

## **Reconciliation: An Essential Element of Mission**

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I am a Missionary of the Precious Blood. To me, this is an important statement of identity. I am a Missionary of the Precious Blood. While this is a statement of my belonging to a particular Roman Catholic religious congregation and it gives evidence to a relationship that I have with a particular group of priests, brothers and lay associates, it is my hope that it can also reveal to you a spiritual identity and a ministerial focus that guides my life and work.

The Missionaries of the Precious Blood were founded in Rome in the year 1815 by St. Gaspar del Bufalo. We are a relatively small community; today we are about 550 Incorporated or Professed members and a several times that number of lay associates. We serve the Church and the peoples of the world in 22 nations. Almost all of our members live and work in their country of origin, yet we claim an identity as a missionary community.

Now St. Gaspar was a Roman priest and a frustrated foreign missionary. Despite his efforts, he never managed to escape the Papal States and his place of birth and death are only a couple of miles apart. And yet he had an important missionary attribute, he was attuned to the signs of the times and this was the time of the occupation of the papal states by Napoleon's army. The papal states were in the turmoil of divided loyalties and Pope Pius VII was being held prisoner. With the restoration of the papal states, there was a great need for renewal and the restoration of the relationship of the people with the Pope- as head of the civil papal state and as the Holy Pontiff.

So St Gaspar pulled together like minded diocesan priests to accept a mission of renewing and revitalizing the faithful (especially the clergy) after the time of the Napoleonic occupation. His was a mission of re-evangelization (before the word was invented) through the preaching of popular missions, influenced by his devotion to the Precious Blood of Jesus.

One such place of his preaching was in the hill town of Sonnino. This was a town of ill-repute among the "good people" of the papal states. It was know as a hideout and refuge for bandits. Well, in the heavy handed manner that is not unfamiliar to the world today, the authorities thought that the way to deal with Sonnino was to raze the town. The logic of the state being: no town, no people, no problem. Fortunately, someone in the papal kitchen cabinet had the sense to suggest that perhaps it would be better to confront the social ills of Sonnino with the preaching and living of the gospel; and he had a preacher (St. Gaspar) in mind to give that mission. And that is what was done. St Gaspar and his companions began a concerted and prolonged mission of accompaniment of the people of the town of Sonnino, preaching the gospel by words and actions and it led to the conversion of the people. The people once alienated and outside the walls of society and the Church, were brought near.

So this is the “backstory” of my identity as a Missionary of the Precious Blood; a missionary identity that is not tied to geographical consideration and which focuses on the mission of reconciliation.

Since the Second Vatican Council, the Church’s understanding of evangelization and the missionary work of the Church as evolved and been developing; which continues today. And there are important theological considerations to be found in the wisdom of the document *Ad Gentes* and subsequent Church documents like *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975) and *Redemptoris Missio* (1990), but in this brief presentation this afternoon, I am not going to delineate any great theological construct or missiology. There are others who are much more qualified to offer that perspective. Rather, let’s keep it very simple.

It has often been said that the Church does not have a mission, but that the mission has a Church. This little cliché reflects the important belief that the followers of Christ have as a first priority, not the establishment of a denominational empire, no matter how beautiful or inspired it might be, but the first priority is to simply to continue the mission of Jesus.

So, what was and continues to be the mission of Jesus? The word cloud of responses would include: Salvation. Redemption. Communion. Forgiveness. Reconciliation. For my response I look to St. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians.

*It is in Christ and through his blood that we have been redeemed and our sins forgiven, so immeasurably generous is God’s favor to us. God has given us the wisdom to understand fully the mystery, the plan that he was pleased to decree in Christ, to be carried out in the fullness of time: Namely, to bring all things in heavens and on earth into one under Christ headship. (NAB-Eph1:7-10)*

So, that is the plan, the mission: **to bring all things into one under Christ.** That is the reason for the incarnation and it is the mission that we are to continue.

Tomorrow we will hear in some detail about the missiology of Pope Francis as found in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium, the Joy of the Gospel*. Today I simply recall the exhortation that all Christians, by virtue of their baptism are missionary disciples. That discipleship and missionary are inseparable realities should not stretch the thinking of anyone familiar with the preaching of Jesus. We know the unity between loving God and loving neighbor. We know that God has made Godself inseparable from the human condition and persons.

So, communion restored with God is a vocation of communion with our brothers and sisters. The vertical relationship with God and the horizontal relationship with one another are two parts of the same one mystery that we call communion. For this reason Pope Francis, in a General Audience homily (15 Jan 2014) spoke of the “indissoluble bond between the mystical and missionary dimensions of the Christian vocation.” Mystical grace received always invites, and we hope inspires, a lived missionary response.

Nowhere is it made more clear than in St. Paul's first Letter to the Corinthians.

*He died for all so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him for who for their sakes died and was raised up. ... This means that if anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation The old order has passed away; now all is new! All this has been done by God, who has reconciled us to Godself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. I mean that God, in Christ, was reconciling the world to Godself, not counting people's sins against them, and that he has entrusted the message of reconciliation to us. This makes us ambassadors of Christ, God as it were appealing through us.” (NAB- II Cor. 5:15, 17-20a)*

Now, there is not a lot of room for confusion here. If we have been brought into communion with God through the grace and mercy of Christ, then that grace comes with a responsibility, a vocation to a mission of reconciliation. Period. Full stop. That's our invitation and our instruction on how to be faithful as a missionary disciple.

