

A New Creation



Hope for Healing in a Troubled World

A storm in our lives can leave us confounded, hurt and forever changed. But the healing power of God's love can find its way into the deepest wounds. A world-renowned theologian and Missionary of the Precious Blood, Fr. Robert Schreiter, C.P.P.S., teaches us about the many layers of reconciliation.

Fr. Robert Schreiter, C.P.P.S., travels the world promoting the cause of reconciliation through the healing power of the blood of Christ. He gives presentations, workshops and retreats on the subject in many countries, but he also works hands-on with victims of violence and war. Often, he is dispatched by Caritas Internationalis, a group commissioned by the Vatican to aid the poor and fight injustice around the world.

“Working through that network takes me to some very interesting and dangerous places,” he said. He has been around the globe to help people heal from terrible wounds—but he said much that he has learned about reconciliation applies equally to the hurts we encounter in our everyday lives.

“These situations that I deal with may be extreme – but anyone who is dealing with forgiveness in their own lives when they’ve been harmed or hurt will know that reconciliation follows the same path,” he said.

As Christians we are called to bring Christ’s peace and healing to others. “We are ambassadors of Christ, as Paul said. For that reason, we are to be ministers of reconciliation,” Fr. Schreiter said. At the same time, it is difficult work. Wounds are

deep, healing is slow, and sometimes neither side is ready to hear about forgiveness and mercy.

“If you can’t live with failure 70 percent of the time, you’d better get out of this field,” Fr. Schreiter said. “To do this work you must have a deep spirituality. You have to be in communion with God. Prayer becomes an especially important resource. If you are not in communion with God and you try to do the work of reconciliation, just what do you think you’re doing?”

Often, there is no clear understanding of who the victim is, and who has done wrong. Or even if there is, Fr. Schreiter said, “the wrong-doer never apologizes. Suppose you grew up in a family where the father drank too much, and his drinking did great harm to everyone in the family circle. What if the father dies or goes away before you are an adult and ready to confront him? Are we held hostage for the rest of our lives to those feelings of hurt and anger?”

The answer is an emphatic no, Fr. Schreiter said. Even if the wrongdoer never apologizes, “God can begin the healing process within us. God begins with the victim. We shouldn’t be surprised at this. Look at

Scripture: God always takes special care of the widow, the orphan, the alien—all the people who are pushed to the edges.”

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St. Paul writes that in Christ, we become a new creation. “Whoever is in Christ is a new creation; the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come” (2 Corinthians 5: 17). When we become reconciled to a hurt that life has dealt to us, when we come to see it in a new way, we also become a new creation—eventually.

“When we have been harmed or have suffered a great loss, we often fantasize: if only we could go back to where we were before,” Fr. Schreiter said. “But you can’t really go back because you’ve been changed. The only way to move is to go forward toward your life as a new creation. The problem is we don’t know which way to go. It can take a long time, in small steps that we barely notice. Often in people who are healing, the moment of new creation comes as a surprise—but it’s very welcome all the same.”

Often, that moment of new creation comes only after a time of terrible pain and anger. “We often say that suffering makes

us better people. And sometimes it does. But suffering in and of itself does not make us a better person. In fact it can destroy us,” Fr. Schreiter said. But the grace of God, the hope offered by God, and the healing granted to us by God, can instead bring us to a new understanding of the world and our place in it, Fr. Schreiter said.



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“When there is what seems to us a senseless tragedy—when a loved one dies of cancer, in a car accident, or in some other tragic way—we sometimes lash out at God. It’s a very human reaction to a terrible event that we cannot comprehend,” he said. “But God can handle our anger. God is not going to turn against us. God is the source of any bit of compassion or mercy that we are able to muster.

“As we grow in our understanding of the world, sometimes our understanding of God does not keep pace. We cling to

the notions of God we held as a child. A recent survey showed that in their faith Catholics have the equivalent of a fourth-grade education. And so we are ill-equipped to understand how our all-powerful father God can allow bad things to happen. We ask, 'Where is God in all of this?' And when we ask that question, it is also a question about meaning. We're asking, does the world make sense? Does the whole world hang together somehow? People who are able to move through these questions, to move through these feelings of anger and abandonment, can come to a deeper understanding of God than the "big parent" God that most of us grew up with."

A Shift in Perspective

Often, to heal from a great wound we must be able to move away from the place of pain, to shift our perspective enough to see what happened to us from a new point of view. Once we can see the wrongdoer as another of God's creations, and not just as an enemy, is central to the process of forgiveness and healing, Fr. Schreiter said.

