

The Blood which Reconciles

By Fr. Barry Fischer, C.P.P.S.

Introduction

When I arrived in Santiago de Chile to begin my theological studies at the Catholic University there in early 1970 I suddenly found myself amidst a society in great upheaval. The Democratic Presidency of Eduardo Frei was coming to a close and the country was gripped in a very lively political campaign to elect a new President. On September 4th, Salvador Allende Gossens, became the hemisphere's first freely elected Marxist President. The next three years proved to be chaotic for any number of reasons too long to analyze here. But the fact is that the country became extremely polarized. Heated discussions about politics became a part of everybody's lives. Families, friends, religious communities, the church became bitterly divided. In September of 1973, Salvador Allende was overthrown in a bloody coup and General Augusto Pinochet assumed power and would not let go of it for seventeen long years. They were years of oppression, of persecution, of disappearances, and of death.

In 1985, the Chilean Church decided it was time to celebrate a "Year of Reconciliation" to try to heal the many wounds still open and seething. The political right was vehement that a marxist president was in power and blamed all the woes of the country on the left and on the middle-of-the-road politicians for having pathed the way for the election of Allende. And the left was hurting badly under the harsh repression their members suffered after the coup in which many, including Salvador Allende, lost their lives. Neighbors denounced neighbors for their political beliefs. Thousands disappeared, taken away by the military, never to be seen again. Others fled the country or were sent into exile. Families were destroyed and divided. At the time I was still Rector of St. Gaspar's School, but for several years now I had been on the Archdiocesan team for the Coordination of 45 Catholic Schools in the Eastern Zone of the Archdiocese. And so I was invited to sit on the Coordinating Committee which was preparing the year's activities. I recall one such planning session, when the Vicar General of the Archdiocese looked at me and said: "Barry, you can help us understand what reconciliation means, since you are a Missionary of the **Precious Blood!**" Well it turned out that throughout the year's activities and during all the reflections and workshops, it became quite clear that we were up against a concept which was not easy to understand and certainly very difficult to achieve! What does reconciliation mean in this context?

Reconciliation: an urgent need of our modern society

What I experienced in my years of ministry in Chile is not by far an isolated situation. Other Latin American countries are struggling with the same question as Chile. In Perú, after years of violence at the hands of the Shining Path Movement in which countless civilians and innocent people were slaughtered at the hands of the Guerrillas as well as by the Military, people today are asking: What does reconciliation mean? How can we attain it? In Guatemala where violence and repression is a way of life and where human

rights are trampled upon as in no where else Latin American, what does it mean to reconcile the rich land-owners and the peasants who work for them at a slave's wage?

As we read the papers each day and watch with dismay the terrible situation in Bosnia, Croatia and ex-Yugoslavia, we are appalled when we think of the enormous task before peoples there, as they one day will have to rebuild after all the slaughters and ethnic cleansings. How do we speak of reconciliation?

In other Western European countries and in North America, racism is once again on the rise, sparked by the the arrival of immigrants who are seeking freedom or who are looking for a more decent way of life. There is a tremendous mixing of cultures which brings with it tensions and mistrust, especially in places where the immigrants compete for much-needed jobs along with other unemployed people from the host country. As growing intolerance and prejudices arise, how do we exercise our ministry of reconciliation in these situations?

In Africa which is the scene of huge massacres of peoples due to tribalism, what is the message of the Precious Blood which seeks to tear down the walls that separate us? In India where the caste system continues to exist, how can we bring about reconciliation?

Undoubtedly, the Blood of Christ speaks in many ways to our world today. But one of the most pressing needs of modern society is the need of **reconciliation**.

Reconciled in the Blood

"It pleased God to make absolute fullness reside in him and by means of him, to reconcile everything in his person, both on earth and in the heavens, making peace through the blood of his cross."

Collosians 1, 19-20

The Blood shed by Christ to reconcile all things unto Himself is certainly one of the most significant and challenging aspects of our Precious Blood Spirituality. I still struggle today to arrive at a definition of "reconciliation". There are too many false concepts which have invaded our mentalities and understandings. With so much daily violence in Guatemala due to the tactics of the numerous death-squads who operate in impunity as well as political and social violence, many people yearn for the return to power of a ruthless dictator who during the early 1980's killed thousands upon thousands of people and who literally erased from the face of the map, four hundred villages which were thought to be favoring the guerilla movement. General Ríos Montt also executed many delinquents and common criminals in order to stop the wave of crime in the streets. People seem to want to return to this state of affairs again to "impose peace", making the country "safer". Can peace be built upon the physical elimination of delinquents who many times steal in order to feed their families? Is the reconciliation Christ brought us with His blood, the peace of the graveyards? In societies which have suffered under

repression, many times when the oppressors find themselves out of power, they call for everyone to forget the past and turning over a new leaf. But is reconciliation about "forgetting" and about granting wide-spread amnesties to exonerate the oppressors from all their crimes against humanity? Is peace the equivalent of signing a "truce" between warring countries or feuding tribes, which stop perhaps the hostilities but do nothing to resolve the underlying issues of injustice which often sparked the conflicts to begin with? Certainly not. But then, what does reconciliation mean?

