

# Mission and reconciliation

## Theology for a new remembrance

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### Abstract

*Conflicts and wars often occur, with devastating consequences in society. Attaining reconciliation is a challenging task, especially if each side in the conflict articulates its identity in terms of victimhood through education, history, and memories. Can theology offer an adequate answer and help overcome conflicts and bring forgiveness? Each time we serve the liturgy, we are reminded to remember the future and remember Christ's ultimate forgiveness. In that sense, worship as a communal and God-oriented event can remind us of our mission, which is participation in God's salvific work. This paper offers some theological insights as guidelines for Christians and their respective communities to pursue. Hopefully, theology will prove its ability and strength to foster reconciliation and unity in a suffering world.*

### Keywords

*mission, reconciliation, identity, eucharist, eschatology, forgiveness*

*"It is now the hour for the Church no longer to speak of Christ, but to become Christ."*

– Paul Evdokimov<sup>1</sup>

After a period of conflict, the main quest in society becomes reconciliation through the healing of painful memories. Stanley Harakas rightly points out that “those who seek to foster reconciliation must understand that they are dealing with deep, ingrained, and

<sup>1</sup> Paul Evdokimov, *The Struggle with God* (Glen Rock: Paulist Press, 1966), 85.

complex memories, identities, hurts, and suffering.”<sup>2</sup> The goal of reconciliation is becoming ever more difficult, especially in ethnic conflicts where each side articulates its victimhood through its education, history, and memories. The former enemy becomes “the other” and is usually perceived as a perpetrator and guilty. On the other hand, an identity based on victimhood secures each side with moral strength and a sense of innocence. For example, people born many years after the Yugoslav Wars (1991–99) are educated through interpreted remembrance of the wars. In that sense, historical conflict becomes a living entity through reminiscences spread by education and mass media. This kind of remembrance becomes a “dangerous memory” that perpetuates and prolongs the atmosphere of ethnic conflicts and craves revenge.

Can theology offer an adequate answer to dangerous memory and help overcome conflicts and bring forgiveness? Furthermore, can forgiveness bring reconciliation and peace for years to come? Is pursuing justice simply another excuse to prolong the atmosphere of conflict? This paper offers some theological insights as guidelines for Christians and their respective communities to pursue. We need to avoid the arrogant idea that religion can mediate violence and bring reconciliation on its own, without other social factors. “Thus, if religion is not the primary or the only cause of violent conflicts in the world, we must recognize that neither peace nor reconciliation can be established simply through the contributions of religion.”<sup>3</sup> Hopefully, theology will prove it has the ability and strength to foster reconciliation and unity in a divided world. The appropriation of good theological work would unlock the potential for churches to be prophetic in their mission, paving the road to reconciliation.

## Eucharist and forgiveness

On the path to reconciliation, St John the Ladder says, “It is good to forgive, but it is better to forget.”<sup>4</sup> These puzzling and wise words invite us to discern whether we need to remember. Is there anything that we should remember in order to achieve reconciliation? In other words, is there anything good to remember that goes beyond forgiveness?

<sup>2</sup> Stanley S. Harakas, “Forgiveness and Reconciliation: An Orthodox Perspective,” in *Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Religion, Public Policy and Conflict Transformation*, ed. Raymond G. Helmick and Rodney L. Peterson (London: Templeton Foundation Press, 2003), 72.

<sup>3</sup> Emmanuel Clapsis, “Ethnicity, Nationalism and Identity,” in *The Orthodox Churches in a Pluralistic World: An Ecumenical Conversation*, ed. Emmanuel Clapsis (Geneva: WCC Publications / Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2004), 169.

<sup>4</sup> Miloš M. Vesin, “Opraštanje i/ili zaboravljanje – hrišćansko lice opraštanja,” in *Opraštanje i/ili zaboravljanje*, ed. Zorica Kuburić, Ana Zotova, and Ljiljana Čumura (Novi Sad: CEIR, 2019), 45.

“Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.” Through these opening words, the liturgy<sup>5</sup> is supposed to open us toward the remembrance of the future.<sup>6</sup> We are invited to remember the eschatological time, that is, the Lord’s kingdom, which is “a progressive movement towards the fullness of the Kingdom of Christ, toward His cosmic and historical triumph.”<sup>7</sup> In the liturgy, we have anamnesis of the whole history of salvation, which is eschatological history. Each time at the eucharist, we hear the words of Christ: “Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins’” (Matt. 26:27-28). In the Jewish and Christian tradition, we notice the tendency in which forgiveness has been framed by reason. If someone wanted to acquire forgiveness, they needed to comply with specific rules: humans must humble themselves, acknowledge their wrong, express readiness to restore the damage, and cease to do evil.