"It's wonderful that God is the author of reconciliation, not us. Because what is our human response to a great hurt? Anger, usually, then hatred comes right

behind that," he said. "A colleague tells this story of his work in Nicaragua during a time of great crisis in the area where he was living. One night he got a telephone call: 'get your daughter out of the country; they're coming tonight to get her.' This was a very mild-mannered man who had been working for peace. But instantly, at that moment, he said, 'I began to hate. I did not know I was capable of that much hate.'

"It doesn't take long in any time of great trial before as humans we run out of resources. How many times have we heard people say that they can't think about reconciliation because of all the anger and pain they are feeling?"

That shift in perspective that brings God's healing often comes in tiny increments, Fr. Schreiter said. Reconciliation can be a long process. "There are a lot of layers to it, a lot of things that we have to do. But we don't have to do everything at once. As Christians, we set high standards for ourselves. We beat ourselves up for not being at the goal yet, especially when it comes to reconciliation and healing. But we have to cope with our feelings of rage, pain and betrayal before we can move down the track to the next phase of forgiveness,"

he said.

“We don’t know what form the reconciliation we receive will take – often, it is an unexpected form. We have to take the process step by step. Because we’re human, we can’t just leap ahead to the outcome.”

Reconciliation and forgiveness run counter to our experience as a human tribe, he added. “In a lot of cultures, when you are wronged, you are expected to take revenge. That’s how you preserve the honor of your family. It seems to be in our genes. So when people feel they have been wronged, and they are very angry and hurt over it, as ministers of reconciliation we have to help people deal with their feelings. We can’t just say, ‘You can’t feel that way.’ We have to work with people to help them see alternatives, other ways in which they can restore their honor, their humanity.”

Because that return to humanity taps into one of the foundations of Christian teaching: that we are formed in the image and likeness of God. When a thing harms us, we are treated as less than human. We are denied that birthright. “That must somehow be restored to us. But how? The way is not always clear,” Fr. Schreiter said. “We can be con-

sumed by hatred and anger. We are held hostage by what has happened to us. And it diminishes us.

“So how is our humanity restored? God restores our humanity. Through the grace of God we somehow find the resources to get ahead of, to get beyond, where we were before. We can’t always describe how it happened, but we find that one day, we are feeling differently than we did before. That’s a sign that reconciliation has happened.”

To feel differently than we did before, to see things differently than we did before: these are important steps in the process of reconciliation. Often, we have to work through our own story many times before it begins to make sense to us, Fr. Schreiter said.

“Reconciliation often involves telling the story of what happened, and telling it again, and again, again, until we can come to some new understanding, until we can reposition ourselves. At one retreat I was leading, a woman spoke of her husband’s death, which of course was a very painful experience for her, a powerful loss for her whole family. Naturally it took her a long time to recover. But in the years following his death there

were things that happened in the family that she was not sure that he could have borne, had he lived. In a way, she said, it was a mercy that he had been spared those experiences. So we see how she was beginning to come to a new understanding of her loss. She was seeing it from a new perspective. And this is a sign that healing and reconciliation have taken place.”



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Forgiving, Not Forgetting

Even after we are healed, we are changed. We can't forget our past or the things that have happened to us. "We set very high standards for ourselves when it comes to forgiving, higher than any other religious tradition," Fr. Schreiter said.

"Forgiveness is being about to give up our anger and negative feelings and begin willing to take a new perspective on what happened. However, forgiveness is not about forgetting.

'Forgive and forget' is bad advice. It is a phrase that is not found anywhere in scripture. We can forgive, but we don't forget; we remember in a different way.

"In Luke's story of Jesus' crucifixion, after Jesus is nailed to the cross his first words are 'Father, forgive them, they do not know what they do.' Jesus didn't forgive them; he asked his father to forgive them. Later, in Acts, Steven does the same thing in clear imitation of Jesus. We see from those accounts that even Jesus had to struggle with forgiveness."

And if Jesus struggled with it, we know that we're going to need more than a little help to get there. But we will get there. "I grew up with brothers, and there was a lot of fighting in the house, as is probably pretty typical with boys," Fr. Schreiter said. "Mom would pull us apart and then she'd say, 'Okay boys, you stop it—and now you've got to forgive each other.' Well, it just doesn't work like that.

"Yet sometimes we feel that if we can't forgive instantly, we won't forgive at all. Instead, we can take comfort in that forgiveness is a process that we can put in God's hands: we tell God, 'I want to get there, but I'm not there yet. Will you help me get there?'"

