

Reconciliation without the gospel, a city without a horizon

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Abstract

The Great Lakes region of Africa has gone through long years of incessant wars. This situation has created divisive conflicts between its sons and daughters. Now, enormous efforts are being made here and there for a probable reconciliation. The goal of reconciliation is a future aspiration, an important element to aim for, perhaps even an ideal city to hope for in the Great Lakes region of Africa torn apart by conflicts of all kinds. This new city – a reconciled city, a peaceful and pacifying city – is only possible if the people of the Great Lakes agree to move from a divided past to a shared future. This article endeavored to prove the fact that reconciliation involves a whole process of which forgiveness is one of the fundamental elements such as truth and justice. Finally, the kind of reconciliation that wants to achieve its goal needs to begin with reconciliation with God and has to find its foundations in the Bible.

Keywords: Reconciliation; Gospel; Horizon; Great Lakes region of Africa; Forgiveness; God

1. Introduction

“Those who do not learn to live together as brothers will perish together as fools”, said Martin Luther King. The Great Lakes region of Africa has gone through long years of incessant wars. This situation has created divisive conflicts between its sons and daughters. Now, enormous efforts are being made here and there for a probable reconciliation. The goal of reconciliation is a future aspiration, an important element to aim for, perhaps even an ideal city to hope for in our Great Lakes region torn apart by conflicts of all kinds. This new city – a reconciled city, a peaceful and pacifying city – is only possible if the people of the Great Lakes agree to move from a divided past to a shared future. This requires a few prerequisites, namely: knowledge of the truth, justice and forgiveness. Among these prerequisites, our work will insist a lot on forgiveness for two major reasons:

- The first reason is that forgiveness is an issue that currently “divides” Burundians. Indeed, on the one hand, victims consider justice as a panacea, and on the other hand, the executioners find that forgiveness is another.
- The second reason is that people need to be enlightened on the type of forgiveness that must be given for a lasting reconciliation. A forgiveness that heals both the one who offers it and the one who receives it.

To these three main elements that are knowledge of the truth, justice and forgiveness, we add another very important evangelical element: God’s invitation, through the prophet Isaiah, to “stop doing evil and do good” (Is 1, 16-17).

2. The main instruments of reconciliation

Reconciliation is a process that requires three main elements in its implementation, namely: truth, justice and forgiveness.

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Knowledge of the truth allows the reconciliation process to progress safely and achieve reliable results. It is necessary to know the truth in particular to prevent certain facts that have remained hidden from constituting a source of conflict in the future. However, the disclosure of the truth must be well prepared by establishing, for example, a framework for dealing with psychosocial problems that may result from it. But the problem remains that, during the disclosure of the truth, we realize that the truth of the victims contrasts with that of the perpetrators of crimes. And the consequence is enormous: we end up with a divergent interpretation of history.

Knowledge of the truth allows justice to be rendered accurately for lasting reconciliation. And as there is no truth without justice, there is no reconciliation without justice either. However, justice can take several forms. In a workshop on the truth and reconciliation commission led by Professor Pope Stephen of Boston College, from 28 to 30 August 2007 in Gitega (Burundi), the Burundi Catholic Bishops' Conference distinguished five approaches to justice:

- 1° transitional justice, which characterizes the transition from one political situation to another deemed better. The most obvious example is that of the transition from a dictatorial or non-democratic regime to a democratic regime. We can also think of all the mechanisms that must be put in place to emerge from a long, deadly war.
- 2° punitive justice, which takes into account the past to establish the criminal responsibility of individuals.
- 3° restorative justice, which materially and/or symbolically repairs the harm caused to victims.
- 4° structural justice, which is based on the transformation of society's institutions (the judicial, police, military, etc. systems).
- 5° restorative justice which concerns the relationships between individuals within a community with the aim of restoring as much as possible the relationships between victims and aggressors within the community to which they belong (Stephen, 2010).

When the truth is known and justice has established the responsibility of each party, then comes forgiveness. Forgiveness is not the enemy of the other elements of the reconciliation process – for instance justice as one might wrongly think. But we still need to know how to forgive for a lasting reconciliation.

3. A forgiveness that heals, for a reconciliation that lasts

Forgiveness is, in our opinion, the most beautiful gift that God gives us to live in communion with others. But we know from experience that it is very difficult for us to forgive; and even when we believe we forgive, perhaps we do it badly. The word forgiveness is a somewhat ambiguous word. We can simply say forgiveness to apologize for having upset someone and we are immediately forgiven. Forgiveness for this kind of lack of respect has no psychosocial impact. However, some cases (rape, war crimes and crimes against humanity, genocide, etc.) require special attention to be forgiven for fear that the forgiveness offered will lead to other harmful effects that render it null and void. So, what should forgiveness be like for such cases? This forgiveness must be a well-thought-out, well-matured forgiveness so that it is a forgiveness that heals and makes one grow psychologically and spiritually.

