

Reconciliation as the Essence of Inter-Religious Dialogue

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Introduction:

People everywhere are asking the question whether peace can ever be achieved in our planet. There is so much conflict and violence taking place in different parts of the world today, that it appears as though disputes, confrontations, riots, terrorism, attacks and war has become part of our human existence. As the Second Vatican Council put it years ago: “War has not ceased to be part of the human scene”.¹ There is so much suffering and loss of innocent lives due to violence and terrorism. In this regard, in *Centesimus Annus*, St. Pope John Paul II remarked: “it must not be forgotten that at the root of war there are usually real and serious grievances: injustices suffered, legitimate aspirations frustrated, poverty, and the exploitation of multitudes of desperate people who see no real possibility of improving their lot by peaceful means.² Reconciliation with one another and peace can only come about when we learn to treat each other as brothers and sisters and recognise our shared vocation as children of God. Further, the pursuit of reconciliation, peace and human development can become more effective if we invite and involve people of all religions to collaborate with one another and work together in dialogue with one another to build bridges of understanding and promote respect for human life everywhere. Religious collaboration is essential to heal wounds of division and bring about peace. In his Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Asia*, St. Pope John Paul II clearly stated: “Given the appalling situation of conflict in so many parts of the world, the Church is called to be deeply involved in international and interreligious efforts to bring about peace, justice and reconciliation”.³

Mercy and Reconciliation are linked to Peace

Peace is the fruit of love, mercy and reconciliation and goes beyond what justice can provide. Humankind cannot accomplish its task of constructing for people everywhere a world more genuinely human unless each person devotes himself to the cause of peace

with renewed vigour.⁴ Peace is an irrepressible yearning present in the heart of each person, regardless of his or her particular cultural identity. Consequently, everyone should feel committed to service of this great good, and should strive to prevent any form of untruth from poisoning relationships.⁵ Peace is not as the mere absence of war, but is called the effect of righteousness; it is the fruit of the right ordering of things with which the divine founder has invested human society".⁶ The truth of peace calls upon everyone to build sincere relationships, to follow the paths of forgiveness and reconciliation, to be transparent in their dealings with others, and to be faithful to their word.⁷

Christian Reconciliation is an encounter with God, an encounter with others in the community and an encounter with oneself. It consists of the realization that God loves humanity, that God loves every single person and hence each of us is urged to reciprocate and love God and our neighbour. God's love for us is unconditional, merciful and eternal. Being human, each one of us is weak and hence we often turn away from God's love. The root cause of this is our own selfishness and egoism which prevents us from being open to others. One of the central commandments of Christianity is love of one's enemies. The second letter of Clement states: "whoever does not love the one who hates him or her is not a Christian".⁸

Reconciliation is very essential for the promotion of peace in society. "The Church extols reconciliation, pardon. In inviting pardon of God, she invites men to practice it among themselves. People themselves have a need to be reconciled, to look upon others with new eyes, to overcome old grievances, to open the doors to their enemies without humbling them, and to seek to build unity again.⁹ Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI had urged each one of us to be peacemakers – by replacing forgiveness and nonviolent solutions to situations of hurt and violence. Referring to the Gospels of the Beatitudes he said: "...this Gospel is rightly considered the "magna carta" of Christian nonviolence; it does not consist in surrendering to evil—as claims a false interpretation of 'turn the other cheek' but in responding to evil with good, and thus breaking the chain of injustice... The revolution of love, a love that does not base itself definitively in human resources, but in the gift of God, that is obtained only and unreservedly in his merciful goodness".¹⁰

In Buddhism, the admission of one's wrong doing, the making of amends and the exercise of restraint in the future to prevent its recurrence are three essential ingredients for effective reconciliation. According to the Buddha, amity, unity and harmony together ensures peace and security. This the Buddha enjoined in the Samannaphala Sutta as follows: For the growth of the Dhamma and Vinaya, one who admits an offense must make amends according to the Dhamma with restraint in the future. (DN 2).¹¹

