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Morning Worship and Biblical Reflections on Reconciliation

Reconciliation (*katallagē*) is an event which indicates the changed relationship for the better between persons or groups, who formerly were at enmity with each other. Bible, both the First and the Second Testaments, gives us sufficient insight into the need and nature of reconciliation, either between God and the humankind or between the humans themselves. The basic characteristic of reconciliation is that the initiative as well as the environment for this salutary event is taken and worked out mainly by the offended party in the estrangement and not by the other who is responsible for such an estrangement. Hence, here there is no question of the superior and the inferior, the powerful and the powerless, the mighty and the lowly. The basic issue is of who understands the tragedy of estrangement and also the beauty of personal relationship as the basis and guarantee of peace and harmony in the community and in the society.

Reflections on the Great Reconciliation at the shores of the Sea of Tiberias

Understood among the leading exegetes as an Epilogue of the Gospel of John, chapter 21:1-25 has within the general theology of John several theological and pastoral objectives. Without going to these general considerations, we are trying to reconstruct the theological message of the central events of the story narrated here from the perspective of a great reconciliation between Jesus and Peter and also as a model for all kinds of reconciliation in the church and in the society, from a biblical perspective. From the outset I want to make it clear that it is not a pure exegetical study, but a spiritual reflection with sufficient biblical data and pastoral overtones. This is especially true when we consider that this epilogue is a later addition to the Gospel of John, after the Gospel had been clearly concluded in John 20: 30-31. This does not in any way diminish the meaning and challenge of the stories narrated in this chapter. Here we are dealing with what is known as actualization in biblical interpretation.

John 21:1-25 has two major scenes, the miraculous draught of fish (John 21:4-14) and the dialogue between the risen Jesus and Peter (John 21:15-23). These two scenes are introduced through a conversation between the disciples which shows that they were getting bored with themselves and with the surroundings. Patterned on the story of the miraculous draught of fish in the Gospel of Luke (Luke 5:1-11), where again Peter is playing a leading role, this story of fishing is also very much centered on the person of Peter. Whereas the story in Luke is related to the call of Peter, here it is associated with the mission of Peter.

Here we are mainly concerned about the linking of the first story of the fishing to the second story of the dialogue between Jesus and Peter. The scene of the breakfast is such that Jesus is the host and the disciples are the guests and Jesus tries to create the impression that they are also contributing something to this friendly meal by telling them: “Bring some of the fish that you have just caught” (21:10), and followed by: “come and have breakfast”. We should keep in mind the fact that this is just the opposite of what had happened a few days back when the same disciples had dissociated themselves from Jesus during his passion, and Peter had outright denied any association with him, not once but three times.

There begins the great story of the reconciliation between Jesus and Peter. If we closely follow the Passion Narrative in the Gospels, it is very clear that there are two events of estrangement, one, the betrayal by Judas and the other, the denial by Peter. In between these there is the fleeing of the other disciples. All the four Gospel writers are keen on reporting the denial of Peter (Mk 14:66-72; Mat 26:69-75; Lk 22:54-62; John 18:15-18; 25-27). What we have in the Epilogue of John is the total reversal of the story of the denial through a confession of love by Peter and a reunion of Jesus and Peter. More than that, this restored relationship is the basis of a great mission Peter is entrusted with: To be a shepherd to take care of the sheep which still belong to Jesus. What is significant in this story is that the initiative for this reconciliation is taken not by Peter, the offender, but rather by Jesus, the offended party. Here again we see the basic difference between the scene of Caesarea Philippi (Mat 16:13-20) and the scene near the Sea of Tiberias (John 21:15-17). The first story is centered on the faith of Peter and the second story is focused on love of Peter. In fact, reconciliation is based on love, between persons and persons. Whereas estrangement is caused through the exercise of human individuality, reconciliation is effected through the exercise of human personality. Here we have to pause for a moment and reflect on the dynamics of the human person as individual and person.

The human person is a unique phenomenon in the entire created cosmos which has its basic and inbuilt matter-spirit dimension in such a manner that the human person is basically a coherent reality, so much so that we can understand the human person as *spirited matter* rather than as *spirit in matter*. Though matter and spirit belong to two entirely different realms with their inbuilt and inherent characteristics, once they are united in the human reality, they are mutually and substantially integrated. Theologians are of the view that this spirit reality in the human person is a participation and an expression of the divine Spirit, which some would call the Holy Spirit while others, following the Indian tradition, refer to it as the *atman* or as the *antaryamin*, namely, the inner controller and energizer. Hence, human life, which is the most sublime result of this union of matter and spirit, exhibits itself in a diversity of forms from birth to death, and this embodies the dimensions of both the matter and the spirit. As a result, it could happen that certain articulations of this human life have a so-called double effect, insofar as the spirit does not approve of what happens as the exercise of the matter. It is this tension and the consequent polarization that are articulated in the statements of the ancient philosopher Ovid: “I do what I hate”.