During his many clinical sessions, Father Jean Monbourquette (2001) discovered that some people, however eager they may be to forgive, felt blocked at specific moments in their process. This is why he proposes a 12-step forgiveness process to offer forgiveness that heals both the one who offers it and the one who receives it.

The 1st step to take is to decide “not to take revenge and to stop the offensive actions”. Indeed, one cannot forgive while still haunted by the spirit of vengeance. But, it is not enough to decide not to take revenge to successfully offer forgiveness. One must discourage the offensive actions of the offender while knowing that stopping the offensive actions, even by resorting to justice, does not resemble revenge in any way.

The 2nd step to take is to “recognize one's wound and one's poverty”. This step consists of accepting that you have been offended and hurt. It is therefore necessary to accept the suffering caused by the offense in order to heal it and transform it to your advantage so that the forgiveness you grant is, in the end, only a form of defense against the suffering.

The 3rd step is to “share one's wound with someone”. One must find someone of trust to share the weight of one's suffering. It is not mandatory that he or she be a counseling specialist. All it takes is someone you trust and who takes the time to listen to you with interest. One of the healthiest and most promising options for healing your injury is, insists Father Monbourquette, to “share your suffering with someone who knows how to listen to you without judging you, without moralizing, without overwhelming you with advice and without even trying to relieve your pain, however troubling it may be.”

The 4th step is to “clearly identify your loss in order to grieve it”. You must first precisely inventory the losses caused by your injury and then grieve it. Many people find themselves unable to forgive despite their good intentions. This is often due to the unconscious wounds they had during their childhood. To be able to forgive, they must therefore define as precisely as possible the nature of their injury and grieve it.

The 5th step is to “accept anger and the desire for revenge”. We too often confuse the spontaneous emotion of anger and resentment, forgetting that anger and the desire for revenge are healthy psychological realities in themselves. Here, it is a question of anger defined as inner irritability caused by an insult or injustice and not anger defined in the sense of hatred and resentment whose goal is to hurt the other. Forgiveness then becomes impossible if we repress this form of anger and its desire for revenge. “Not recognizing one’s anger and desire for revenge under the pretext of wanting to forgive is lying to oneself in addition to disguising forgiveness as a social grimace”, contends Father Monbourquette.

The 6th step is to “forgive oneself”. As the saying goes “charity begins at home”. Before forgiving others, one must begin by forgiving oneself. “He who wants to forgive but cannot forgive himself is like a swimmer who is constantly being dragged back out to sea by the backwash of the wave, far from the shore”, says Father Monbourquette.

The victim of the offense lamentably accuses himself of not having warned of what happened to him. And this breaks his inner peace and harmony to the point that he becomes incapable of forgiving the other. Therefore, to forgive the other, we must forgive ourselves in order to restore peace and inner harmony.

The 7th step is to “understand your offender”. Understanding the offender does not mean excusing him, and much less exonerating him. Understanding the offender means stopping blaming him, knowing his story better, seeking his positive intention, discovering his value and dignity. In short, understanding the offender means taking a more lucid look at him in order to grasp all the dimensions of his person and the reasons for his fault. It is by understanding the offender that we can authentically forgive him.

The 8th step is to “find meaning in your life for the offense”. Offense does not only have negative effects. Offense can have positive effects. This is especially when it allows the offended person to know themselves better, to find their inner freedom, their values, to take charge of their future more seriously, to understand the love and fidelity of God, etc. This 8th step invites us to discover the positive meaning of the offense.

The 9th step is that of “knowing that you are worthy of forgiveness and already forgiving”. If the one who wants to forgive has never tasted the delights of forgiveness, how do you expect him or her to feel the desire to forgive the other? Some people believe themselves to be unforgivable because of the seriousness of the fault committed. Others do not cry out for the gratuity of love. Such people have a lot of difficulty forgiving because they themselves feel unworthy of forgiveness from others.

The 10th step is that of “stopping trying to forgive”. Forgiveness is a long process, as we have already seen. During this process, we can realize that human effort is overwhelmed by events. And at a certain point, we realize that human effort to forgive, far from helping the one who wants to offer his forgiveness, risks harming him. At that point, we must not persist in wanting to forgive at all costs. We must instead rely on God. “Forgiveness is not the result of simple personal asceticism. It depends on another source, a divine source”, says Monbourquette.

The 11th step is that of “opening oneself to the grace of forgiving”. Already in the previous step, we realized that we are not the sole author of forgiveness. We have asked for God’s help. Now we prepare ourselves to welcome this help and to forgive with the same divine help. We finally open ourselves to divine grace and offer our forgiveness to those in need.

The 12th and last step is to “decide to end the relationship or renew it”. Here, we have already forgiven our offender. But now we have to decide what to do with this new relationship that binds us. This is where the concept of reconciliation comes in, since forgiveness is not equal to reconciliation, although the latter is the desirable outcome. Forgiveness is one of the elements in the long process of reconciliation. There are situations where reconciliation is impossible while forgiveness is possible. Professor Monbourquette (2001) gives as an example the cases where we are dealing with an unknown, deceased, untraceable, hardened or inveterate and irresponsible offender.

