

Reconciliation is an act of mutual recognition

Konrad Raiser

Let me begin by greeting you warmly in the name of the World Council of Churches. I have gladly accepted the invitation to preach at this opening service of your World Congress since this offers me an opportunity to affirm the links of co-operation and partnership which have developed over these past 25 years between the WCC and the World Association for Christian Communication. The theme of this World Congress 'Communication: From Confrontation to Reconciliation' allows us to acknowledge together the centre of our ecumenical calling, i.e. to be agents of reconciliation.

As you know, the World Council of Churches has proclaimed the period from 2001 to 2010 as a Decade to Overcome Violence. The purpose of the Decade is explained further as a manifestation of 'churches seeking reconciliation and peace'. The theme of your congress, therefore, corresponds very directly to the perspective which is being opened up through the Decade. The formulation here is important: the churches are seeking reconciliation and peace, knowing very well that it is not in their power to achieve either. In a world marked by confrontation and conflict, churches can appeal to move towards reconciliation, and in fact they have been given a 'ministry of reconciliation' as the Apostle Paul explains in his second letter to the Corinthians.

The Christian community has been entrusted with the 'message of reconciliation' (2 Cor 5:19), and in the spirit of this exposition of the Apostle Paul, we might say that this message is the core of the churches' mission today. How we communicate this message of reconciliation becomes in itself an essential part of our search for reconciliation and peace. With a view to some of the recent conflicts where Christians and people of other religious traditions stand against each other, I would dare to say: Wherever Christian proclamation in word or in acts contributes to sharpening confrontation and conflict, it is in danger of betraying the ministry of reconciliation that has been entrusted to us.

When we look a little more closely at this passage in the fifth chapter of the second letter to the Corinthians, we realise of course that Paul is talking in the first instance about reconciliation with God. His essential affirmation is that 'in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us' (v. 19). Reconciliation is a gift which God freely offers to those who have broken the fundamental bond of communion with God. In Christ, God's offer of reconciliation implies a forgiveness without preconditions. It is God's offer of love to all of humankind and to all of creation, restoring in Christ the bond of communion. The only appropriate response is the free and willing acceptance of this offer, and this is precisely the focus of Paul's appeal. But those who have accepted the offer of

reconciliation from God are then called to become themselves messengers and agents of reconciliation.

Communicating the message of reconciliation involves the Christian community not only in its proclamation by words, but also in its praxis, and sometimes the life of the Christian community is, a stronger witness, for better or for worse, than its words. God's offer of reconciliation must find its response in the effort to seek reconciliation in the Christian community and to act as agents of reconciliation in the community around us.

Understanding the concept

The concept of reconciliation has for long centuries been part of a specific religious or theological discourse even though Paul has taken the term from the secular language of his time, pointing to a radical change in a relationship. With a different prefix, the same root can refer to the dissolution or the separation in a relationship. The entry of the concept of reconciliation into public or even political discourse is of relatively recent origin. It gained prominence in connection with the attempt to heal the wounds which the Second World War had inflicted on the neighbours of Germany, in particular those in the East.

Even more widely known is the reference to reconciliation in the mandate of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. Very fresh still are the reports and images of the visits by Pope John Paul II to Greece and to the Ukraine, seeking reconciliation with the Orthodox churches. The Pope offered an apology for acts committed by the Catholic Church and asked for pardon while offering pardon in turn for any wrongs done to the Catholic Church. However, these gestures by the Pope and other similar public expressions of apology also show the ambivalence of such initiatives. They do not necessarily achieve reconciliation; at best they can open the door for a process of reconciliation to be initiated.

A number of important insights emerge from these experiences.

1. Reconciliation aims at healing a broken relationship. This presupposes that the causes and the responsibilities for the conflict have been established. To uncover the truth is the essential first step. In many instances this will bring to light the asymmetry between the parties involved, between the perpetrators or wrongdoers and the victims or those who have been wronged. The perpetrators can be brought to admitting their responsibility and can offer an apology. However, the offer of reconciliation must come from the victims, from those who have been affected in their dignity and integrity.

2. Reconciliation can only be offered when basic trust has been rebuilt. The breakdown of trust, leading to the failure of communication, very often is the initial stage in the development of an open conflict., This further makes us aware of the fact that communication is not only an indispensable element to move from confrontation to reconciliation; communication can equally become a means to fuel conflict. In fact there are many recent examples where distorted communication in the form of propaganda has been used as a powerful weapon in conflicts. Communication. can be used to establish one's own righteousness and to denigrate the other side. In such situations, it can become very difficult to move from the deliberate cultivation of an enemy image towards initiating a process of reconciliation. The victims will be able to consider the offer of reconciliation only when their dignity has been restored. The search for reconciliation has nothing to do with striking a deal in negotiations. The purification of the motives for reconciliation therefore is an essential second step.

