

Reconciliation: Our Path to a New Future

Sister Priscilla Solomon, CSJ

Reconciliation is an interior process, and a journey, that must find expression in both internal and external relationships. Reconciliation is personal. It needs to take place in one's very being before it finds expression with others. It invites a shift in our relationships. Whether it is our relationship with God, with self, or with others (including the entire earth community), we must enter into an interior journey and express the fruits of that journey in the relationship itself.

Evidence of the need for reconciliation is everywhere. In a world that daily, even hourly, faces the crises of violence, racism, economic and social oppression, environmental degradation and destruction, terrorism, even nuclear war, the need is clearly visible. Even in situations that are not so extreme, we feel the need for reconciliation.

Canadian Context

We, in Canada, face the challenges of reconciliation between Peoples of Settler and Immigrant origins and Indigenous Peoples. This message was very clearly expressed and articulated by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) through its work and its reports, especially its summary report on June 2, 2015, and in its final report in December of 2015. The TRC created 94 Calls to Action, including calls to the churches to repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery and the concept of *Terra Nullius*, to engage us in responding to this need.

In this article, I reflect on what reconciliation is, what some of its characteristics are, its context for us in Canada, and how I engage in this process and journey. There is far more to reconciliation than what I can say here, but this is a beginning in the conversation.

Much of what I want to share with you comes out of the writings of Fr. Robert Schreiter, C.P.P.S., who is a professor at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. His writings, as reported in his second book, are the fruit of his reflections and lectures on “suffering and deliverance from suffering” and a request from Caritas Internationalis to write “a field manual on reconciliation for relief workers.”¹

Among the many messages he gives is the recognition that the process of reconciliation needs to be contextualized. For Canadians, the immediate context is the residential schools which gave rise to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Canada. The more general context, but significant nonetheless, is the colonization process that has had such debilitating and destructive effects on Indigenous Peoples communally and individually. The creation of residential schools is but one aspect of the government policies that facilitated the colonization process.

¹ Robert J. Schreiter, C.P.P.S. *The Ministry of Reconciliation: Spirituality and Strategies* (Orbis Books NY, 2002), introduction, p.1. This second book continues Schreiter's reflections begun in the first book: *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order*, (Orbis Books NY, 1992).

What Schreiter says about reconciliation includes what has been taught in basic Catholic theology over many generations but it also articulates, expands, and contextualizes some of those ideas and teachings. In his book, *The Ministry of Reconciliation: Spirituality and Strategies*, he also provides some refreshingly unexpected interpretations of the Resurrection stories. In so doing, he highlights some of the qualities of reconciliation.

What is reconciliation?

There are as many definitions of reconciliation as there are situations in which it is needed. However, for the sake of shared understanding in our context, let me share these with you. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, in its report says:

To the Commission, reconciliation is about establishing and maintaining a mutually respectful relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in this country. In order for that to happen, there has to be an awareness of the past, acknowledgment of the harm that has been inflicted, atonement for the causes, and action to change behaviour.²

Robert Schreiter says: “The experience of reconciliation is the experience of grace – the restoration of one’s damaged humanity in a life-giving relationship with God.”³ He says also: “This restoration of humanity might be considered the very heart of reconciliation.”⁴

Some of what I share comes from my own personal journey. I have been involved in inculturation of my faith and interculturalization of faith for most of my adult life. By its very nature, inculturation of the Christian faith by an Indigenous person involves reconciliation. I have come to know that, while holding very different realities in tension, and owning the deepest values and truths of each, it is possible to come to wholeness. The wholeness of who I am includes being Indigenous and being Catholic.

As I was reading, reflecting and working with others on reconciliation, I thought about the three R’s in education. People of my generation are familiar with the three R’s – three basics –, which we could rhyme off as: reading, writing and ‘rithmetic. There are three basics to reconciliation as well: They are Recognize, Respect and Reconcile (Reach out). Let me reflect on each of these basics.

Recognize

This entails a number of recognitions. Each person needs to recognize one’s self, one’s experience and one’s reality as well as the other’s self, the other’s experience and their reality. We also need to recognize the separate and distinct journeys that have brought us to this point personally and as peoples who share this land.

Another very essential recognition is that reconciliation is not of our doing. Schreiter reminds us often that reconciliation is gift – it is grace – God’s action begins a process of transformation. No one can impose reconciliation on another, or demand it.

² Honoring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, p. 6.

³ Robert J. Schreiter, C.P.P.S. *The Ministry of Reconciliation: Spirituality and Strategies* (Orbis Books NY, 2002), p.15.

⁴ *Ibid*, p.15.

I am reminded that, as Schreier says: ‘the restoration of one’s damaged humanity in a life-giving relationship with God’ is core to reconciliation.’ I recognize that what led to the TRC was God’s life-giving restoration of the humanity of Indigenous individuals who attended residential schools. Because God was active in their lives, inviting them to healing and transformation of their hearts and their reality, often through participation in talking and healing circles, sweat lodges, and other ceremonies, they were able to speak their truth and to call Canadian society and culture to account and to transformation.