At the end of this process of forgiveness, we will have noticed that true forgiveness is not a purely “mystical” forgiveness that the followers of the various religious denominations proliferating in the Great Lakes region enjoy offering during their so-called “spiritual ecstatic moments”. “To forgive is not to be sentimental”, reminds us Bishop Desmond TUTU (Maluleke, 2020). True forgiveness is forgiveness that is given in soul and conscience. True forgiveness is forgiveness

that is given by someone who begins by exercising his human efforts (see step 1 to step 9 above), and who realizes during the process that his efforts are not enough and implores divine grace to help him (see step 10 to step 12 above). This is the authentic forgiveness of a Christianity that is needed for the Great Lakes region, wounded by divisions of all kinds.

4. Evangelical reconciliation: a reconciliation with God

“In the name of Christ, be reconciled to God” (2 Cor 5:20). Reconciliation has always been a project of God for humanity, although man has never ceased to oppose it through his sin. In the first chapter of Genesis, we read that after creating everything, God created Adam and Eve. They lived in peace with God. One day, their relationships are ruined because of sin (Gen 3). Peace is destroyed. The relationships that united them are broken.

Nevertheless, the rest of the Bible is the story of God’s plans to restore these broken relationships. Already in chapter 9, the prophet Isaiah predicts the coming of Jesus. Verse 6 of this chapter describes him as the prince of peace. In the New Testament, Jesus comes to restore our relationships with God, with others and with all creation. In Colossians 1:19-20, we read “for it pleased God to have all fullness dwell in him and to reconcile all things through him and for him, both on earth and in heaven, having established peace through the blood of his cross”. So, with the death of Jesus on the cross, peace is found. God had the incredible courage to sacrifice his son to achieve reconciliation with his creatures. And he invites us to make an effort, with a few similarities, to reconcile ourselves with each other.

Perhaps someone would ask why we must make so much effort to reconcile ourselves when Jesus reconciled everything by his death on the cross? Well, if Jesus reconciled everything by the blood of his cross, he did not take away our freedom as children of God. We are always free to choose to do evil or good. “Without a doubt, sin is the work of man,” and it is the same that prevents us from loving one another. So, what prevents us from getting out of the vicious circle of our conflicts is that we choose to do evil rather than to do good. If we want a lasting reconciliation, we must “cease doing evil and learn to do good”. However, ceasing to do evil and doing good means that we stop doing the evil that we have done. And this implies learning to ask for forgiveness on the one hand, and on the other, learning to forgive in order to reconcile ourselves with God and with our brothers and sisters.

5. Reconciliation without the gospel, a city without a horizon

We have seen the role of human effort in the process of reconciliation. It is indispensable. But just as indispensable, and indeed the most indispensable, is the divine grace in the same process.

A process of reconciliation that wants to succeed in its goal must integrate into its agenda a desire to know the truth, justice rendered in its multiple forms and a forgiveness that heals both the one who offers it and the one who receives it. This is a forgiveness that requires, towards the end of its long process, an intervention of divine grace as we have seen. Evangelical reconciliation adds another very important element: “to stop doing evil and learn to do good”.

Also, any form of reconciliation that one can imagine can only succeed if it is based on divine reconciliation. Evangelical reconciliation serves as a model for our reconciliation among ourselves. What is true for reconciliation with God is also true for reconciliation between men and women. The reconciliation of man with God is the means of the reconciliation of man with his fellow man. Indeed, he who has been reconciled with God no longer has difficulty in being reconciled with men. He cannot imagine rigged paths that could benefit him to the detriment of his neighbor with whom he wants to be reconciled. He will always think of a reconciliation that lasts because it is founded on a hard stone, that of the cornerstone, Jesus Christ. He is therefore convinced that his reconciliation with God is real only as long as it is followed by his reconciliation with his neighbor. Reconciliation with God opens the horizons to reconciliation with his neighbor.

6. Conclusion

Today, many countries are trying to emerge from a period of hard trials of wars and divisions. Among these countries are those of the African Great Lakes region. After enormous losses in both material and human lives comes the time for reconciliation. What are the main elements that must be considered for this reconciliation? What should be the role of forgiveness in this reconciliation? What type of reconciliation should be considered for this region? We have tried to answer these questions by studying the problem of reconciliation. Reconciliation involves a whole process of which forgiveness is one of the fundamental elements. However, we have seen that there is no contradiction between forgiveness and the other main elements of the reconciliation process, namely truth and justice. And finally, we have seen that reconciliation that wants to achieve its goal begins with reconciliation with God. However, we do not claim to

have exhausted this very delicate subject of reconciliation in these few pages. This is why we invite other researchers to do much more in-depth research on it.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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