

A gift freely offered, freely accepted

Barbara J. Fraser

In a homily in which he called "truthful communication ... an important element to prepare the way from confrontation to reconciliation," the Rev. Konrad Raiser, general secretary of the World Council of Churches (WCC), set the tone for the WACC Congress 2001.

Speaking at the opening liturgy on July 4, Raiser placed the Congress theme, "Communication: From Confrontation to Reconciliation," in both a biblical framework and the context of a world marked by religious conflicts, and underscored the relationship between the Congress theme and the WCC's declaration of the next 10 years as a "Decade to Overcome Violence."

"Wherever the churches' message leads to deepening of confrontation we are betraying the core of our message," Raiser said.

Using examples from Scripture -- Cain and Abel, the Prodigal Son and the story of Jacob and Esau -- Raiser highlighted the paradox of reconciliation: it is not a retribution, it cannot be earned; it is "a gift which God freely offers to those who have broken the fundamental bond of communion." And the only appropriate response is free and willing acceptance. Furthermore, Raiser said, "Those who have accepted the offer of reconciliation are then called to become messengers and agents of reconciliation.

Ironically, in the Scripture passages cited by Raiser, reconciliation does not come through words. The Prodigal Son's well-rehearsed confession of guilt is brushed aside by the father who welcomes him with joy. Similarly, modern efforts at reconciliation -- such as Pope John Paul II's recent apology to Orthodox churches for acts committed by the Catholic Church and his offering of forgiveness for any wrongs done to the Catholic Church -- are only one step on the road to reconciliation. Such expressions, Raiser said, "do not in themselves achieve reconciliation; at best they can open the door for reconciliation."

Raiser outlined three fundamental elements without which true reconciliation cannot occur. First, he said, no healing can take place unless the causes of the conflict have been identified, a process that often reveals the inequalities between the perpetrators of violence and those who have been wronged. "The perpetrators can be brought to admitting their responsibility and may offer an apology; however the offer of reconciliation must come from the victims," Raiser said.

This must be followed by the rebuilding of trust. Here "communication can be used to build community or to destroy community" by denigrating the dignity of others, he said, adding that the victims "will be able to consider the offer of reconciliation only when their dignity has been restored."

Even recognition of injustice and the restoration of the victims' dignity are not enough, however. Reconciliation is not a "deal" that can be negotiated, Raiser said, but an act freely offered -- without preconditions -- by those who have been treated unjustly.

"Reconciliation ultimately is a manifestation of love, affirming the other no longer as an enemy but as a fellow human person," he said. The error lies in believing "that we can do something to deserve it."