamed. To forgive is not to allow the action of the other to affect my relation to him/her. It is like the sun that would not turn away from your windows just because you have closed them and put thick curtains across. True forgiveness means that my attitude to the person remains unchanged, even when I oppose his/her action and demand reparation for the material harm done. The material harm done cannot be repaired by forgiveness, which rectifies only the personal relationship.

I agree that the word forgiveness may be meaningful in certain situations, for example, a mother forgiving the murderer of her son or daughter, even if the murder was done in a moment of passion, anger, revenge and self defence. Even in such situations, understanding makes a great difference.

This means, in other words, we must avoid judgement of the other person, even when we oppose the action of the other. When you listen to people talking about others, you realise that they pass many judgements as 'truths': "I know s/he is like that," implying a value judgement. Jesus said: "Do not judge" (Matt 7.1). Seeing the other as the other sees him/herself in what s/he does is "not to judge" the other. In judging another, one imposes on the other one's own criteria of what is right



and wrong, and thus claims superiority over the other, one looks at the event from one's own point of view and refuses to see it from the other's point of view. This creates a wall between the two. Whenever we judge another, we are wrong, for we can see only the external action, while the person's intention and interpretation is known only to that person. By not judging, I do not mean that I approve of the action, or that it is right. There are actions which are wrong and need to be opposed. What I mean is that the person is not judged and blamed; my attitude to the person remains unchanged. If one starts with the assumption that, right or wrong, the person has a justifiable reason for what s/he does, and is not against me intentionally, then there will be no misjudgement against the person and no hurt feelings, even when I have to oppose the action. Jesus seems to do precisely this when He tells the woman caught in adultery: "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again" (Jn 8.11).

One often hears, "I forgive, but I can't forget". Here it is not just a matter of memory. The judgement against the other remains and it interferes with the proper relationship between two persons. I suggest that instead of trying to "heal memories" we should eliminate the bad memory caused by the wrong judgement of the other. There is nothing to heal: we must see that we have been wrong in our judgement of the other's motive. If we were in the same position and under the same conditionings as the other person, we would have acted in the same way. I have come across hundreds of cases when a hurt person honestly tried to understand the 'offender' from his/her point of view, the problem ceased. For as I said earlier, no one is doing harm to the other intentionally, just for doing harm (Have you done it anytime?). This compassionate understanding has to be cultivated through a lot of awareness, so that interpreting the other favourably becomes a sort of second nature. True love (forgiveness) is capable of transcending all

sorrow, breaking down all barriers that separate and disunite and bring about true harmony.

Though what I have said above is useful primarily for interpersonal relationships, the approach is valid also for groups. Hence salvation for societies in conflict is reconciliation and forgiveness.

Even if one holds, for arguments sake, that one does harm intentionally, what has happened is happened; nothing can be done about it by anyone; the only reasonable thing in that situation is to forgive, as Mrs Staines did. If one does not forgive, then she or he suffers, and uselessly carries along a dead weight. The presumed “wrong doer” does not even know that the other is suffering, as s/he had not intended offending the other. If on the other hand, one responds to that situation with understanding/forgiveness, then the person is free of the past. The only sensible thing to do about a past event is to forgive. Here most people seem to fail and hold on to past hurts which are caused by their own misunderstanding. Hence in conclusion, we must forgive everyone from our heart unconditionally, and bring about reconciliation between people.

Once I was visiting a family in Nairobi. Roland, his mother and his two small children (3 and 5) were there. I was told that Isabel, the children’s mother, had run away with a married man; they spoke at length about how wicked she was and so on. When I asked them if I could contact Isabel, they strongly dissuaded me, telling me that she had abused so many priests who had tried to contact her. However at my insistence they gave me a contact number. I called the number and left her a message; she called me back immediately. I began by saying: “Isabel, I believe you have had a hard time which forced you to take such a drastic step of leaving your children; I would be happy to meet you”. Soon after her office

hours she came over. She narrated her side of the story; most of the incidents were the ones told me by Roland. I agreed that given her way of seeing things, how much she was hurt. Then I explained to her how Roland would have seen those incidents; then she saw the point and said, “Now it is too late; if this was done in the beginning I would have gone back to him”. Roland saw everything from his point of view, he had his interpretation; Isabel from hers, she had her interpretation. They said they “loved” one another, but not in reality, they failed to understand the other from the other’s point of view. The priests, who contacted her earlier, saw everything from Roland’s point of view alone – hence she opposed them.

Another example is of sister Bertha. During a retreat she said that she could not pray as something was deeply disturbing her. She had this distraction for the last five years or so, and had discussed it with many counsellors, had made four or five retreats. She shared her story. She was very angry with her Mother General and her team for dismissing her sister from the congregation. She spoke for a long time about her pain, hurt and anger. As Bertha works in the office of the General, it was a daily hell for her. When she finished I asked: “Are you saying that they sent her away without any reason?” “they made no investigation, but believed all that was said against her?” “they knew the accusations were false and yet threw her out?” to all these and a couple of other questions, she answered “No”. I asked her: “Then what are you complaining about? They did all they reasonably could and acted the way they thought best for the congregation; you would have done the same if you were in their position”. Then Bertha saw and it changed her; she could thank God during the mass that day that she was free from five years of suffering. She had suffered for five years because she refused to understand the others from their point of view; she had misjudged them, and so was against them and she suffered immensely.

What I have said above is useful primarily for interpersonal relationships; it can also be useful in relations between groups, peoples and nations. Our mission is to enable people to come to proper relationship; hence the importance of reconciliation in mission cannot be over emphasised.