The quality of mercy is essential in order to reconcile with one another and build bridges of communion and peace with one another. True mercy is the most profound source of justice and peace. We recollect here Jesus' words in the Gospel of Matthew: "Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy".¹² At the opening to the Second Vatican Council, St. Pope John XXIII stated that the Church must use the medicine of mercy rather than the weapons of severity.¹³ In his Encyclical Letter, *Dives in Misericordia*, St. Pope John Paul II dedicated a complete chapter on "The Mercy of God in the Mission of the Church". He stated that it is the task of the Church to give witness to divine mercy. This encyclical invites each of us not only to experience God's mercy but also to practice mercy towards others. In the words of the Pope: "the Church-professing mercy and remaining always faithful to it - has the right and the duty to call upon the mercy of God, imploring it in the face of all the manifestations of physical and moral evil, before all the threats that cloud the whole horizon of the life of humanity today. The Church must profess and proclaim God's mercy in all its truth, as it has been handed down to us by revelation".¹⁴ Hence, we can be true witnesses and agents of God's mercy only when our thoughts, words and deeds are shaped by mercy.

Reconciliation is essential for Interreligious Dialogue and Peace

Dialogue is an essential condition for the promotion of peace in the world. St. Pope John Paul II asserted that "Dialogue for peace is a challenge for our time".¹⁵ In speaking to the people of Asia, he said: "All Christians must therefore be committed to dialogue with the believers of all religions, so that mutual understanding and collaboration may grow; so that moral values may be strengthened; so that God may be praised in all creation. Ways must be developed to make this dialogue become a reality everywhere, but especially in Asia, the continent that is the cradle of ancient cultures and religions... Christians will, moreover,

join hands with all men and women of goodwill who share a belief in the inestimable dignity of each human person. They will work together in order to bring about a more just and peaceful society in which the poor will be the first to be served. Asia is the continent where the spiritual is held in high esteem and where the religious sense is deep and innate: the preservation of this precious heritage must be the common task of all”.¹⁶ Interreligious dialogue presupposes a heart to heart listening to one another in a spirit of respect and trust. It is speaking the truth in love and striving to arrive at a common agreement in truth, but where that is not possible, to honestly admit and state that we agree to disagree.¹⁷

The Asian Bishops affirmed that “dialogue with our fellow Asians whose commitment to other faiths is increasingly important”.¹⁸ One of the resolutions of 1970 says: “We pledge ourselves to an open, sincere and continuing dialogue with our brothers of other great religions of Asia, that we may learn from one another how to enrich ourselves spiritually and how to work more effectively together on our common task of total human development”.¹⁹

Our human society can become more human only if we introduce mercy, forgiveness and reconciliation in all our mutual relationships with one another. St. Pope John Paul II instructs us the “forgiveness is also the fundamental condition for reconciliation, not only in the relationship of God with man, but also in relationships between people. A world from which forgiveness was eliminated would be nothing but a world of cold and unfeeling justice, in the name of which each person would claim his or her own rights vis-a-vis others”.²⁰ “To refuse forgiveness and reconciliation is for us to lie and to enter into the murderous logic of falsehood”.²¹ He goes on to say that “mercy becomes an indispensable element for shaping mutual relationships between people, in a spirit of deepest respect for what is human, and in a spirit of mutual brotherhood. It is impossible to establish this bond between people, if they wish to regulate their mutual relationships solely according to the measure of justice. In every sphere of interpersonal relationships justice must, so to speak, be “corrected” to a considerable extent by that love which, as St. Paul proclaims, “is patient and kind” or, in other words, possesses the characteristics of that merciful love which is so much of the essence of the Gospel and Christianity”.²²