Nonetheless, in eucharistic words and on the cross, Christ did something revolutionary by bringing forgiveness outside our reasoning. As noted above, one of the necessary preconditions for forgiving is acknowledging wrongdoing (e.g., 2 Sam. 12:13ff.; 1 Kings 21:27-29). However, on the cross, Christ gave ultimate and unconditional forgiveness: “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). Christ is giving forgiveness when someone is not even aware of their wrongdoing. In our human experience, before achieving reconciliation, we often ask for conditioned forgiveness. However, Christ forgives unconditionally; and what God forgives, God no longer mentions. “I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins” (Is. 43:25); “I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more” (Heb. 10:17).

Each time we serve the liturgy, we are reminded to remember the future and remember the forgiveness that Christ gives unconditionally. The believing community through the eucharist becomes one body of Christ, that is, the church.

The Christian Church proclaims that the only option and hope of life that the world has is derived from the already actualized and coming reality of God’s Kingdom in which all people, through their identification with Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, partake in God’s trinitarian life and thus live in his love, peace, joy and justice (Ps. 85:7-13; Isa. 32:17-18; 65:17-25; Rev. 21:1-2).<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Liturgy in the Orthodox tradition.

<sup>6</sup> Rastko Jović, “Doing Gender Justice as a Mission Imperative: God’s Justice and Ours,” *International Review of Mission* 104:1 (2015), 27.

<sup>7</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology* (Crestwood: SVS Press, 2003), 181.

<sup>8</sup> Emmanuel Clapsis, “The Eucharist as Missionary Event in a Suffering World,” in *Orthodox Perspectives on Mission*, ed. Petros Vassiliadis (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2013), 60.

The liturgy becomes an event in which forgiveness and reconciliation transcend justice.<sup>9</sup> Through forgiveness, Christ delivers us from the power of sin and guilt. Sharing in one bread and blood creates a new identity for believers.

Social scientific studies have shown us that ritual is essential for developing a specific “religious worldview.” Clifford Geertz, for example, remarks that for the participants in a religious performance, the ritual becomes the realization of a specific religious perspective,<sup>10</sup> a model of what is believed, and a model for believing. Additionally, the ritual affects social order and is a powerful instrument that creates cultural values and acts as an agent of socio-cultural change.<sup>11</sup> It is the mission of theology to “presuppose the adoption of an effective process of ‘consciousness-raising,’ by which the faithful will be helped to recognize the social implications of what they become in the Liturgy, which is not unrelated to what they do outside the church building.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, through the liturgy, believers become one body of Christ empowered to forgive and act on behalf of the resurrected Lord.

## Love and forgiveness

In God’s eyes, love is the power of forgiveness beyond our insistence on justice. “An eye for an eye will leave everyone blind.” These words have been ascribed to Mahatma Gandhi, and they illustrate the necessity of the new law for humankind. The law of love introduced by Christ is necessary if we want to save and reconcile the world. “Man himself prepares his own hell in closing himself against divine love that remains unchangeable.”<sup>13</sup> In the Gospel of Luke, we read about a woman who enters a Pharisee household (Luke 7:36–50). Luke portrays this woman as a sinner who anoints Christ, as kings and prophets were anointed.<sup>14</sup> Her entry into the room where Christ eats violates the male space of the Jewish house, a space that is forbidden to women. The woman breaks the barriers of culture and religious orders in pursuing the judgment of God. God’s judgment is revealed as forgiveness and mercy. “Herefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little” (Luke 7:47). This judgment of God forgives the one who has wondrous love, despite the multitude of sins.

<sup>9</sup> Santrač S. Aleksandar, “Umetnost (po)mirenja: opraštanje ili ispravno sećanje,” in *Opraštanje i/ili zaboravljanje*, ed. Zorica Kuburić, Ana Zotova, and Ljiljana Čumura (Novi Sad: CEIR, 2019), 117.

<sup>10</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 87–125.

<sup>11</sup> Frida Kerner Furman, “Ritual as Social Mirror and Agent of Cultural Change: A Case Study in Synagogue Life,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 20:3 (1981), 228–29. See also, Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 87–125.

<sup>12</sup> Clapsis, “Eucharist as Missionary Event in a Suffering World,” 65.

<sup>13</sup> Evdokimov, *Struggle with God*, 84.