3. The establishment of truth and the restoration of the dignity of the victims do not yet bring about genuine reconciliation. Reconciliation is not an agreement struck between two parties, but it is an act freely offered by those who have been treated unjustly. True reconciliation comes with empty hands and with no preconditions. It is the offer of true communication risking vulnerability without defence, trusting only in the true intentions of the other. Reconciliation ultimately is a manifestation of love affirming the other no longer as an enemy but as a partner.

The two Bible readings (Genesis 4: 1-9 and Luke 5: 11-32) refer to conflict situations between two brothers where reconciliation has failed. In addition, the biblical tradition includes one very moving account of reconciliation, i.e. between the two brothers Jacob and Esau. We remember that Jacob was the second son of Isaac born shortly after his sibling brother Esau. In the biblical account they represent the hunting and the peasant cultures. The story tells us that Esau trades his birthright and thus the right to inheritance and to the blessing of his father for a meal of lentils prepared by his brother Jacob. Jacob, encouraged by his mother Rebekah, disguises himself as his older brother and thus obtains the blessing of his father Isaac which had been reserved for the first-born. This competitive struggle for the blessing, for superiority and power, not only between two sibling brothers, but between two cultures and ways of living, is the cause of the conflict and the breakdown in the relationship between the two brothers.

Jacob has to leave his father's house to escape from the anger of his brother Esau. As the story unfolds, we see how Jacob had to work and struggle to own the blessing which he had received without deserving it. Through hard labour, skill, but also cunning, he manages to establish a large family and great wealth in terms of animals and servants. For long years, he lives as an alien with his mother's brother Laban.

Then comes the moment when, after the agreement of separation from his uncle had been sealed, Jacob wants to return. But how to achieve reconciliation with his brother Esau? Jacob first tries to strike a deal with Esau by offering him oxen and donkeys, flocks, male and female slaves. But those who were sent out as intermediaries come back with the frightening news that Esau is about to move against him with 400 men. In his anxiety, Jacob turns to God in prayer and invokes the blessing which he had received. He takes all his courage and tries a second time to appease his brother through the gifts of animals and servants which he sends ahead of him. Finally, he

even sends his wives and children across the river and remains behind, alone.

The story then tells us about the struggle at night with an unknown man. Neither of the two can prevail, and finally, at day-break, the stranger wants to go. Jacob having faced a mortal challenge, asks for a final confirmation of the blessing: 'I will not let you go unless you bless me' (Gen. 32: 26). Having received the blessing, Jacob realizes that it was God with whom he had wrestled: 'For, I have seen God face to face and yet my life is preserved' (v. 30). Only now, at the point where he had put all his property and wealth and even himself at risk, was he certain of the blessing which had been conferred upon him.

And then comes the final moment, of the encounter: On the one side Esau with his 400 men, and on the other Jacob with his two wives and the children. Jacob, now purified in the motives of his desire for reconciliation goes ahead of the family towards his brother, bowing seven times to the ground. No word is spoken, but trust has been re-established. Thus Esau, seeing his brother, embraces him, and both of them weep. Only after his children and wives have come up and bowed before Esau comes the first verbal communication. Esau asks: 'What do you mean by all this company that I meet? Jacob answered: To find favour with my Lord. But Esau said: I have enough, my brother, keep what you have for yourself. Jacob said: No, please; if I find favour with you, then accept my present from my hand, for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God - since you have received me with such favour. Please accept my gift that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me, and because I have everything I want. So he urged him, and he took it' (Gen. 32: 9-11).

This moving account of the reconciliation between Jacob and Esau speaks for itself and does not need much interpretation. However, it helps to confirm the crucial insights which we have gained from contemporary experiences. Reconciliation is not the result of appeasement or a deal of restitution. It is the result of the free and unconditional act on the part of one who has been the victim of injustice. Trust as the precondition of reconciliation can only be re-established if those responsible for the acts of injustice or wrong-doing reach the point of setting aside all self-justification, if they are ready to risk themselves in the encounter with the other side. Reconciliation finally happens with empty hands, as an act of mutual recognition, where seeing the face of each other is like seeing the face of God, which is identical to seeing each other's true humanity.

There is no blueprint for the way from confrontation to reconciliation. Communication which is meant to prepare, facilitate and encourage this move is a holistic act which goes beyond communication with words. Being true to oneself and to the other may be expressed more authentically by gestures and acts than by words. However, truth and reconciliation belong inseparably together, and truthful communication can become an important instrument to prepare the way from confrontation to reconciliation.

Text of the sermon given at the Opening Service of the WACC World Congress.