

August 2012

Blessed are the Reconcilers

If we don't transform our hurts, we project them on to a cycle of negativity

Thousands of Catholics across the country will be preparing for the inevitable changes and challenges that September will bring to their parishes; families, schools, staffs. Children will start school, older children will move on to second level, others to College, and more will join or, at least try to join the work force. Priests will be moved, parishes will be 'clustered' and radical church re-ordering will, no doubt, continue. All such breaking of familiar patterns usually brings huge emotional conflict.

At such times, like stars in a cloudy night, some special souls will nearly always emerge, bringing with them the light of sensitivity, healing and common sense. I call them 'special' because most of us, unthinking in our prejudices, myopic in our tunnel vision, rush in and take sides too soon. Not many can wait to discern and explore the bigger picture. I offer these reflections during the month of August when, notionally anyway, there may be a few fleeting opportunities to prepare ourselves for the various challenges that may impact the context of our daily or weekly worship.

Not everyone is capable of playing the role of reconciler. Yet it is probably the most needed gift and service in the church and world today – whether in the context of a civil war in Syria, or a Niger famine, or of domestic or pastoral blood-letting. And it is only the compassionate soul, facing its own divisions that can ever hope to make a difference where leaders and factions are driven by fixed certainties. We read in today's 'Irish Times' with reference to Kofi Annan: "He's an honest broker, but there are those who want to take him out of the game to untie hands for the use of force. It's already clear," says Russia's deputy foreign minister Gennady Gatilov.



To be a reconciler is to be one of those who forever endeavour to flesh out in their complex lives the pattern of the dying and rising mystery of Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Instead of reacting to, resisting or reflecting back the negative emotions and attitudes of those around them, whether in a one-to-one, communal or wider context, they take into their own vulnerable spirit, like Jesus did, the arrogance, hardness and stubbornness of those they lead or serve or live with, their jealousies, cynicism and strange motives. This is costly, spiritual work. It is the occupation of the saint.

When I pray to be a reconciler I'm praying for the death of my all-powerful ego. I'm praying for the grace to transform, within my own body and soul, within the most redeemed part of me, the sins into graces, the curses into blessings, the destructive forces into life-enhancing gifts. In our imitation of Christ the experience of redemption can come no better than this. So often, in our daily routine of getting hurt, what we usually do, either in self-justifying anger or self-righteous brotherly or sisterly 'correction', is to add force to the negative energies, by turning them round and redirecting them with still greater velocity, in an even more subtly negative way, back to the source from which they came rather than developing 'The Art of Letting Go' Richard Rohr (Franciscan priest).

There is an extraordinary power in the manner in which the very physical presence of Jesus united opposites through the peace and love that encompassed him: 'In his own person he destroyed the hostility' (Ephesians 2: 16).

Jesus had learned that if the small and unsatisfied ego is not transformed, then the negative emotions of envy, fear and hate will be either denied or projected elsewhere. Yes, we are indebted to Richard Rohr for the dictum: 'What we don't transform, we transmit.' He describes the familiar process of both denying and projecting as 'scapegoating', from the Jewish ritual of putting your faults on a goat that was whipped out into the desert. We displace and project our negative emotions on to other people, other systems, by blame and outrage. It is so hard to carry the burden of our own flawed humanity. Only the true essence, not the ego, can cope with such anxiety, such ambiguity, and such fragile insecurity.



If our pain is not transformed by reference to a wider horizon, to a regaining of true perspective, to a letting-in of God's vastness, it will always be transmitted to others. The destruction of mindless wars, global or local, can be traced back to closed and divided hearts. Inner emptying and dying is so hard to do. Nothing outside us is transformed without the radical grace of inner conversion.

The seemingly irreconcilable situations we encounter at home and in the community are but microcosms of a wider alienation. We live in a desperately destructive and divided world where evil is perpetrated under the guise of nationalism and religion. Very often there is no one to accuse or punish. There is often only the blind and trusting holding of human ignorance and pride, sin and failure, until our love and pain break through to resurrection. 'There is no redemptive violence,' writes Rohr, 'there is only redemptive suffering.'

In his *People of the Lie*, Scott Peck quotes an old battle-scarred priest who said, 'There are dozens of ways to deal with evil and several ways to conquer it. All of them are facets of the truth that the only ultimate way to conquer evil is to let it be smothered within a willing, loving human being. When it is

absorbed there, like blood on a sponge or a spear into one's heart, it loses its power and goes no further.' Whenever a person or a community manages to achieve this heroic kind of ultimate sacrifice, then the whole world becomes a safer place to live in.



We always have a choice about making peace or war. I can choose to see the positive in the other point of view or I can decide to block it even before I have heard it. I can search for the negative in everything I hear or

I can really try to understand better what I disagree with. I can keep trying to forgive those who oppose my plans at every turn, or become bitter about it. I can grimly choose to accept, to be a reluctant reconciler, even while I still hear whispers of revenge echoing along the narrow corridors of my heart. Even for Jesus there was no instant transformation.

However, thank God, there are times too, when, discerning a sinister lack of peace in a clearly toxic environment, it is wiser to shake the dust of those people and places off our feet – and scamper, hopefully to return again when our spirit is stronger. I find making the sign of the cross over my mind, body and heart to be a deeply reconciling little ritual. As you touch your forehead and chest, in the Eastern tradition you are opening the brow and heart chakras of vision and compassionate understanding. According to Jewish practice, as you touch your left and right shoulder, you are activating the spiritual centres of mercy (chesed) and strength (geburah).

In the Christian tradition we open ourselves to the influence of the Blessed Trinity, to the creator and sustainer of the world, to the saviour and reconciler of its sins, to the healing spirit of new beginnings. In the end it is the cross alone that will hold the opposites together and transform them. And only the light will then be transmitted. When I bless myself, the world too is blessed. So may all the new beginnings and changes about to take place this autumn bring many blessings in their wake.