<sup>14</sup> See Ελένη Κασσελοῦρης, *Το κατά Λουκάν ευαγγέλιο: προβλήματα φιλολογικά ιστορικά ερμηνευτικά θεολογικά* (Βόλος: Έκδοση Ιεράς Μητροπόλεως Δημητριάδος και Αλμυρού, 2003).

According to the Law's rubrics that men brought in the name of God, this woman needs to be condemned and punished. Nevertheless, God in whose name these laws came into existence turned them upside down through the law of love.<sup>15</sup> Paradoxically, mercy nullifies the image of God we have been building for centuries, striving for certainty. However, Christ shows us a law of love, which brings us into a relationship with the living God who introduces us to uncertainty.

## Eschatology and reconciliation

The eucharistic anamnesis places the participants in a position behind the end of history.<sup>16</sup> This super historical "remembrance" is the foundation of a holistic view of the world. Furthermore, in eschatological experience, reconciliation becomes not an expression of psychological benevolence but an act of ontological significance.<sup>17</sup> "So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift" (Matt. 5:23-24).

Reconciliation is not conditioned on anything; it is required to presuppose participation in communion with God. In that sense, worship as a communal and God-oriented event reminds us of this ontological truth and can "help mission to recover its true nature as participation in God's mission."<sup>18</sup> The Christian identity that builds on the eschatological anticipation of the coming Lord's kingdom hopes for salvation and the gathering of all people under Christ's loving reign. Suddenly, acceptance of the other and the different does not become an obstacle or a threat. On the contrary, it becomes an authentic expression of Christian existence. Such theology brings and makes possible genuine relationships between different people in history. Unfortunately, the eschatological orientation of Christian identity through the care for humanity is lost every time the church flirts with the ideas of earthly power or dreams of theocracy or some other form of authoritarianism that ultimately abolishes the personality of people.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Rastko Jović, "Strah milosrđa," in *O Božjem milosrđu: Zbornik radova s međunarodnoga znanstvenog simpozija o milosrđu održanog 22. travnja 2016. godine na Katoličkom bogoslovnom fakultetu u Đakovu Sveučilišta Josipa Jurja Strossmayera u Osijeku*, ed. Ivica Raguž and Šimo Šokčević (Đakovo: Katolički bogoslovni fakultet, 2016), 163–77.

<sup>16</sup> Aleksandar Đakovac, *Nebeski Jerusalim i sekularno carstvo: Oglеди o crkvi i sekularizmu* (Beograd: Hrišćanski kulturni centar dr Radovan Bigović, 2018), 133.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>18</sup> Clapsis, "Eucharist as Missionary Event in a Suffering World," 62.

<sup>19</sup> Pantelis Kalaitzidis, *Orthodoxy and Political Theology* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2012), 109.

## The mission of the church: Restoration of humanity

An essential step toward reconciliation is to restore humanity for both victims and perpetrators.<sup>20</sup> In forgiveness lies the power that removes accountable guilt for behaviour and erases the consequences of separation and limitation on the potential of growth.<sup>21</sup> What can theology offer on the dignity of the human person concerning eschatology?

Eschatology is a constant reminder that we cannot deify historical forms as truth, limiting God to those same historical frameworks. The development of eschatology in history is the acceptance and limitations of history itself, that is, in what capacity the historical period is ready to fully actualize God's will. From a Christian perspective, religious communities, in line with the awareness of the world's vulnerability and the inevitability of the historical end of civilization, must show more concern about building a better society. Building a better and prosperous life for humankind is an unfolding of eschatological remembrance, that is, God's promise for us. "I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). The fullness of earthly life can make eternal life a meaningful expectation. The struggle for the values of freedom and respect for others, the pursuit for reconciliation that reduces conflicts in history, are part of the dynamics of the struggle for meaning, which is empowered by eschatological remembrance of the Lord's kingdom. Thus, eschatological identity has the prospect of overcoming historical enmities and offers a vision of reconciled humanity, making eternity meaningful.

"O mortal, stand up on your feet, and I will speak with you" (Ezek. 2:1). These are the words of God to the prophet Ezekiel. Moreover, while the prophet knelt and wanted to talk to God, God raised him in his spirit (Ezek. 2:2). These words illustrate the attitude that God does not want slaves but wants to restore humanity's fullness in each human being. Furthermore, that restoration has been actualized in Christ: perfect God and perfect human. "In Christ all discrimination among Christians on grounds of history, culture, social status, or sex have been removed (Gal. 3:27-28; cf 1 Cor. 12:13; Col. 3:11; Eph. 6:8; Jas. 2:2-7). The gift of life in one body is a call to mutual forgiveness, love and peace (Col. 3:12-15)."<sup>22</sup> The humanity of Christ followed his divinity revealing the true

<sup>20</sup> Donna Hicks, "The Role of Identity Reconstruction in Promoting Reconciliation," in *Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Religion, Public Policy and Conflict Transformation*, ed. Raymond G. Helmick and Rodney L. Peterson (London: Templeton Foundation Press, 2003), 144.