As the TRC indicates, transformation requires both education by Indigenous Peoples regarding Indigenous experience of colonization and a willingness on the part of Peoples of Settler origins to be educated, reconciled and called into a new relationship.

Respect

The Latin roots of this word help us understand that it means to see again, or to look again more closely, more deeply in search of what we have not yet seen. For many Indigenous people, the experience has been of not having been seen at all in the first place. Rather, our presence often triggered deeply-held prejudices, rejection and exclusion.

In order to reconcile, it is necessary for us to look again at each other and see more clearly who the other really is. We need to look again at our perceptions of the other. We need, also, to look beyond the surface and see the heart of the other. Indigenous people need to see more clearly that there are people of Settler origins who are working to bring about transformation and reconciliation.

Those of Settler origins need to see more clearly that alcoholism, lateral violence, and social disorder within the Indigenous communities is not an indication that Indigenous Peoples are “less than, incompetent, violent by nature, lazy” or any of the other degrading descriptions that have been applied to us. Rather, they are the effects of a process of colonization that has dispossessed and disempowered Indigenous Peoples.

This process has not clearly been seen by peoples of Settler and Immigrant origins because, for the most part, it is not your experience. In addition, respect requires that we see more clearly the benefits enjoyed by Peoples of Settler origin that have arisen out of the unjust structures and policies that have been created by successive governments.

Reconcile

Reconciliation is a two-way process. Among other things, it involves awareness, forgiveness, repentance and changed behaviour. God initiates reconciliation in the heart of the offended one, who then is empowered to take the first step toward the offender. That step may include forgiveness at some point. It entails reaching out to the offender and, at the least, articulating the pain and/or suffering caused by the other’s action.

The one offended may forgive, but that does not accomplish reconciliation. For reconciliation to take place, the offender must repent and reach out in return. Expressing sorrow is important, but not adequate. Reconciliation requires action that seeks to right the wrong done, and to change the relationship in the future.

Robert Schreiter, C.P.P.S. says: “Reconciliation is both a spirituality and strategies.”⁵ He says this about the need for reconciliation in the many social and political contexts in our world today, which includes the Canadian context.

“The reconciliation called for presents two faces. One face is social. It has to do with providing structures and processes whereby a fractured society can be reconstructed as truthful and just. It has to do with coming to terms with the past, punishing wrongdoers, and providing some measure of reparation to victims. It must create a secure space and an atmosphere of trust that makes civil society possible.

The other face is spiritual. It has to do with rebuilding shattered lives so that social reconciliation becomes a reality. Social reconciliation sets up conditions that make reconciliation more likely but these conditions, of themselves, cannot effect it.”⁶

The 94 Calls to Action and the choice of the United Nations’ Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as the framework for reconciliation in Canada addresses the strategies component. The spirituality component is the work of people like ourselves.

As an Indigenous person, I was among the group of individuals invited by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops to discuss its response to the TRC Calls to Action regarding The Doctrine of Discovery and *Terra Nullius*,⁷ and to consider how we might more effectively respond to and engage in reconciliation. That group and its mandate have been expanded to form the Our Lady of Guadalupe Circle.⁸ As part of your personal growth in awareness, I invite you to find and read these documents on the CCCB website.

As a Sister of St. Joseph, whose charism is sometimes described as ‘unity and reconciliation’ and at other times as “reconciling love”, I am deeply committed to engaging in the reconciliation process that is expressed in the TRC’s 94 Calls to Action.

As an Indigenous person, I have great hopes for the healing and restoration of my people. As a Christian and as a Canadian, I also have great hopes for a Canada that lives out of Christian values and relationships of equity, integrity, respect and love for one another – a love that reaches out to each other as brother and sister in this land. May we have the vision, courage and grace to reconcile!

⁵ Robert J. Schreiter, C.P.P.S. *The Ministry of Reconciliation: Spirituality and Strategies* (Orbis Books NY. 2002), introduction (p vi), p. 8.

⁶ “The reconciliation called for presents two faces....cannot effect it.” Ibid (p. 4. & p. 9)

⁷ Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops website:

<http://www.cccb.ca/site/eng/media-room/statements-a-letters/4446-catholic-responses-to-truth-and-reconciliation-commission-call-to-action-48-and-questions-regarding-the-doctrine-of-discovery>.

<http://www.cccb.ca/site/images/stories/pdf/catholic%20response%20to%20doctrine%20of%20discovery%20and%20tn.pdf>

⁸ Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops website:

<http://www.cccb.ca/site/eng/media-room/4641-national-catholic-organizations-form-catholic-coalition-to-strengthen-and-foster-relations-with-indigenous-people-our-lady-of-guadalupe-circle>