People of every religion must join the quest for peace by examining our own readiness to forgive others and to be reconciled, and by making gestures of forgiveness and reconciliation

in our own family, social and political responsibilities.²³ Without peace between religions, peace in the world is not possible.²⁴ There is an increasing need for interreligious dialogue today, given today's situation of conflicts, disputes, violence, threats to life coupled with the suppression of religious freedom in many countries. We need to constantly search for creative measures to build peace on earth. The Golden Rule states that we should not do to another what we do not want done to us. This Rule is found in all the great religions of the world. According to St. Augustine, God wrote this rule in the hearts of all human beings.²⁵ In Judaism, it is found in the book of Tobit, Chapter 4, verse 15 and the book of Sirach, Chapter 31, Verse 15. In Christianity, in the New Testament it is found in the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 7, verse 12 and in the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 6, verse 31. This Golden Rule has functioned as an important element in dialogue between religions and it is humankind's cultural heritage.²⁶ This means that compassion, sympathy, love, mercy, reconciliation, readiness to help and beneficence belong to the wisdom of humanity.²⁷ Hence, every religion is convinced that connecting religion to violence is a misuse and an aberrant form of authentic religion. There is an urgent need to utilize the universal human virtues of reconciliation and mercy in order to dialogue with various cultures and religions and work together with them to bring peace in the world.²⁸

Conclusion:

All the religious traditions of the world clearly agree that peace is a divine gift to humankind. We recollect here the words of Blessed Pope Paul VI who stated that 'Progress must be made towards a peace which is loved, free and brotherly, founded on a reconciliation of heart'.²⁹ Hence, reconciliation becomes the way to overcome the barriers of hatred and violence with the powerful weapons of love and forgiveness. Let us work together in a spirit of dialogue with people of all religions to promote world peace.

Endnotes

1 The Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 79.

2 St. Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, no. 52.

3 St. Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Asia*, no. 38.

4 The Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 77.

- 5 Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI, Message on the occasion of the World Day of Peace, 2006, no. 6.
- 6 The Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 78.
- 7 Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI, Message on the occasion of the World Day of Peace, 2006, no. 6.
- 8 Second Letter of Clement, Verse 13 f.
- 9 St. Pope John Paul II, Address to the Members of the Diplomatic Corps, 14 January 1984.
- 10 Emeritus **Pope Benedict XVI**, Vatican City, 18 February 2007
- 11 Ananda W. P. Guruge, The Buddha on Reconciliation in the Keynote Address of the 25th General Conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists, Colombo, Sri Lanka, 13-17 November 2010.
- 12 The Gospel of Mathew, Ch 5 Verse 7.
- 13 St. Pope John XXIII, *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*, Speech of the Solemn Inauguration of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, 11 October 1962, no. 16.
- 14 St. Pope John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, no. 12, 13.
- 15 St. Pope John Paul II, *Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace*, 1983.
- 16 St. Pope John Paul II, *Radio Message in Manila*, February 21, 1981. See AAS 73 (1981) pp. 393-94 and J. Neuner - J Dupuis, *The Christian Faith*, Bangalore, TPI, 1987, no. 1040.
- 17 Walter Kasper, *Katholische Kirche: Wesen-Wirklichkeit-Sendung* (Freiburg i. Breisgau: Herder, 2011), 47f, 417f.
- 18 “Asian Bishops’ Meeting: Message and Resolutions of the Asian Bishops Meeting,” 29 November 1970, Manila, Philippines, n. 24, in FAPA I, 3-10
- 19 “Asian Bishops’ Meeting: Resolutions of the Asian Bishops Meeting,” n. 12
- 20 St. Pope John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, no. 14.
- 21 St. Pope John Paul II, Message for the World Day of Peace, 1980.
- 22 St. Pope John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, no. 14.
- 23 St. Pope John Paul II, Message for the World Day of Peace, 1980.
- 24 Hans Küng, *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 75-76.
- 25 St. Augustine, *On Order*, II, 25; *Confessions*, I, 18, 29.
- 26 Küng, *Global Responsibility*, 58-59.
- 27 Walter Kasper, *Mercy, the Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life*. Paulist Press, Mahwah, New Jersey, 2013, p. 64.
- 28 Ibid., 65.
- 29 Blessed Pope Paul VI, *Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace*, 1975.