When we further try to analyze this phenomenon of an inbuilt polarization in the human person, it becomes evident that the human reality is constituted through a convergence of the *individual* and the *person* with their inbuilt orientations and tendencies. Every human person is at the same time an individual and person. In philosophical definition an individual is someone who is *undivided in oneself and divided from others*. It is the matter dimension of the human reality that constitutes and determines this individuality. As a result, the human persons, insofar as

they are individuals, tend to exercise their divisiveness from others rather than their relatedness towards them. However, within the general framework of human behavior the exercise of individuality results often in a kind of uneasiness, dissatisfaction, conflict and also frustration. At the same time, the very same human reality has within itself another nobler dimension, which we call the exercise of the personality. As persons, people are invited and prompted to relate themselves to others, to be available to others, to be at the service of others. In fact, people are happier when they exercise their personality rather than their individuality. All are aware of the beneficial and salutary aspects of the exercise of human personality. All realize that it is in their relational dimension that they enjoy the meaning of their humanness. The parents enjoy it in their relationship with their children and married people enjoy it in their reciprocal relationship and availability. Friends of all sorts do everything possible within them to enhance and deepen their relationship. The yearning for relationship is basic to all human behaviors, whether at the social or at the religious levels.

The mystery of human life lies in this: Whether the humans exercise their introvert individuality or their altruistic personality is decided by each one, and it is always a question one's choice and preference. Here lies the major issue of human freedom. What very often happens is that the instinctual preference of humans for one's own individuality eventually ends up with a feeling of dissatisfaction, whereas a reflective choice of what belongs to the realm of personality brings with it joy and satisfaction together with a sense of fulfillment. But time and again people find it difficult to stick on to this personality dimension because it costs and it hurts. It costs the one who does it, and it hurts the one who dares it. It brings in its train a lot of inconveniences and disadvantages. Consequently, several people revert to the exercise of their individuality and its related selfishness. As long as humans are created as free beings, this is bound to happen. Any amount of instruction and persuasion will not make any radical change in this realm of freedom and choice. Though we claim to be living in a global village, where all barriers related to caste, color and creed are fast disappearing, and people are trying to live in harmony and peace, the intriguing fact remains that the hidden agenda of much of what we call globalization and the global village are tainted by economic and political greed. The basic orientation in all human relationships is, to a great extent, the gain each one can get from the other. The net result is that while the rich become richer, the poor become poorer. Hence there is a lot of justification for conflicts and confrontation.

All the same, there are values that are beyond these facts. And herein we come to see the need and beauty of reconciliation which can eventually and ultimately create a better atmosphere for peace and prosperity. And this is what the great reconciliation between Jesus and Peter is placing before us and challenging us. In fact, the estrangement of Peter from Jesus during the passion because of his individualistic choice has now been reversed to his personal qualities, the deepest and the most sublime of which is love. Through this semiotic story in the Gospel of John the Church as the community of those who are united in Christ is definitively placed in the context of reconciliation as the hallmark of Christian existence and Christian praxis.

Paul and his Reconciliation with the Corinthian Community

Paul has given us some of the most beautiful reflections on reconciliation as a sublime expression in Christian life. "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away. See, everything has become new! All this is from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was

reconciling the world to him, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ. Since God is making his appeal through us, we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God” (2 Cor 5:17-20). It seems that many have not reflected on the context in which Paul has written this penetrating reflection on reconciliation. The orientation towards these reflections are already given in 2 Cor 1:3-6: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ. If we are being afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation; if we are being consoled, it is for your consolation, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we are also suffering”.

When we put together these two reflections of Paul, and reconstruct the story of the temporary estrangement of Paul from the Corinthian community on account of a rebellion and challenge Paul had to encounter from that community, to confront which Paul had to write a “letter in tears” (2 Cor 2:4), we can more or less understand the context in which Paul emerges as the great messenger of reconciliation in the early church and also a model for all those who are engaged in the work of reconciliation in the church and in the society.. Since it was question of a pastoral care of the Corinthian community, it was Paul’s duty to make that community understand where the problem lies and where the truth has to play its decisive role. Hence Paul had to deal with that community to make it realize where the problem lies. Once he realized that the community had regained its correct understanding of the problem and also the fuller meaning of committed Christian life, Paul was in a hurry to emerge as the herald of a radical reconciliation between himself and the Corinthian community. What is significant about this reconciliation is that, what takes place here on earth in specific historical and geographical context, is the application and concrete realization of the original and ever-present divine reconciliation, the concrete expression of which is the Christ Event. Within the context of this historic and historical reconciliation involving God, what takes place here on earth in the form of minor reconciliation, is a simple and sublime application and realization of the initiative taken by God and given to the humankind to imitate and continue whenever and wherever such occasions arise.