<sup>21</sup> Stanley S. Harakas, "Forgiveness and Reconciliation: An Orthodox Perspective," in *Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Religion, Public Policy and Conflict Transformation*, ed. Raymond G. Helmick and Rodney L. Peterson (London: Templeton Foundation Press, 2003), 72.

<sup>22</sup> Clapsis, "Eucharist as Missionary Event in a Suffering World," 63.

humanity, revealing the real aim of humanity – what a human being (ἄνθρωπος) could be in its fullness. In that sense, humanity has been elevated to its full possibilities through the unity with the divine in one person of Christ. The church as the body of Christ has as its mission to restore humanity and elevate it in one person of Christ. Even more, human beings should be observed not only through the eyes of history, but eschatologically, through the person of Christ: that is, what the person “could be.” Eschatology institutes the church’s mission,

revealing what we have already become in the risen Christ, and what we will fully experience in his Kingdom. Thus Christians, as it becomes evident in the Eucharist, draw the being of their identity not from the values of this world but from the being of God and from that which we will be at the end of this age.<sup>23</sup>

The apostle Paul reminds us, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom. 12:2). His invitation to Christians to reject conformism to this world means being against collectivism because we need to conform only to Christ.<sup>24</sup> In its essence, this conformism to Christ means the birth of a new identity, which brings a critical relationship toward the reality in which we live. Instead of being ultimately dependent on its historical or collective identity, baptized Christians acquire a relational and respectful relationship with the broader community. Even more, faith becomes a personal effort and not something that is given or imposed by family or our collective.<sup>25</sup> Without this personal response to the faith, we are always in danger of being instrumentalized.

Moreover, the call for each and every Christian is to step into the world of responsible subjects. The ultimate dependence on family develops a person who becomes more conformist to family values.<sup>26</sup> Collectivism of this type does not allow any change in a person’s life, which disables individual growth.<sup>27</sup> To be authentic, Christianity needs to emancipate each and every person, bringing dignity and liberation from existential dependence on various collectivistic selves. Healing and renewing humanity represents an essential step toward reconciliation, which can and should occur within the church. In theological terminology, this possibility has been named “deification.” *Deification* has

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>24</sup> Kathy Ehrensperger, “Be Imitators of Me as I Am of Christ: A Hidden Discourse of Power and Domination in Paul?” *Lexington Theological Quarterly* 38:4 (2003), 256.

<sup>25</sup> Rastko Jović, *Dinamika hrišćanskeg identiteta* (Beograd: PBF/ITI, 2018), 66.

<sup>26</sup> Θάνος Λιποβάτς, *Φαντασμάτι και Αληθής Ελευθερία* (Αθήνα: Πλέθρον, 2008), 55.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 56.

been perceived as salvation against corruption and death, which has been caused by sin. In the words of Saint Athanasius, “God became man so that man might become a god.”<sup>28</sup> In these words lies the ultimate basis of human renewal and restoration, where *deification* is the rising of humanity into unity with God accomplished through the work of the Holy Spirit. Consequently, denial of the Holy Spirit rejects God’s living presence in history and strips human beings of the dignity and power of love – that is, forgiveness.

## The mission of God’s living presence

Therefore I tell you, people will be forgiven for every sin and blasphemy, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come. (Matt. 12:31-32)

It sounds astonishing that loving God unconditionally forgives all sins except this one. The sin against the Holy Spirit will not be pardoned. We need to discover the meaning of these words in the context of the church’s mission. God who forgives everything, who suffers for all people, who voluntarily humiliates himself, who gives eternal life to people, and who is love suddenly punishes people for blasphemy. Why is this so? How is it possible that a loving God does not forgive blasphemy against the Spirit but forgives the word against the Son? We cannot look at these words in a simplified way, but must answer the theological question “What is the role of the Holy Spirit?”

The Holy Spirit “prepares, determines, constitutes and communicates”<sup>29</sup> the mystery of Christ. The Holy Spirit has a saving and revealing role as the personal manifestation of the Son within the life of the believing community.<sup>30</sup> The gifts and fruits of the Spirit are given for the building up of the body of Christ, for the unification of many into one body (2 Cor. 12). The Holy Spirit, therefore, makes God dynamically present in history. The denial of God’s presence cannot be forgiven because it denies both the active and personally present God. Then, when we deny the Holy Spirit, when we blaspheme against him, we deny the living presence of God, confining the Almighty in the sacred past (scriptures, rites, rituals).