"But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near through the blood of Christ. It is he who is our peace, and who made the two of us one by breaking down the barrier of hostility that kept us apart. In his own flesh he abolished the law with its commands and precepts, to create in himself one new person from us who had been two and to make peace, reconciling both of us to God in one body through his cross, which put that enmity to death. He came and 'announced the good news of peace to you who were far off, and to those who were near'; through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father."

Ephesians 2, 13-18

Perhaps one of the best ways to understand reconciliation and its dynamics is to think of it as **bringing people and things into their proper relationships**. Sin, whether it be personal, social, or institutionalized has wreaked havoc on humanity, distorting, obstructing, and often destroying the proper relationships which God intends for our world. We might think of reconciliation in this sense on several levels: **personal** in which we are put into the proper relationship with God; **community** in which we reestablish the proper relationship with one another; **social** in which we develop the proper relationships with other social groups, societies, races, peoples, etc.; and **environmental** by returning to a more respectful and proper relationship with our mother earth. We read in Paul's letter to the Colossians, *"It pleased God to make absolute fullness reside in him and by means of him, to reconcile everything in his person, both on earth and in the heavens, making peace through the blood of the cross."* (1, 19-20). Indeed the symbol of the Cross speaks of this reconciliation. The vertical post rises from the ground to the heavens in a sign of humankind once again being in relationship with the Father as Sons and Daughters. The horizontal beam which holds up Christ's outstretched arms speaks to us symbolically of a reconciled humanity, in which we become one with others, recognizing our conditions as brothers and sisters, children of the same Father. In Christ who shed his Blood on the Cross, the original harmony between God and humans and between peoples is restored. Our relationships have been redeemed.

We could spend days reflecting on each one of these aspects which the Blood of Christ wishes to redeem and bring into the proper relationship willed by God from all eternity. Time limits our possibilities. And so I would like to touch briefly on these different aspects, beginning this afternoon with the **personal** call to reconciliation in the Blood of Christ.

From Harmony to Brokenness

The creation account in the Book of Genesis relates to us the plan of God in which all creation was in harmony. God and man and woman strolled together in the afternoon in the garden, enjoying each other's company. Nature provided a beautiful and balanced environment and animals were friendly companions. Until sin entered the equation. Then, as we are reminded in Genesis that that beautiful harmony characteristic of God's creation experienced a profound rupture. Man and woman felt a sense of shame and hid from their God and Creator, man and woman began to quarrel, and even their relationship with nature and animal life took another course.

In other words, when the human being breaks off from God and tries to go it his or her own way, that sin of pride and independence has far-reaching consequences which cut across the wide span of human relationships touching and souring the relationship of man and woman with nature. Cain kills his brother Abel. Humans build the Tower of Babel and ravage nature.

This Creation Story tries to understand and make sense out of our human reality as we experience it. At the basis of our need for reconciliation lies the call to be reconciled with God in the core of our beings in order to be able to build a redeemed and reconciled world. Christ is the new Adam, the new Person, who once again lives in the **proper relationship with His God!** "I have come to do the Will of my Father!" is His most often expressed desire. And it is in living that correct relationship, in harmony with the Father, that Christ completes His Mission of reconciling all humanity and setting us once again on the right track. Jesus teaches us **the truth about ourselves.** He teaches us who we are and what we are called to be! In following Him and living according to His Spirit, we are able to attain the fullness of life! Our broken lives can be restored!

Reconciliation in the Truth

"And for anyone who is in Christ, there is a new creation; the old creation has gone, and now the new one is here. It is all God's work. It was God who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the work of handing on this reconciliation. In other words, God in Christ was reconciling the world to himself, not holding men's faults against them, and he has entrusted to us the news that they are reconciled. So we are ambassadors for Christ; it is as though God were appealing through us, and the appeal that we make in Christ's name is: be reconciled to God."

