

“Toward a Theology of Reconciliation”

**Catholic Peacebuilding Network Conference
Bujumbura, Burundi**

July 26, 2006

Lisa Sowle Cahill, Boston College, USA

Discussion in the first day and a half of this conference have revealed much concern with an important problem for the Church: How does the Church community reconcile the innocent and the guilty—with repentance and forgiveness, including repentance and forgiveness for our own sins as a church (clergy, bishops, laity together make up the church)?

Many biblical themes and images could be helpful, for example, image of God, creation, new family in Christ, new creation, ministry of Christ, and more. I am going to concentrate on one set of images and narratives today: the death and resurrection of Christ.

Two important theological interpretations:

“Theology of the cross”—The Christian way of life is a way of sacrifice and suffering.

“Paschal mystery”—We die and rise with Christ.

BUT WHAT DOES THIS REALLY MEAN??

Theologians can say many fine and pious things, but we must look for real understanding in the context of our experience, and not avoid any difficult questions. Today we will not resolve the difficult question of the real meaning of the cross, but let us reflect and explore together.

Three possible interpretations or paradigms. I will present two, then offer a third as a combination of both.

1. Anselm’s theory of Christ’s substituting for our sin, and receiving death on a cross as a punishment. Thus God’s honor was restored or his wrath turned aside. (Anselm was really more nuanced than this, but this is the idea that we were often taught—the “stereotypical” Anselm.)

Contemporary theology finds many difficulties in this position.

Does God demand punishment before God will forgive? Is God angry and even vengeful? Is God’s justice satisfied by an innocent death, even the death of his own Son?

NO: See 2 Cor 5:19: “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them.” Note that GOD does not need to be reconciled to us; WE need to be reconciled to GOD. God’s love is always present to us.

2 .Liberation theology’s view of Christ on the cross as God’s solidarity with the victims (Jon Sobrino). God suffers with those who suffer.

South African theologian Takatso Alfred Mofokeng (The Crucified among the Crossbearers: Towards a Black Christology):

“In black churches during apartheid, Good Friday is even more important than Easter. On Jesus passion and death: “In fact it is their own painful life story that they are reliving and narrating. J of Nazareth is tortured, abused, humiliated and crucified in them. They are hanging on the cross as innocent victims of white evil forces. Jesus’ cry of abandonment is their own daily cry” (28).

African American woman theologian Shawn Copeland writing about slavery (“Wading through many Sorrows,” in A Troubling in My Soul, ed. E. Townes).

“ The cross was treasured because it enthroned the One who went all the way with them and for them. The enslaved Africans sang because they saw the result of the cross— triumph over the principalities and powers of death, triumph over evil in this world” (120).

This is on side of the paschal mystery: Christ dies for the innocent who suffer and lifts them up.

3. We need both of these aspects in an interpretation of cross and resurrection for today’s world. We must add Anselm’s insight to liberation theology: Christ dies for the guilty as well and the innocent. (And we are all in some ways guilty and in others innocent.)

A European theologian who speaks from his experience on this issue is Jurgen Moltmann. As a very young man, he fought for Germany in World War II. Only after he was in a British prisoner of war camp did he realize the extent of what the Nazis had done. (Jesus Christ for Today’s World)

In situations of great personal and social depravity, such as Auschwitz and Vietman, people experience “a hell of suffering and a hell of guilt...a senseless suffering with no way out, an unforgiveable guilt and a fathomless abandonment by God and human beings....For many people death was a release from the fear and suffering of that hell” (143-44).

In order to live with a burden of guilt like Auschwitz, “expiation is needed. Without forgiveness of guilt the guilty who recognize their guilt cannot live...Yet we have seen that there is no forgiveness of guilt without atonement,” especially from the standpoint of the guilty. It is not that God cannot forgive, it is that the guilty cannot believe that their guilt can be forgiven (which is why they are often afraid to admit guilt). Through his passion and death on a cross, Jesus Christ does more than put himself “on the side of the

victims.” “He also became the one who atones for the guilty” (68). On the cross Jesus is not only a victim among victims, he is a guilty one among perpetrators. “God proves his love for us in that WHILE WE WERE STILL SINNERS Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8).

Christ even shared the guilt and terror of the damned. Between the crucifixion and resurrection, according to the Apostles Creed, Christ “descends into hell.” This indicates his complete identification with the human condition, including the most hopeless guilt and despair, as well as his saving presence among the most lost and corrupt, even the dead.

