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How African Reconciliatory Theology can Enrich the Sacrament of Penance

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Looking at the African situation as well as humanity in general, there seems to be a secularist revolution that is seeping into postmodern society with the result that Christianity has been marginalised and its practice weakened. The celebration of the sacraments, especially penance, has been affected. For example, the need for repentance so as to attain God's forgiveness has been replaced with a self-serving do-it-yourself morality. However, using its key characteristics of truth-telling, reconciliation, forgiveness and reparation, African theology of *ubuntu* can enrich the understanding and appreciation of sacramental penance.¹

AN AFRICAN CONTRIBUTION

No doubt, African reconciliatory paradigm encourages building comradeship after a period of separation. It must be noted that acceptance and incorporation are necessary for reconciliation between formerly alienated people. This is central not only on a personal, physical, psychological level, but also on a social, political and even environmental level. African traditional spirituality regards reconciliation as being highly significant for the entire universe and provides conditions that facilitate a process of social reconciliation. Theo Sundermeier suggests that traditional African religion is the clearest example of what may be called a "religion of reconciliation." He bases this assessment on the understanding that:

1 Ubuntu is a Zulu word meaning human being. It is used as a concept that affirms the organic wholeness of humanity, i.e., a wholeness realised in and through other people. This is a practice well-known in Africa, of trying to reconcile people who have done wrong with the rest of the community. See Michael Battle, *Reconciliation: Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu* (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 1997), 39.

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‘Religions of reconciliation are oriented toward the community; their prime focus is on nurturing relationships and restoring breaches in society. They are committed to the world in which they live, and do not seek to escape from it. Rather, their ethos is one of participation and involvement’.²

Generally, the desire and commitment towards reconciliation and elimination of unpleasant situations is dominant in the African community. For example, among the Bantu peoples³, social order and peace are essential and sacred. This order is conceived primarily in terms of kinship relationship. And since everybody is related to everybody else, a person is not an individual but a corporate entity. The occurrence of sin or manifestation of evil produces tension and simultaneously deepens the sense of damage in the community. So, reparation and reconciliation are handled through offering sacrifices and by ritual purifications. A person conscious of his/her sin and under fear of punishment ritually transfers the guilt to an animal which is sacrificed (killed). By so doing, the sinner asks the Supreme Being or the spirits to accept that offering as a substitute in his/her place. More often than not these rites include a communal meal at which all present partake. Through these rituals, Africans feel there is something outside themselves that is reborn, forces are reanimated, and life reawakens. The renewal is no way imaginary, and the individuals themselves benefit from it, since the particle of social being that each individual bears within him/herself necessarily participates in this collective celebration.⁴ This is because African religiosity and spirituality is about the totality of life and how to enhance it. It seeks to address elements of social disruption and hostility. Thus, the focus is always on keeping reconciliation practices down to earth and pragmatic in order to avoid settling for pretence with regard to societal harmony.

Based on its approach, African reconciliatory paradigm is a philosophy that is inclined towards action and the practical affairs of life. It is reconciliatory and accommodating, rather than exclusive and alienating. It does not create theories about things that are not related or significant to people’s lives. In other words, it supports a holistic and well-balanced view of reality, promotes a perception of inter-dependence and mutuality of all the forces of the universe.

2 Theo Sundermeier, “Erlösung oder Versöhnung? – Religionsgeschichtliche AnstoBe,” *Evangelische Theologie* 53 (1993), 124ff.

3 Bantu is the largest the African ethnic group and it is used as a general label for the 300–600 tribes who speak Bantu languages.

4 Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen Fields (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 353.

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This means that it provides a practical approach to social problems. Therefore, such a process is certainly relevant in the quest for social reconciliation.

COMMUNITY EMPHASIS

Basically, African reconciliatory paradigm is community oriented and strives for the well-being of everyone. Its aim is to reveal and foster human aspects that inherently link human beings to one another and the universe. It attempts to lead people towards an understanding and appreciation of their traditional heritage, which in itself can create a reconciliatory atmosphere. Given its pluralistic concept, it is a philosophy that essentially embraces diversity. It also attempts to harmonise and accommodate what seems to be different instead of eliminating or belittling it. Claudia Nolte-Schamm argues that such an inclusivism and openness must be an advantage to any reconciliation process.⁵ She goes on to say: ‘African Philosophy dictates that the “other” – be it an “other” ethnic group, an “other” worldview or religious system, an “other” way of communicating or whatever – is incorporated rather than expelled’.⁶

Desmond Tutu claims that the African heritage, traditions, culture, customs and beliefs as reflected in the Bantu ethos can help Africans realise the reality and necessity of reconciliation for all of humanity.⁷ The concept of *ubuntu* can make this a significant contribution simply because its tradition focusses on social relationships, promoting the values of interdependence and togetherness as well as the healing of broken relationships. Nolte-Schamm comments:

‘This ‘human-centred approach to life’ may help to overcome feelings of disappointment and frustration about people; it may counteract feelings of resentment, antipathy or anger; but also feelings of inadequacy, guilt and shame. It may even foster a

5 Claudia M. Nolte-Schamm, “A Comparison Between Christian and African Paradigms of Reconciliation and How They Could Dialogue for the Benefit of South African Society,” (Doctorate Thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 2006), 99.

