
"Reconciliation" - a key theological concept

From the point of view of the history of religions, the term "reconciliation" concerns the definition of the relationship between human beings and a higher power. It assumes that these relationships have been disrupted, a disruption which the human being must remove through religious acts: that is, in favour of reconciliation. From the perspective of *Christian* theology, we can say the following: the act of reconciliation has been completed in Jesus Christ in an original-sacramental way. This act seeks to have its reconciliatory effect on the contradictory realities of this world. People who allow themselves to be called to the service of reconciliation are the moving force of this reconciliation. It does not content itself with the humanly incurable damage which the history of conflict in this world has inflicted on the respective victims.

The concept of reconciliation concerns different areas of theology :

- *Christology*, since Christ is the servant and instrument of reconciliation,
- *Sacramental theology*, since penance and the Eucharist are the sacraments of reconciliation,
- and *Eschatology*, since the eternal Kingdom of God is the fulfilment of reconciliation.

Having said this, the theological concept of reconciliation is dynamic : it integrates the destructive past into a movement which is eliminating precisely this destructive past.

In the Sermon on the Mount it says :

" If you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you,

leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift." (Mt 5:23f.)

Reconciliation with God must be effective in the reconciliation of people amongst each other. Justice and reconciliation belong together indivisibly in Christianity. Theologically speaking, the connection seems to consist in the mutual relation between love of God and love of one's neighbour. *Christian Duquoc OP* describes reconciliation between people as a "necessary dimension" for reconciliation with God. I would formulate this more strongly: reconciliation between people is the *precondition* for reconciliation with God. Without reconciliation between people, there is no reconciliation with God!

Eucharist as sacrament of reconciliation

Thomas Aquinas writes in the *Summa Theologiae*: "The power of this sacrament can be considered in two ways. First of all, in itself (*secundum se*): and thus this sacrament has from Christ's Passion the power of forgiving all sins, since the Passion is the fount and cause of the forgiveness of sins." (STh III, 79,3)

"The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because the loaf of bread is one, we, though many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf." (1 Cor 10:16-17)

The human experience of the common meal has, therefore, not merely an accidental meaning. What counts is not so much the food as such, but the fact that we eat it *together*.

The Canadian theologian *Jean-Marie Tillard* describes the Eucharistic meal more exactly as "sacrament of ecclesial reconciliation" or of ecclesial "unity": "Through her great witnesses and her various liturgical forms, the tradition (...) has confirmed that the Church derives its unity from the holy meal" – and, moreover, as a result of the sacramental-remembering "participation in the power of the unique event in which Christ sacrifices his life to gather together the scattered Children of God in unity."

If it is true that the Church derives her unity from the common Eucharistic meal, then why is there in ecumenical discussions, time and again, the demand that the separated churches must *first* seek unity, and only *afterwards* – when unity has been realised – are able to celebrate the Lord's Supper together? Should we not, in view of the reconciling and unity-establishing power of the Eucharist, rather go the opposite way, in that we practice Eucharistic hospitality and common celebration of the Lord's Supper here and now, so that we receive the gift of ecclesial reconciliation and church unity from Jesus Christ himself in the common meal?

At the same time, the Eucharistic meal is a depiction of our eschatological goal. It is not restricted to celebrating what we are already living. On the contrary, it is Christ's body which is disrupted by our state of non-reconciliation, right through to the concrete mediocrity of our ecclesial *koinonia*. The common meal which we celebrate in the Eucharist heals our state of non-reconciliation and reforms it, so that we can strive towards the "God, who is all in all" (1 Cor 15:28) as the community of Christ.

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