(II Corinthians 5, 17-21)

We are called to be "ambassadors of reconciliation" in our world today, but we will only be able to give peace, if we have attained in our own lives that deep peace and reconciliation in the Blood of Christ. An important part of this process of personal reconciliation lies in accepting the Truth about ourselves. There is profound wisdom in Jesus' words when he gives us the two great Commandments: "Love God and love your

neighbor **as yourself!**" In order to be ambassadors of peace and reconciliation, we must first find it ourselves, for we will speak from the abundance of our hearts.

Many of us have fallen into the traps set by Satan. We have accepted his lies as truths. We believe along with most of humanity today that the truth of our identity lies in success, or in popularity and we strive for that, even in religious life! The competitiveness which causes so much suffering and injustice in our world, can also creep in and poison our hearts and our relationships in religious life. Jesus has come to unmask the lie! Jesus teaches us that the truth of our identity is not found in any of that, but in **God's infinite love for us**. When we can recognize and embrace this basic truth about ourselves, we experience a deep healing and freedom.

Permit me to return to the story of Marlo Moya, the lad at St. Gaspar's College that the faculty members had voted to expell. There is more to this story which I would like to share with you now, for I believe it bears on the subject we are discussing.

As a result of my decision to reconsider his situation, I gave out a questionnaire to each of the faculty members of our school with the following questions: 1) What problem did you ever had with Marlo? 2) What did you do to help Marlo overcome his problem? 3) And, in the light of your answers in 1 and 2, do you still feel that Marlo should be expelled from our school? The results were illuminating. Of the sixty teachers who responded, only three had ever had a problem with Marlo. None had done anything to help him. And only one continued to insist on his expulsion. Marlo did not leave our school. I then proceeded to look for a teacher with particular sensitivities and capacity for friendship with the students and asked that teacher to take on Marlo as his special mission. To get close to him. Become his friend. Penetrate his world and to discover what was underlying his troubled life. The teacher managed to become friends with Marlo and little-by-little, the lie was unmasked. Marlo had been told time and time again for years that he was bad. That he was a negative influence on others. He was trouble. And after a while, Marlo began to believe the lie. He began to think that he was bad and he had a very low self-image. He then had to live up to that image in his attitude and in his conduct towards others. Slowly, the teacher-friend began to get another message across to Marlo: "Marlo you are okay!" "You are a good person." "God loves you, Marlo!" Of course, at first Marlo found this hard to believe. But he finally did accept that basic truth about himself. Satan's lie had been unmasked and the truth of his identity was revealed to him. And that truth was rooted in God's infinite love for him, even in our sinfulness. Marlo graduated from our school, three years later, a very different person! The year was 1979 when Marlo came into my life. He would influence me and my vision of mission far more than he could ever imagen. Last year, in 1994, Marlo Moya made a surprise trip to Guatemala and called and asked if he could stay at our Seminary for a few days. The first night we talked for hours and at one point in the conversation, he said, "Fr. Pepe I know how much you went through in order to save me from expulsion and to keep him in our school fifteen years ago and I want you to know that I came here to see you especially to say **thank you!**" Marlo had discovered the truth about himself, a truth which freed him from the lies, which healed the wounds and which opened him up to new growth.

All of us bear our own wounds which we often carry since childhood. Because we are sinners we can wound one another and we often wound the very people we love. Sometimes we have poor images of ourselves and the basic truth about ourselves becomes distorted and this distorts our way of viewing and of relating to others. Part of our call to personal reconciliation is to be reconciled with our past, to accept it as part of our salvation history, of our love story with God. We cannot change the past, we cannot change our parents, we cannot change where we were born, we cannot change the family we were raised in or the circumstances which marked our childhood. But we must recognize the truth that God was always there, even in the darkest moments. My history, your history, is salvation history...if we will accept it and embrace it as such!

Sometimes we are embittered by our faults and shortcomings. We become frustrated that in spite of all our best efforts at improvement we fall again and again. And we can get many negative feelings about ourselves. In my younger years I was a very "explosive" character. I would let things simmer, get under my skin, all the while smiling, but woe to anyone near me the day the volcano exploded! As was the case with the eruption of Vesuvius, not many people would survive in the flow of my wrath! After such "eruptions of rage" during which the valley was left scattered with corpses, I would feel very bad and down. My own self-image would plummet. Finally one day I remembered the words of St. Gaspar, who many times would recommend to his Missionaries to "rest in the open heart of the Crucified" and to go contemplate "the great Book of the Cross" and to discover there the wisdom of God. I did that. For many minutes I would sit there with head bowed, ashamed, angry at myself and feeling rejected by God for my temper tantrum and accompanying lack of charity toward my brothers and sisters. And then I would contemplate in silence the Crucified one and recall the image of the suffering servant: ***"It was our infirmities that he bore, our sufferings that he endured, while we thought of him as stricken, as one smitten by God and afflicted. But he was pierced for our offenses, crushed for our sins; upon him was the chastisement that makes us whole, by his stripes we were healed"*** (Isaiah 53, 4-5). As I meditated and rested in the opened side of the Crucified One, I left the Precious Blood which He shed heal my wounds. I found solace and peace and renewed strength to keep on struggling to improve. I have returned many times to "the foot of the Cross"!