6 Ibid.

7 See Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, 127. Also see. Michael Battle, *Reconciliation: Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu*, 35, 57, 64. Many African theologians agree: “We are convinced that the Bantu principle of vital participation can become the basis of a specifically African theological structure of reconciliation.... Communion as participation in the same life and the same means of life will be, we believe, the centre of this ecclesiological theology.” See Vincent Mulago, “Vital Participation,” in *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, ed. Kwesi A. Dickson and Paul Ellingworth (London: Lutterworth Press, 1969), 157.

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willingness to forgive and to give someone a ‘second chance.’ Essentially, it has the potential to restore lost hope in humanity and [the latter’s] ability to do and be good.’⁸

This optimistic worldview is one of the treasures which Africans use as an appropriate way of restoring confidence in our human ability to confront and overcome social problems.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SACRAMENT

In the African reconciliatory paradigm hurtful sentiments are settled between persons or parties who have offended each other – as is often the case in everyday life – by rituals like hand shaking, patting the back, embracing each other and then having a reunion meal or drink. I propose that adopting some of these practical sociological embodiments of contrition, reconciliation and forgiveness could enrich the celebration of *sacramental penance*. As a way of showing our turning away from sin and reconciling with God and the Church, penitents may shake hands with the confessor soon after confession and perhaps also embrace or shake hands with one another particularly after the Lord’s prayer during the penitential service. And where possible after the penitential service the Christian community may share together refreshments as a sign of thanksgiving for God’s love and mercy. This tangible embodiment of reconciliation and forgiveness between God and humanity serves not only to express the gesture of humility and forgiveness in a human way, but also has the purpose of promoting that inner attitude of conversion of life and purification of heart. And even from the purely human point of view, independently of the Church’s teaching on sacramental activity, such an expression of a human attitude rooted in our bodily nature not only expresses inner attitude, but reciprocally it strengthens and deepens it. This is the remarkable thing in human beings that the body shapes the soul and the soul shapes the body.

African reconciliatory paradigm is a worldview which does not exist in an individual sense but always within the context of the community. There is agreement among researchers that *ubuntu* theology perceives reconciliation as a reunion of the community. If humans mistreat one another, it displeases God. When they reconcile, they are by the same token also reconciled with God. Tutu ultimately sees *ubuntu* theology as promoting communal reconciliation between God and neighbour.⁹ Besides emphasizing

8 Claudia Nolte-Schamm, “African Anthropology as a Resource for Reconciliation: Ubuntu/Botho as a Reconciliatory Paradigm in South Africa,” *Scriptura* 93 (2006): 379-80.

9 Michael Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu*, 9.

human beings' likeness to God, the fullness of humanity only becomes manifest in community. He claims that God has made us so that we will need each other. We are made for a delicate network of interdependence.¹⁰ *Ubuntu* theology can restore humanity and dignity to both perpetrators and victims of violence and create a sense of mutuality among humans who are alienated from one another.¹¹ This theological vision is able to bridge the terrible rifts created by the injustices and inhumanities of the past. It has the capacity, Tutu stresses, to 'overthrow apartheid' through humanising the oppressor and establishing a sense of South Africans belonging to one another.¹² I believe that this paradigm of reconciliation based on appreciating the sense of *community* might enrich the Catholic spirituality of reconciliation not only for Africans but for all humanity.

The African paradigm of peace-building and communal reconciliation helps human beings realise that they share a common history and future. They are dependent on each other for their collective well-being. So, it is possible that the sacrament of penance can be more appreciated and enthusiastically embraced if celebrated communally. However, the communal dimension of reconciliation has not been fully adopted by the Africans themselves, and less so by other peoples. Where it has been effectively applied, it has transformed antagonistic people, families, clans, communities and tribes into healed, reconciled and vibrant communities.¹³ It has encouraged its enthusiasts to hope for the best and to try to bring out the best in others. This is because it does not give up on people, and it does not despair at their failures and inadequacies. Its *five* key pillars are dialogue, truth-telling, reconciliation, forgiveness and reparation. It is upon these vibrant characteristics that I consider the African theology and reconciliatory paradigm a vital resource for revitalising sacramental confession in Africa and elsewhere.

