

Reconciliation in South America

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Alison Saunders provides an analysis of the particular hurdles that working for reconciliation encounters in the South American context.

The nineteen seventies and eighties were a time of profound political repression and violence in South America. From military dictatorship in the Southern Cone, to US-sponsored civil war and genocide in Central America, human rights were routinely violated. During this time, the Churches, often inspired by liberation theology, spoke out for justice together with other popular organizations, offering a voice of protest on behalf of the tortured and disappeared.

The last twenty years or so have seen a gradual end to violence and the slow transition of most of the continent to democracy, and with it, the role of the Church has changed. An important

part of the transition process has been the Truth and Reconciliation commissions, which have been charged with acknowledging the past and building a united future.

My interest in the process comes from spending a year in Chile, during 1998-9. Ten years after the start of the transition to democracy, and six years after the report of the Truth and Reconciliation committee, the debate on how to deal with human rights abuses re-opened. Pinochet's dramatic arrest in London, and subsequent attempts to bring him to trial, seemed to give the country space to talk about the dictatorship years in a more open way.

In the case of Chile, coming to terms with its history was achieved more completely when the country was able to recognize the incompleteness of the 'Truth and Reconciliation' commission, and started to deliver justice through the judicial system. Reconciliation of societies is a process, rather than an end

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point that can be reached.¹ As democratic government becomes more entrenched, it becomes more resilient and able to withstand the pressures that are generated by further revelations of the truth. Thus, at different stages in the transition to democracy, national reconciliation can be re-examined and re-enacted in a more profound way. There is an inevitable tension between demands for justice and the maintenance of social order when new democratic governments are still fragile. The role of the Church as an arbitrator, and a Christian theology of reconciliation can contribute different things at different stages of the process. The Roman Catholic Church continues to play a key role in all sections of Latin American society, and so has a particular role to play in reconciliation in this context.

The melting-pot of reconciliation

What are the 'ingredients' of reconciliation? John Paul Lederach, working in Nicaragua, uses Psalm 85 to identify Truth, Mercy, Justice and Peace as key concepts in conflict transformation.² The tensions inherent between each of these concepts help to identify some of the difficulties in reconciling societies torn apart by state violence and by civil war, yet each of them has to be addressed for reconciliation to occur. To these elements can be added the concept of

forgiveness, at the level of individuals and society, without which true reconciliation cannot occur.

The work of liberation theologians during the seventies and eighties put justice at the heart of theology and practice of certain sections of the Catholic Church. During this period, significant sectors of the Church identified wholeheartedly with 'the poor' in their aspirations for economic justice and in their resistance to repressive governments. Yet in this work, the Church itself was deeply divided between those who saw identification with the poor as a key part of the gospel message, and those – often in the church hierarchy – who wished the Church to be a force for national unity for all social classes. Liberation – and its demands for economic and political justice – was therefore not seen as a facet of reconciliation but, in its identification with just one sector of a deeply divided society, in direct opposition to it. Conservative bishops in meeting in 1985, called for a 'theology of reconciliation' that countered the liberation theology's demands of justice for the poor and oppressed.³

It was those conservative elements in the Chilean Church that enabled the country to take its first steps towards democracy. Cardinal Fresno, the successor to Cardinal Raul Silva, was

widely seen as a conservative, but perhaps because of this, he mediated with some degree of success between the military and opposition, and with moderate opposition parties to provide a united platform for democracy.⁴ The visit of Pope John Paul 2 to Chile in 1987 also provided a boost to the process towards democracy. His commitment to the democratic process, rather than to specific policies, meant that he was trusted by the moderate right as well as the left. By reasserting the Church's traditional role as a focus for national unity, and thus to some extent lessening its close association with the poorest in society, the Church provided the space in which the first steps to reconciliation could be taken.

The transition of Latin American countries towards liberal democracy has resulted in the cessation of violence committed by right wing military states and by left wing revolutionary groups. The virtual collapse of Marxism as a viable political ideal has left liberal democracy as the only solution for government. Even the most socialist of these governments are committed to neo-liberal economic policies to provide economic growth. The popular demand for economic justice for the poorest in society, which provided the impetus for the struggles in the 1970s and 1980s, was not part of the package of transition and reconciliation.

While socialist leaders in Chile and Brazil are starting to help the poorest, in Central American countries, inequality fueled by globalization continues to grow. This presents a continuing challenge. If reconciliation includes justice as well as mercy, then a transition towards a less unequal society remains a high priority.

Truth and reconciliation

One of the earliest steps in the transition to democracy in Latin America has been the establishment of various commissions, designed to acknowledge the widespread human rights abuses that occurred. The establishment of 'Truth and Reconciliation' commissions suggest that truth has an important role to play in the process of reconciliation.

However, different commissions with the same name, have resulted in different outcomes. The terms truth and reconciliation mean different things to different people. In South Africa, public truth telling was seen as the path to reconciliation. The granting of amnesty was conditional on telling the truth, and the programme of commission hearings throughout the country committed the truth about the apartheid regime, and the struggle against it, to public memory. Whatever the limitations of the process, a recognizably Christian understanding

of forgiveness as an essential part of reconciliation – both individual and societal – was at its heart.