I discovered the joy which John Paul II spoke about years ago on a visit to Brazil: "The Precious Blood of Christ brings us the greatest joy of all: that of **knowing that we are loved by God!**" And what a peace and joy that truth brings us. Humility is about recognizing truth. And to recognize this basic truth about ourselves is truly a great experience. To accept the love of God for us, in spite of our sinfulness and shortcomings. God loves us with an unconditional and total love. It is not bound to our merits. There is a great truth in this which each of us must accept, if we are to bearers and witnesses of God's love and reconciliation to others. ***"Realize that you were delivered from the futile way of life your fathers handed on to you, not by any diminishable sum of silver or gold, but by Christ's blood beyond all price: the blood of a spotless, unblemished lamb"*** (1 Peter 1, 18-19).

The little Eagle

I heard a story once which I would like to share with you at this point, as it expresses what I want to say. It is the story of **a little eagle**.

"Once there was a big eagle's nest, resting on the pinnacle of a high mountain. One day while Mother Eagle was out fetching food for her young ones, one of the little eagles crawled up the side of the big nest and peaked over the edge to take a look at the world below. As he scrambled up the side and reached the top, he lost his balance and fell out of the nest and tumbled down the mountain-side. The fall was long and frightening until he landed upon a pile of hay. When he recovered his senses and looked around him he realized that he had fallen into a pen filled with other little eagles. They had strange habits. They never looked up, but spent the day pecking in the dirt searching for bugs and scraps of food to eat. He learned their ways. Months went by and he grew bigger and stronger, along with his other companions in the pen. One day he glanced up to the sky and saw a huge bird soaring in the heavens. He felt something strange inside him and he moved his wings a little as if to say, "I would like to fly, too!" Every day now the young eagle would gaze at the sky and wish he could fly. He even experimented from time to time, stretching his wings and running, only to fall into the ground with a crash. His companions watched him and made fun of him saying: "He thinks he's an eagle...and he's only a chicken!" And they went about pecking in the earth and fighting over their food.

Some weeks later, our eagle friend, now bigger and with stronger wings, tried once again to take flight. His companions, as usual, stood around laughing at him as he ran down the pen and opened his wings. But this time...it happened. To the amazement of all, the young eagle rose from the ground and flew out of the pen. He climbed into the heavens and joined the other eagles in their flight."

We can say that our little eagle friend found his true identity and he was set free. This little story is the story of each of us. We are created with the image of God imprinted on our beings, but we find ourselves in a sinful world and we learn the ways of sin and estrangement from God. We grow accostumed to living like chickens. But the TRUTH is that *we are NOT chickens! **We are made to fly!** We are sons and daughters of God!* And we should not settle for anything less than that.

This is what Jesus came to teach us. This is what Jesus reveals to us: the truth about our human condition! Jesus comes to free us from the lies which surround us and try to convince us to be content with being less than we are called to be. Lies which divide us and lead us to harm one another and to kill one another. Jesus came to begin a New Creation and He calls you and me to build that new world with Him in His Spirit. Jesus came to reconcile us in the Truth.

Yes, we are called to be "ambassadors of reconciliation" in our broken world. But our task begins within ourselves as we are called to "be reconciled in the Blood" shed as a pledge of God's infinite love for us and which heals us freeing us from the lies which entrap us so that we might rise to our Call to live fully as Sons and Daughters of God.

This "reconciliation in the truth" is indeed a realization which fills us with deep joy, which no one and nothing can ever take away from us. It is a truth which we celebrate each day when we gather at the Eucharistic Table and we hear proclaimed the words: "This is my Body broken and my Blood Shed *for you!*" so that we might have the fullness of life and be strengthened in our daily efforts to **fly like eagles!**

For Reflection:

1. Re-read the story of your life and discover in it the presence of our loving and redeeming God.
2. What are the wounds which still need healing in your life?
3. Sit before the Crucified One and absorb in your innermost self the Wisdom of the Great Book of the Cross. Thank God for loving you as you are and for calling you to share in His Life.

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