There is actually a broad consensus among theologians that traditional Western Christianity may benefit from the African focus on the community.¹⁴ Setiloane states that Christianity could be enriched immensely if it were to learn from African tradition about community, that is, of the very sense of being.¹⁵ I believe that the African emphasis on community is quite refreshing and exciting especially if the communal dimension does not prevent the

10 Ibid., 35.

11 Ibid., 5.

12 Ibid., 45.

13 Ibid.

14 See M. L. Daneel, *Fambidzano: Ecumenical Movement of Zimbabwean Independent Churches* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1989), 272; D Crafford, "The Church in Africa and the Struggle for an African Identity," *Skrif en Kerk* 14 (1993): 163-75.

15 Gabriel M. Setiloane, *African Theology* (Cape Town: Lux Verbi, 2000), 57.

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individual from taking personal responsibility and accountability. Just as Western individualistic tendency can be *both* destructive and creative, the all-embracing emphasis of the communal reconciliatory approach can also become harmful if Christians ignore their personal responsibility of making an effort to celebrate the sacrament of penance. Hence, the rite for reconciliation of several penitents with *individual* confession and absolution seems to be the most appropriate in revitalising the sacrament of penance. This is because it fosters the spirit of penance within the Christian community whereby the faithful can have the possibility of individual confession and yet communal penitential celebrations help to sensitise about the social impact of sin and reconciliation. Last but not least, the faithful especially children are helped to gradually form their conscience about sin in human life as well as enhancing that freedom of making a personal choice to attain God's grace through the sacrament of penance.

As well as reconciliation with God, the sacrament of penance is vital in making friends again of people who have been estranged. It helps make peace between people who have perhaps quarrelled, have had a disagreement or fallen out with one another and no longer walk together or talk together. Quarrels in the same family, between brothers or sisters, between parents and children can be saddest of all and also the bitterest and the hardest to make up. If you have ever tried to reconcile people who have fallen out, you know what a terrible struggle it often takes for people to shake hands and make up again. So, the grace of God through the sacrament of penance enables us to renew our friendships with God and one another. God is kind, our truest Friend and ever-loving Father. He never turns away from us, but it is we who turn away from Him. God is always wanting to make it up again between us and Him. But it takes two to make a friendship. Actually, you cannot force another to be your friend or reconcile with you. Even God cannot force us to be friends with Him. What is key is the slightest sign of our sorrow, the least indication that we are ready to let go of our past mistakes or sinfulness. Like the story of the prodigal son, which is perfectly fulfilled in the sacrament of penance, the great sacrament of penance reconciles us with God our Father and gives us joy that our human friendships are restored.

CONCLUSION

Therefore, the African notion of *ubuntu* of trying to reconcile people who have done wrong with the rest of the community is a profound practice that can *revitalise* the understanding and celebration of sacramental penance for all Christians. Karl Rahner, an influential

theologian before and after the Second Vatican Council of 1962, articulates that everyone has an opportunity for salvation and that we should not give up on our neighbour, everyone can be saved. He stresses that it is important to appreciate the Christian belief that wrongdoing is not only an offense against God, but also against the Church or community.¹⁶ So, after acknowledging your mistake and the need to say sorry, the community then helps you, welcomes you back and supports you through the journey of reconciliation and attaining new life. This way of thinking is certainly very helpful when teaching about the sacrament of reconciliation, placing great emphasis on the role of the whole community along with the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ.

16 Karl Rahner, "Forgotten Truths Concerning Penance," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 2 (London: Longman & Todd, 1963), 136. See also Rahner, "Penance as an additional Act of Reconciliation with the Church," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 10 (London: Longman & Todd, 1972), 128-130.

The Need for Holistic Education. I do not see the future of education as being robot-based. Education in the context of the Gospel of Jesus favours holistic education and not merely skills-based training programmes. All school must attempt to create a learning environment where children are accepted as they are, and are encouraged to attain their full and unique potential as human beings, made in the image and likeness of God. Holistic education engages all aspects of the student's life. It is not focused merely on learning about ideas, but also encourages education in the arts, culture, science, languages, sport, ecology and religion. Schools that opt for holistic learning strive to encourage pupils to be unselfish and to use their gifts, not just to benefit themselves, but for the common good of other humans and the planet.

– SEÁN McDONAGH, *Robots, Ethics and the Future of Jobs* (Dublin: Messenger Publications) p.73.