Christ’s cross and resurrection are one event: the cross is the love and life of God reaching into and transforming even the worst suffering and guilt. The cross is God’s love accompanying us all the way into the human condition, and healing us. Resurrection life is thus eschatologically present to us even in our experience of the cross.

Emphasize an additional point:

Christians share in Christ’s death and resurrection not just as individuals, but as a community. As a community (church) we are called to participate in Christ’s sacrificial death that also brings the love of resurrection and new life.

Hebrews: An eloquent interpretation of Christ’s death as a sacrifice, written for Christians who has suffered persecution, and were in danger of despair and giving up their faith. Christ’s death creates a new covenant people (8:13). Christ calls us to imitate his fidelity and willingness to suffer for others. Christ is also our intercessor, asking forgiveness on our behalf if we are not ready to do so. We, as a church and covenant people, may not be ready to ask the forgiveness we need and to prepare the way for individuals to ask and receive forgiveness.

1 Peter: This letter also calls the community to imitate Christ by being “a holy nation and God’s own people”—and “to give an accounting of the hope that is in us” by our deeds (3:15). 3:8-9: “have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another,” so that with “gentleness and reverence” (3:15) we may win doubters and sinners over to Christ. WE NEED TO STRESS THE ROLE OF THE WHOLE CHURCH IN THIS PROCESS.

In conclusion: What does the paschal mystery mean? How do we as a Christian community “die and rise with Christ”?

1. We are in solidarity with those who suffer—both the innocent and the guilty. (And lines may not always be clear.)
2. We are willing to make sacrifices and even to suffer ourselves for others, especially the powerless; both the powerless victims and those who are powerless to overcome their own burden of guilt.

Example of Michael Courtney: Suffering is not something Christians seek for its own sake. Suffering is not good in itself. God does not “send us” suffering. However we

become more perfect in unity with Christ when we share in God's love—even if that love takes us into suffering.

3. The ministry of reconciliation through the cross and resurrection is entrusted to the community of the church. Even when individuals are not able to ask or give forgiveness, we must intercede for them as Christ intercedes for us, take on and bear their guilt as Christ takes on our guilt. Christ as God's Son was "sent in the likeness of sinful flesh" (Rom 8:3), and was even made by God "to be sin" so that we could become "the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21).

It is idealistic and utopian to think that everyone will be able to ask forgiveness and forgive. Is there a way for the church and its members to help build new trusting relationships in the community as a whole, including such people? Is there a way the church as a community could help the process of reconciliation by accepting guilt and responsibility—acknowledging our guilt and even taking on responsibility for others? The church has a role to play in creating a space and preparing for reconciliation by being a community where the guilty can be open to asking and receiving forgiveness, and where those who suffer can be ready to enter into new relationships of trust and healing.

It is easy to be a Christian role model when we know we have been good—it is much more difficult to be a role model when we know we have been bad! This is an issue for the Church everywhere, not just Africa. How can we be "good examples" of acknowledgment of guilt, repentance, asking for forgiveness, and beginning in new relationships?

US Church: Sex abuse crisis, racism in church and society. Issue of "distancing" the "church as an institution" from guilt—should we question this? Are there systemic problems in which we all participate?

South African theologian Tinyiko Sam Maluleke, commenting on TRC ("The Crucified Reflected in Africa's Cross-Bearers," in *Mission Studies* 16/1-2/2000).

"It is God's preferential option not only for the poor, but for all that wins the day. It is in this sense too that Jesus takes up the role of reconciler—for he stands for and between all. ...it is important to note that Jesus himself did not pronounce forgiveness on his killers. He asked God to forgive them. ...often the people who legitimately need to do the forgiving are no longer here to do it. In this way human forgiveness and human reconciliation where it really matters and where it is really necessary can only be done symbolically, representatively and therefore tentatively" (88).

Here liturgy and other Christian practices can perhaps fill the "gaps" left by theology. LITURGY. For ex, Prof. Simon Gasibirege mentioned a Mass of released prisoners and victims which was a very powerful moment of reconciliation. Also at this liturgy, the Archbishop officially apologized.

Summarize with 2 Cor 5:19 on Christ's reconciling action of love as a mission of the whole church:

“God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting our sins against us, and has entrusted to us the message of reconciliation.”