



No. 10

Reconciliation

In our society we see relationships which are shattered, conflicts which escalate. We see people inflicting harm on others, people living in pain, the earth suffering. There is a yearning and a need for reconciliation.



Photo courtesy of Caritas Australia

Go and be reconciled with your brother and sister first.
Matthew 5:24

Changing Hearts

Life on the island of Negros in the Philippines revolves around sugar plantations. In response to decades of exploitation of labourers by the wealthy owners, the local Church cultivated Basic Christian Communities (BCCs). These were a means of integrating the spiritual needs of the people with their struggle for economic justice and freedom.

To break the cycle of dependence of the labourers on the plantations, Columban priests, Niall O'Brien and Brian Gore helped form leaders through cooperatives and BCCs made up of farmers from the hills. The era was that of the Marcos military dictatorship.

Fear of this empowerment of the poor resulted in the two Columbans, a local priest and six lay workers being imprisoned on a false charge of murder (The Negros Nine).

However, the year long trial before the case was dropped, became the public forum to proclaim and explain a Gospel response to people's serfdom.

Niall O'Brien's book *Revolution from the Heart* (Oxford University Press 1987) named the experience an exercise in changing hearts and in reconciliation. Through it both owners and labourers grew in justice and love – social revolution as reconciliation.

Reconciliation: A Journey

In our work with the people of Timor Leste we see some of the deep hurt they carry from the injustices and atrocities committed upon them. One day I was jolted into a greater insight into the depth of that hurt. We were discussing reconciliation and the need for forgiveness which has been the rationale behind the Reception, Truth and Reconciliation Commission when a lady exclaimed that she could not forgive her persecutors. The suffering she had endured was too strong in her mind. *"I want to forgive, but I can't. I can't even pray the Our Father."* The problem is made worse because her oppressors have never faced justice, have not acknowledged the truth of what they did, have never compensated her for her loss.

It made me realise that reconciliation is a journey, not a one-off accomplishment. This lady truly understood what forgiveness is and she can't do it ... yet. But she is hopeful that she will. She reminded me that on the cross Jesus didn't say *"I forgive"*. He said, *"Father forgive them."*

We have a cross in our backyard (pictured below). During one prayer service, the people were asked to write the names of family members killed. One woman asked us to help her write the names of her three sons!

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The crucified Jesus has overcome divisions, re-establishing peace and reconciliation, precisely through the cross.

Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church #493

The Church's social doctrine indicates the path to follow for a society reconciled and in harmony through justice and love.

Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church #82

Why do you observe the splinter in your brother's eye and never notice the plank in your own?

Matthew 7:3

Missionary, Robert Schreiter, says that mission today is about reconciliation. Reconciliation is the work of God reaching out to humanity with an invitation to freely respond in justice and love to the inhumanities that people inflict on each other. *"This restoration of humanity is at the very heart of the Christian understanding of reconciliation and I think we might add at the very heart of the struggle for human rights."* It requires a revolution of heart, giving and receiving forgiveness that brings transformation to both sides.

Reconciliation has both individual and social dimensions embracing all peoples - individuals, generations, nations, ethnic groups, gender, poor and wealthy. Reconciliation embraces all situations – family, exploitative economic structures, wars and social conflict. Individual reconciliation focuses upon the restoration of the damaged humanity of individuals. Social reconciliation focuses on the reconstruction of the social moral order. Social reconciliation occurs when reconciled individuals with a vision, such as Martin Luther King, exercise leadership.

In Australia we have many situations calling for reconciliation: the situation of indigenous people, ethnic tensions, the growing disparity between rich and poor, the war in Iraq, trade policies and the alienation of people from the Church. Climate change is revealing that those parts of the Australian economy which take from the land and do not give back are in need of reform. Reconciliation between the land and the people must grow.

Christianity is based on community. There is no real community without reconciliation. It is incumbent on Christian communities to be places where reconciliation is made possible.



Resentment and the desire to punish are poor guideposts for building a better future.

Robert Schreiter, "Can We Forgive 9/11?"
St Anthony Messenger, Sept 2006

Social reconciliation is the social reconstruction of the moral order of a society so that the wrong-doing of the past can never happen again,

Jose Zalaquetta, Head of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Chile.

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you.

Luke 6.27

Prayer

Jesus, you are our peace. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us.

What Can I Do?

Engage in the "Overcoming Family Violence Program" (Families Against Violence Advocacy Network)
www.ncca.org.au

Use the "Fighting Fair" resource from the Conflict Resolution Network
www.crnhq.org

Get involved in Aboriginal reconciliation. "Reconciliation"
www.reconciliation.org.au

Talk it out with a racist.

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Chat Points:

Robert Schreiter says of reconciliation that:

- Memory is not suppressed,
- Victims initiate it,
- It is not a managed process,
- It does not compromise with oppressors;
- The source of the problem must be confronted,
- It brings peace, not truce.

- Discuss these points in relation to: Bullying, Victims of crime, Family breakups, Aboriginal Australians, Warring factions

Learn More @

About reconciliation processes:

- The Sycamore Tree Project**
www.pficjr.org/programs/stp/articles
- Street Stories** www.abc.net.au/rn/streetstories/stories/2007/1958281.htm
- Reception, Truth and Reconciliation Commission**
www.cavr-timorleste.org/

Read:

- Reconciliation: Searching for Australia's Soul**, Norman Habel, Harper Collins, Australia; 1999
- Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order**, Robert Schreiter, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 1996



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