According to several exegetes 2 Corinthians is a collection of three writings, the first seven chapters constituting the central theme of the letter, and chapters eight and nine related to the collections for the saints and chapter ten to thirteen probably a part of the “letter in tears”. It is precisely in chapters one to seven that Paul emerges as a person characterized by his most authentic human qualities seasoned by the various crises he had to go through from the Corinthian community and also from other unexpected events, such as the “affliction in Asia” (2 Cor 1:8). What is significant about Paul is how he first had to bring the Corinthian community to its senses because it had violated the principles of Christian discipline through the aggressive act of the offender, and then he proceeded to restore the apparently broken relationship through the initiative he took to enter into a cordial relationship with that community. Paul’s words are poignant and persuading: “Make room in your hearts for us; we have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have taken advantage of no one. I do not say this to condemn you, for I said before that you are in our hearts, to die together and to live together. I often boast about you; I have great pride in you; I am filled with consolation; I am overjoyed in all our afflictions” (2 Cor 7:2-4). When Paul placed his case of reconciliation with his community at Corinth within

the larger perspective of the reconciliation which God has effected in and through Christ, for him it was such a minor issue with its compelling and persuading power received from God himself. For Paul, God is the source of human reconciliation. The divine power enables and empowers the ministry of reconciliation in the world, extended to all areas where divisions of all sorts remain. God is in us, saying to the world, "Be reconciled."

The Deutero-Pauline literature contains a few references to reconciliation. The term itself, with the meaning "to change thoroughly", occurs only in Colossians and Ephesians. In both letters the image of a glorified Christ is used to describe the cosmic reconciliation won by the cross: "For in him all the fullness was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile all things for him, making peace by the blood of his cross.... And you who once were alienated and hostile in mind because of evil deeds, he has now reconciled.... through his death, to present you holy, without blemish, and irreproachable before him" (Col 1:19-22). Ephesians uses the same idea of the social harmony brought about by the complete transformation of believers through the death of Christ. The author speaks of Christ as "our peace" (2:14) who created "in himself one new person (*kainos anthrospos*) (2:15) in place of the two (Jews and Greeks), thus establishing peace that he might "reconcile us both with God, in one body, through the cross, putting that enmity to death by it" (Eph 2:16).

A concrete expression of reconciliation as something affecting our daily life and effecting an authentic Christian witnessing is presented in the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus refers to the "fulfillment" dimension of the Law and the Prophets and the "better *sedeq*" which he wanted his disciples to put into practice. With its focus on the importance of interiority and interpersonal relationship, the new interpretation given by Jesus insists on keeping interpersonal relationship intact to such an extent that the initiative taken by his disciples to get reconciled, even in a matter for which they are not responsible, is a condition for the acceptance of a sacrifice that is offered to God: "When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go, first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift" (Mat 5:23-24). Not only in religious matters but also in social behavior Jesus recommends reconciliation as a matter of prudence and common sense: "Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are still on the way to the court with him" (Mat 5:25).

In the Leadership Discourse in the Gospel of Matthew (Mat 18:1-35) there are several hints at the importance of reconciliation for the successful functioning of the community, for which the leaders have to spend their time and energy to keep it going according to the mind of Jesus, the real Rabbi of the community (Mat 23:10). They have to go after the lost sheep, sometimes even leaving the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went wrong (Mat 18:12). Likewise, if the members of the community sin against the leaders, the leaders should have recourse to a moderate and modest way of correcting such erring members in view of getting them back into the framework of the community (Mat 18:16-17a). Only in extreme cases should the leaders take disciplinary actions against such offenders (Mat 18:17b). Here again all aspects of vengeance and cruel ways of discipline are to be avoided. The forthcoming assurance of Christ about his presence where two or three are gathered in his name has been traditionally understood as a clean chit given to the leaders to do what they like under the pretext of Christ's presence with them. Thereby often every aspect of forgiveness and reconciliation is forsaken and forgotten and an imperial style of authority is executed. In fact, the promise made by Jesus of his presence in the community is available also for the

undisciplined ones. Consequently, the promise made by Christ of his presence is, at the same time, also a *warning* that the leaders should be extremely considerate, gentle and forgiving and that they should not go to extremes. That is precisely the point made by the Evangelist in placing the awkward question of Peter about the number of forgiveness in this context (Mat 18:21-22). Peter was trying to limit forgiveness and the possibility of reconciliation to a limited number of seven and Jesus had to expand it to seventy-seven times, meaning thereby as many times as necessary. In personal relationship it is not a matter of arithmetic computation but of endless and unlimited forgiveness and consequent reconciliation. That is the challenging message of the parable of the great forgiveness (Mat 18:21-35).

In the Bible, as in modern usage, reconciliation means a deep improvement in relationships, not only between God and humans, but among humans themselves and also between the humans and the environment. From a biblical standpoint, the empowerment to develop healing and growth-producing relationships among people, however, is given by God. According to the Second Testament, reconciliation is the supreme gift of God expressed in the saving death of Jesus of Nazareth, who thereby won for us redemption and salvation. Reconciliation continues to be offered and sustained through the Church. Reconciliation in the Second Testament is not so much the cultic matter that it is for the First Testament. It is the sum and essence of God's work in Christ, and expression of grace in our relationships with one another.

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