Pope John Paul II wrote that “Mission is a single but complex reality.” (RM 41) But I like how Stephen Bevans, Divine Word missionary, a theologian and missiologist, drawing on his historical perspective and his years of missionary experience, breaks down the complexity by describing six elements of mission, all will be recognizable to those with missionary experience;

1. witness and proclamation
2. liturgy, prayer and contemplation
3. justice, peace and the integrity of creation
4. dialogue with women and men of other faiths and ideologies
5. inculturation, and
6. reconciliation.<sup>1</sup>

The first four elements have long been recognized as the activities of mission. John Paul II called the proclamation of the Lordship of Jesus and his vision of the reign of God as the “permanent priority of mission.” (RM 44) The mission of Jesus, his preaching of the reign of God in word and deed, remain at the heart of the mission of the Church today. Through liturgy and prayer the Church invites and accompanies people into a renewed and strengthened communion with God and instructs believers how to live their faith in the world. According to Bevans: “Commitment to justice and peace and the integrity of creation is a seamless garment” and is constitutive of the Church's missionary task, embodied in service to the poor which affirm their dignity. Corporal works of mercy and joining with others for sociocultural transformation, is the work of missionaries that seek to reveal the reign of God in our midst. Dialogue with those that are “other,” other by religious belief or ideology, was once thought of as a practice for inviting conversion to the Catholic faith, but today is viewed as an important missionary task that is rooted in the belief that the Spirit of God is active and discoverable in people

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<sup>1</sup> Bevans, Stephen. “Unraveling a ‘Complex’ Reality: Six Elements of Mission.” International Bulletin of Missionary Research, April 2003. 50-53.

and places previously unappreciated. Dialogue is an important means to know and respect the 'other' and reduce the tensions that exist among people who have radically different beliefs. In dialogue with others we recognize that truth is truth, wherever it is discovered and God is present in that truth.

The element of inculturation is not so much a missionary activity as a newly appreciated perspective or mindset that recognizes that the Spirit is present in all contexts and can be discovered with attention to the experiences of people. This is important for the missionary who seeks to bring the message of Christ to a people in a way that they can understand and which respects their history and perspectives.

And just as important, an appreciation for inculturation provides the Church with a needed critical lens to look inward and to understand how culture (primarily western and european) has influenced, and often corrupted, the Church's teaching and understanding of the Gospel of Christ. A recognition of the effects of inculturation allows the Church to face the truth of wrongly guided missionary activity of the Church in the past; and be self-critical in the present.

A case in point is offered to us as we recall the horrible sin of chattel slavery, past and present. I do not have time to delineate the Church's centuries long complicity in slavery and slave trafficking; or the long silence. It will have to suffice to say that we have much to lament. While the Good News is given to bring healing and transformation to a world that is sometimes systematically unjust, history has shown how the church can be compromised by the influence of that same injustice. It is an appreciation for inculturation that has allowed the Church to honestly acknowledge past false teaching and to seek conversion. It is an appreciation for the all-pervasiveness of inculturation that warns the Church to not be smug in today's "certainties."

Reconciliation has only been recognized more recently as an essential element of the missionary work of the Church. Even an obtuse reading of the signs of the times point to the need for reconciliation at multiple levels: personal, sociocultural and political. Missionaries address this need through a variety of pastoral activities, but reconciliation, as an element of mission, is more than a strategy.

In his writings on reconciliation, the theologian Robert Schreiter, CPPS reminds us that reconciliation is more a spirituality than a strategy.<sup>2</sup> Recalling the passage from Corinthians that I quoted earlier, reconciliation begins as a grace from God. And it is the missionary work of the Church, not so much to develop strategies, but to give witness to that grace and to announce the hope that the divisions that separate peoples can be healed and barriers broken down and that right relationships can be restored. And "right relationships" are the relationships that are expressed in the preaching of Jesus of the reign of God. Above all, the task of reconciliation is to give powerful witness to the hope that past sinfulness does not have to determine our action in the future. Reconciling

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Schreiter, *The Ministry of Reconciliation: Spirituality and Strategies*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997.

missionaries give witness to the mystical truth that death and division will give way to life and peace. Reconciliation seeks to restore right relationships vertically and horizontally; announcing the good news of a mercy given by God to restore communion with humankind and a mercy that is evident when peoples live together respectful and peacefully as brothers and sisters. A proclamation of hopefulness and actions to restore right relationships; this the reconciliation apostolate of a missionary disciple. This is our work as ambassadors of Christ.

I am a Missionary of the Precious Blood and we claim a spirituality of reconciliation as our charism. But it is not just the charism of my congregation, but it is a charism for all missionary disciples; Priest, Religious and lay; those who minister in foreign lands and those that serve in places close to their place of birth. If we know, if we have experienced the grace and mercy of Christ, then we have a vocation as an ambassador of Christ and the message and ministry of reconciliation has been entrusted to us. This is the missionary work of the Church and we share this missionary call and we respond faithful through our communion as disciples together in mission.