A Conversation with Fr. Robert Schreiter, C.P.P.S.

Author, teacher, preacher and presenter Fr. Bob Schreiter brings a message of reconciliation to the Church and the world today.

How did you become involved in the work of reconciliation?

Growing up in Nebraska, I would never have dreamed that I would become involved in international work in peace-building and reconciliation. Indeed, that whole field didn't even exist at that time. The work as we now know it began to emerge only in the late 1970s. The religious dimension of it—how religious faith and practice helps strengthen the peace-building and reconciliation process—didn't really come about until the 1990s.

If the field did not exist, how did you find it—or rather, how did it find you?

I can pinpoint exactly when my own interest began in this area. It was in January 1986 and I was leading a week on Precious Blood spirituality for

the Precious Blood families (the C.P.P.S. missionaries, the C.P.P.S. sisters from Dayton, and a native Chilean group of Precious Blood sisters).

While we were together, General Augusto Pinochet, Chile's dictator at that time, announced a plebiscite on his rule. The Chilean bishops responded quickly by announcing a new national pastoral plan to be called *Reconciliation in Truth*. (The "in Truth" was added because in neighboring Argentina "reconciliation" had come to mean forgetting the suffering of the victims of a civil war, and letting the wrongdoers go scot-free.)

I was asked on the spot to give a presentation on reconciliation. I obliged, but it wasn't very good, since I really didn't know what I was talking about. After the presentation, one of the persons participating asked

me point-blankly: “How do you reconcile with someone who doesn’t think he did anything wrong?” I had no answer. But it was that question that set me thinking about reconciliation.

A few years later I gave a series of lectures on reconciliation in Boston. These were published in 1992 by Orbis Books as *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order*. At that time, the Berlin Wall had fallen and there was much interest in how to rebuild societies that had suffered oppression under Communism. This little book was one of the very few on the topic that were available at the time. It was quickly translated into several other languages and circulated widely.

In 1996 I was asked by Caritas Internationalis to join a new international working group that would develop materials for training people in peacebuilding and reconciliation. Caritas Internationalis is a service organization for 162 Catholic relief and development agencies around the world. Member organizations from the United States are Catholic Relief Services, the Campaign for Human Development, and Catholic Charities USA.

We developed a handbook for reconciliation and a training

manual. They have been translated into many languages (I helped introduce the Russian edition in Moscow a few years ago), and have been used to train tens of thousand of grass-roots workers around the world.

In 1998 I published another book on reconciliation (*The Ministry of Reconciliation: Spirituality and Strategies*), as well as articles and chapters in books on the topic. As a result of these



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writings and my work with Caritas Internationalis, I began to speak widely about reconciliation and to receive invitations to work in conflict areas.

How would you describe your work in reconciliation?

Building peace after a time of conflict and working toward reconciliation are complex tasks. My part in this focuses upon the resources of religious faith for doing that work, and for sustaining spiritually those who are working in this area. Peacebuilding is arduous and often frustrating work, since there are many setbacks and

disappointments.

What has come about in recent years is a growing awareness of how important the role of faith is in this work. Realizing that reconciliation is God's work—a work in which we but participate—is an important perspective for being able to keep working in this area.

Likewise there are certain skills to be learned, such as how to deal with people who have come through deep trauma. The healing of painful memories and being able to get on with life plays a big role here. Helping people envision what peace might look like is another important skill.

I work full-time as a teacher at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, so I cannot stay for long periods of time in places where I am invited. What I usually do is work with leaders who need to have a vision of faith to guide these rebuilding processes.

How has this work led you around the world?

My work in reconciliation has branched out. In 1999 the Australian Bishops' Conference asked me to talk about reconciliation between Australia's Aboriginal population and the white settler population. Issues

of polarization in the Church, and the response to the clerical sexual abuse scandal in the U.S. have also prompted many invitations.

I also spoke on peacebuilding and reconciliation at World Youth Day in Sydney in July 2008, on behalf of Caritas Australia.

You could certainly find an easier topic—so why do you stay involved in the work of reconciliation?

The work is exhilarating, because one feels that such things help make a difference in the world. At this point there are not a lot of theologians who are willing to get involved in this often messy and frustrating work. Whatever help we as theologians can provide is always greatly appreciated. One of the most touching tributes I have received was from Bishop Carlos Belo, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1996 for his work in East Timor. He credited my work with shaping his own vision of reconciliation.

But as we learn in our faith, it is not my work, but God's. A ministry of reconciliation flows directly from our Precious Blood spirituality. And I have been happy to be part of this.