“The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes” (John 3:8). The Spirit blows where it wishes, and

<sup>28</sup> See S. Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* or *On the Incarnation* 54:3, PG 25:192B.

<sup>29</sup> John Breck, “The Lord is the Spirit : A Christological Pneumatology,” in *Come, Holy Spirit, Renew the Whole Creation*, ed. Gennadios Limouris (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1990), 59.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.



it is not limited by history or past. On the contrary, the Holy Spirit turns every history into the space of the living presence of Christ. In other words, the Spirit contextualizes Jesus Christ in time, making time and space a way of communication and relationship with the living God. It will be forgiven if someone does not accept everything related to the historical Jesus.<sup>31</sup> The Holy Spirit is always together with Christ, freely helping him to not be subject to nature and instincts. The Holy Spirit is present in every moment of Christ's ministry (at his birth, in the desert, at his baptism, at his resurrection). Therefore, whatever has been done through the Holy Spirit is freed from restrictions of natural reality. Blasphemy and denial of the Holy Spirit imply a denial of human "deification," that is, a denial of the possibility of participating in the life of God. Human dignity (deification), the most precious understanding, is endangered if we deny the Holy Spirit and living presence (mission) of God. The salvific work of the Holy Spirit makes inseparable categories of human restoration and mission in the suffering world. In other words, the living presence of Christ in Spirit is an obligation upon the Christian community to actualize Christ's mission today, spreading and sharing unconditional forgiveness as a path to reconciliation. Thus, by the Holy Spirit's work, reconciliation becomes a possibility through the restored humanity and living presence of Christ and his imperative of unconditional forgiveness. Christian self-understanding reveals that the church's historical mission needs to be the living presence of the risen Christ, that is, eschatologically conditioned.

The real challenge that we face as churches is not whether we will work for peace, justice and tolerance in the present world, but rather how the voice of God for peace, reconciliation, justice can become stronger, louder and translatable in our actions as we desire to participate in God's continuous work for the salvation of the world.<sup>32</sup>

The church's mission should be the constant identity development of believers; the church's imperative is to make an effort to be a community composed of responsible persons who strive to "iconize" the Lord's kingdom in history. Through its mission, the church needs to make people "consciously aware of God's salvific presence and action in the world, and invites them to partake in a new life of communion with the Trinity that decisively shapes their identity as this develops through and in relation to God and other people."<sup>33</sup> The clear awareness that the kingdom cannot be realized on earth as a

<sup>31</sup> Chrysostom says that not everyone could know Jesus limited in the body (historical). "They could not know the Son, but they received the experience by the Spirit." You may not know the Son (history), but you may not be ignorant of the Spirit (present): PG57, 449.

<sup>32</sup> Clapsis, "Ethnicity, Nationalism and Identity," 170.

<sup>33</sup> Clapsis, "Eucharist as Missionary Event in a Suffering World," 63.

secular creation<sup>34</sup> does not imply the relativization of our efforts to go in that direction today.

## Conclusion

Metropolitan Zizioulas said, “Academic theology may concern itself with doctrine, but it is the communion of the Church which makes theology into truth.”<sup>35</sup> The incarnation of Christ enabled the unification of every human being with God; human nature was brought in and anchored in the Holy Trinity. Liturgical anamnesis restores and shapes our personality in the image of the resurrected Lord. Christ’s love is a power that enables the faithful to forgive unconditionally in seeking reconciliation as an ontological prerequisite for communion with God.

The distinct but inseparable bond between liturgy and mission toward reconciliation raises awareness that what Christians do in the church is related to their activism in public space. The community of the faithful constitutes Christ’s resurrected body and becomes identified with him through the Holy Spirit. In doing the will of God, believers actualize the good news of salvation, forgiveness, and peace to all people. This new Christian identity is an unceasing motion that establishes the dignity and liberation of each human being. In this lifelong process, the church plays the most prominent role. In the eucharist, believers remember that the Lord’s kingdom has come, and in Christ, they have gotten a new identity, which represents the abundance of life. This particular *remembrance* allows the faithful to acquire a new perception of forgiveness and reconciliation, determining their mission in a suffering world.

<sup>34</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *The Journals of Father Alexander Schmemmann 1973–1983* (Crestwood: St Vladimir’s Press, 2002), 59.

<sup>35</sup> John D. Zizioulas, *Being As Communion* (Crestwood: St Vladimir’s Press, 2002), 118.