The Latin American context was different. In many countries, the transition to democracy included an amnesty for former military rulers imposed on the new democratic regimes. This meant that truth commissions were not there as a process to provide reconciliation. The truth – or some of it – was told, with the expectation that the process of ‘reconciliation’ would mean that this truth would be swiftly forgotten. This is contrary to Christian understanding of forgiveness and reconciliation. Reconciliation is costly, and so is the process of forgiveness that is an essential part of this. God’s reconciling love is expressed through the life, death and resurrection of his Son (2 *Corinthians* 4.14-21). This is offered as a free gift to humanity, but our reconciliation with God demands human repentance as well, as through baptism we die to sin and rise to new life in Christ (*Romans* 6.11-12). True reconciliation must be based on the commitment of both parties to overcome divisions through truth rather than collective amnesia.

However, the public acknowledgement of truth seems to be one of the most difficult – not to say threatening – aspects of the



Dignity requires us to fight for change (Graffiti in Buenos Aires). What place does the ‘fight for change’ have within a process of reconciliation?

reconciliation process, even where amnesty laws protect the instigators of violence. Governments – and the military – that are publicly committed to truth about acts of terrorism nevertheless take pains to limit the amount of truth that is told. Nowhere is this clearer than Guatemala, where Bishop Juan Gerardi was bludgeoned to death in 1998 just days after the publication of the Catholic Church’s report entitled *Guatemala, Never Again!*, which blamed the government for 85% of the violent deaths in Guatemala’s civil war. Judges charged with investigating his trial have been forced to flee the country.

Slow and difficult steps

In Chile, truth telling has been a gradual process. The first report of the Truth and Reconciliation commission told the story only of human rights abuses that were known to have ended in death – about three thousand cases. It was more than ten years later that a

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report into more than thirty thousand cases of torture was written, with the report of the National Commission on Political Imprisonment and Torture. This publication of this report is a significant step towards reconciliation. Firstly, it led to an admission by the army that torture was used as state policy rather than having occurred only as abuses of individual officers. Responding to the report, Gen Cheyre said the army accepted physical and moral responsibility for ‘punishable and morally unacceptable acts of the past’.⁵

The publication of the report – and the response of the Chilean army – contains two of the things necessary for forgiveness and reconciliation. Firstly, the public acceptance of responsibility for torture at a structural level means that a more trusting relationship between the military and the civilian government, based on a shared understanding of the dictatorship years, is now possible. There is also some public restitution to the victims of torture, who now receive a state pension.

But the witness statements for the report will not be made public – nor passed to the courts – for fifty years. This suggests that the publication of the total truth about human rights violations is still politically too

dangerous. Perhaps truth is the hardest thing for a society in transition to bear.

Yet for the individual victim, the absence of truth makes reconciliation difficult, if not impossible. Alicia Pastore’s husband, Ofelio, was ‘disappeared’ in the first week of the coup in Chile. Seventeen years after the transition to democracy, Alicia still knows nothing about who arrested her husband, where he was taken, what he suffered and whether those responsible will face the consequences of their actions.

About seven years ago, Alicia and her children decided they would admit that Ofelio was, indeed, dead – a big emotional and legal step. They would no longer hold out hope. Still, with no body, no funeral, and no one held to account for what happened, there is no closure.

‘It’s still an open wound,’ Alicia said. ‘Fresh, bleeding, constant.’⁶

For people like Alicia, reconciliation and forgiveness can only be a personal action inspired by her Christian faith: in spite of Chile’s progress on reconciliation and justice, no forum has dealt with this case. Her actions for reconciliation affect her personally, but she cannot, through her forgiveness, be part of a recognized public process. Actions such as chatting with a soldier, or talking to supporters of the military regime about her husband’s

disappearance are difficult but necessary acts of reconciliation, yet their significance is not given a formal place within the national reconciliation process.

In the light of Alicia's story, the work done by grassroots organizations to document human rights abuses, and to promote reconciliation, has been particularly important. The Vicariate of Solidarity documented the disappearances and torture over many years, and this information has been used to in the preparation of the 'Truth and Reconciliation' commission, and subsequent legal actions. Reconciliation of the structures of society, based on general acceptance of guilt can give sufficient stability for societies to survive as peaceful entities. However,

forgiveness works at the level of individuals, working through their emotional responses to what has happened. Both are needed if a country – nationally and locally – is to move forward together.

Truth, mercy, justice, peace, forgiveness. These are part of the reconciling mission of the church. In Latin America the church operates in different spaces and through different mechanisms – both political and non-political – to facilitate and participate in the different processes that are part of the national journey of reconciliation. However, it is the Christian commitment to truth as the necessary foundation for all reconciliation work, and it is this which will ensure that it is built on firm foundations.

Notes:

¹Robert J Schreiter, 'Reconciliation and Forgiveness', pp.191-201 in *Fullness of life for all: Challenges for Mission in Early 21st Century*, I Daniel, C Van Engen and H Vroom (eds), Rudopi, 2003.

²John Paul Lederach, 'The Meeting Place' Chapter 8, *Journey Towards Reconciliation*, Harald Press, 1998. <http://www.colorado.edu/conflict/transform/jplchpt.htm>

³P Sigmund, *Liberation Theology at the Crossroads* OUP, 1990, p.4.

⁴H Stewart Gambino, 'Redefining the Changes and Politics in Chile' in E Cleary and H Stewart-Gambino, (eds.) *Conflict and Competition: The Latin American Church in a Changing Environment*, Lynne Rieder Publications inc., 1990, p.30.

⁵<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/3987341.stm>

⁶http://www.columban.org/magazine/10-04_missing-mosher.html