#### **4. Reconciliation with Justice**

True reconciliation cannot happen without justice. Various Governments have set up Commissions of reconciliation in order to help the process of reconciliation. In India, the North East is an area that needs a lot of reconciliation; the conflict between the Military and the people is becoming worse daily. The Military will have to recognize the rightful grievances of the people; the militants will have to see that ultimately violence is not an answer to any problem. In the North East often missionaries are accused of instigating violence and sectarian divisions. Though there is often no truth in this accusation, what is important is that we ought to actively contribute towards a process of reconciliation between the various groups.

Another area in which Christians can be actively involved is to bring reconciliation between Hindus and Muslims. We are affected by both, yet we can stand sort of “above” the factions and mediate a process of reconciliation, help both the groups to accept the mistakes of the past without being defensive about the past; there is no denying that mistakes have been made by every side. The prejudices, the conquering mentality and fear that affected the relationships in the past need not be carried over into the present day. Similarly, in the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians, for example, reconciliation cannot happen until the wrongs done to the Palestinians are recognized, corrected and justice is done to them. The olive trees in Palestine were planted by Palestinians many years before the Jews established settlements in the

area; when the Jews marked roads “for Jews only,” and took control of the springs and closed off the area with checkpoints the Palestinians have been wronged. They will need to want to have a future in which the Jews and Arabs will be able to harvest olives together without fear. They have to look to a future in which Jews will not have extra privileges. Earlier, when talking about understanding, I said that by not judging I do not mean that I approve of the action of the other; the wrong done to the Palestinians has to be acknowledged and rectified. People will have to want peace and want to be reconciled. Our mission is to help to bring about such attitudinal changes in people, so that, people giving up their hatred for one another, come to understand the other and see that it is better for all if they live in harmony. A future based on the recognition that, as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights puts it: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood”.

We do not need more inquiry committees; we need truth and reconciliation committees, like those established in South Africa and other countries that chose the way of conciliation, of requesting forgiveness for the past and attempting to build a better and more just future. St John Paul II had shown that asking forgiveness also leads to reconciliation and proper relationship. He had the courage to acknowledge that injustice had been done to Galileo and other scientists, and the Pope asked forgiveness for such injustices. However, the Pope has not acknowledged that the Church had made mistakes in the past, but very ingenuously said: “Another painful chapter of history to which the sons and daughters of the Church must return with a spirit of repentance is that of the acquiescence given, especially in certain centuries to intolerance and even to the use of violence in the service of the Church” (John Paul II 1994, in Fiedler 1998: 50). Many more areas are there that need an apology: the dealings with heretics and schismatics,

“witches,” sorcerers, crusades, the Inquisition, the suppression of free thoughts and expression, like in the case of the Modernists, theologians like Tissa Balasuriya of Sri Lanka, Boff, Curran, Dupuis and many others. The Church has also to revise its self understanding of itself as the only guardian of Truth and the assumed authority from Christ to suppress any opinion contrary to theirs. An honest acknowledgement that mistakes have been committed in the past will help heal more wounds than all these beating around the bush will do. Justice, however, must not be set against forgiveness, as the case of the good thief also shows. Even after forgiving him, Jesus does not free him from the cross, that is, from the punishment that the wrongdoer himself considered “just”. Thus, we must forgive everyone interiorly while we demand that justice be done. Pope Francis has done right when recently he asked forgiveness for the crimes against children committed by clerics during many years. He has also asked for forgiveness when he visited Bolivia, though in the US he did not ask forgiveness from the original inhabitants of the country for the harm done to them by the invading Europeans.

## **5. Reconciliation at the Service of Mission as Proper Loving Relationship**

Following Jesus’ wall-breaking ministry, we must recognize that our work as evangelizers is to help to build solidarity among people, to bring people together, to enable them to live in harmony. In the past our mission work has often caused divisions by taking some people out of their groups to be Christians. There is an element of truth in what Jesus says that he has come to cause divisions (Lk 12.52ff). Even when this happens, namely, some in a group or family decide to become Christian, and others are opposed to it, our efforts would be to help people understand each other’s point of view and respect each other’s stand and allow each one to follow his/her conscience and path. A proper relation can be preserved

even when such divisions are inevitable. Another aspect is to recognize that a difference of opinion need not necessarily lead to antagonism and opposition, if each side approaches the situation through understanding of the other side, which leads to reconciliation, even when each one follows a different path in religion, politics or in personal matters. The Churches have to recognize that their mission is not primarily geared towards increasing the number of members, but being a channel of the working of the Spirit gathering all people into one family of God, into the Kingdom of God, irrespective of their religions, cultures, gender and races.

In order to move in this direction, obviously there is need of a rethinking about the understanding of mission itself, which earlier was understood primarily in terms of Church expansion and numerical growth of the church. While this may still be valid this cannot be the primary understanding of mission. Mission has to be, following the wall breaking ministry of Jesus, geared to building human communities of love, fellowship, justice and mutual respect for each other's rights. Here humans and their concerns come first; they take primacy of place in our mission efforts. Our mission will be to join hands with all those who are concerned about human well being, freedom, justice and respect for human rights, not minority rights, but human rights of all. If we follow what was mentioned earlier about understanding the other from his/her point of view that will enable us to be mediators of reconciliation between peoples and groups. I mentioned above some of the ways people use in their search for Reconciliation; in every region and culture people have various 'local' ways of handling conflicts and bringing about reconciliation; we will have to familiarize ourselves with these and make use of them for our mission; if we start with people's own ways, then they are more open to it, than if we import something from outside.

For the theme of JDV's Diamond Jubilee Celebration and Conference, namely "Befriending the Other," reconciliation is an important dimension; in every relationship conflicts and misunderstandings are bound to arise; but if one has the spirit of reconciliation as we have developed it earlier through understanding the other, there will be no situation which leads to break up of a relationship; people can continue as friends and contribute to building up of communities of love, fellowship and cooperation.

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