

NAGYPÁL Szabolcs

The Ministry of Reconciliation through Kenosis

“Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies,
it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

(John 12, 24)

God entrusted us with the duty and responsibility for bringing God's peace to all people on Earth. Reconciliation inside and outside is the main aim of any dialogue, be it ecumenical or interreligious, which are the great and adventurous endeavours of present-day Christianity. In dialogue the participants aim for a conversion of thinking and for building a reconciled community. These are the hoped for effects of dialogue for the person and for humanity. In our essay we present a radical methodological proposal to move forward in our ministry of dialogical reconciliation.

COEXISTENCE, CONVIVENCE AND COOPERATION

There are two types of dialogue: the (indirect) dialogue of love and the (direct) dialogue of truth. First, let us have a look at the dialogue of *love*, which embraces the socio-political dialogue of action and the experiential dialogue of life and participation.

A group of people – not yet a community – in building up their belonging and in aiming for common identity in dialogue of love, can make three steps in the way of dialogue of life, action and participation. These steps are coexistence, convivence and cooperation. On the level of *coexistence*, the group aims for tolerance, understanding, respect and appreciation through the elimination of mutual prejudice, intolerance and misunderstandings, improper and inadequate words, judgements and actions.

The territory of *convivence* offers serious reflection, reception and advancement through the open exchange of experience and witness of faith, love and hope; using honest cross-questioning and respectful listening. Thirdly, *cooperation* contributes to various solutions of conflicts through the promotion of consciousness and perfection; through the service of our neighbour in common human tasks, while strengthening the good and fighting against sin.

As soon as a group made a commitment towards these steps, and continued to put them into practice, a community is born. The fruits of this endeavour are manifold, and concern partly the inner cohesion of the community and partly the outer common effects. As for the communitarian consequence, a certain element of ‘already and not yet’ is present in all possible opportunities for dialogue.

In the process of identity-building, a new self-understanding is created, a fusion of transcendental horizons, converging to a new common horizon. A unity of reconciled differences appears which is endured and productively shaped. The community starts to maintain a consensus of conscience, providing each other with friendship, sisterhood and brotherhood.

DISCOURSE ON TRUTH

Parallel with the dialogue of love, the direct dialogue of *truth* embraces the intellectual dialogue of *discourse* and spiritual dialogue. Compared with non-religious types of

dialogue, the interreligious and ecumenical dialogue brings about new dimensions in the dialogical game seeking the truth. We mention interreligious dialogue first, because the cement and glue already linking the participants is strong in one hand, but general enough on the other.

The basis of interreligious dialogue, apart from our common humanity, is the nature of the people seeking and serving the transcendental truth. Therefore, the community we hope as a fruit of interreligious dialogue is the theocentric community of people longing for God and the transcendental. The goal of interreligious dialogue is the deepening of our commonalities and spiritual values, the further discovery of experiences and dimensions of the divine mystery, through mutual enrichment and exchange of charisma.

When focusing on the intra-Christian application of the general and the religious theory of dialogue, both the hope and the effectiveness of our method increase. Ecumenical dialogue brings about more hope for a united community than non-religious or interreligious dialogues. Its prayed-for effects are growth in faith and renewal, and the regaining of Christian credibility when encountering the world, through the visible unity of the Church of Jesus Christ.

The conversion of the various denominations and confessions, the ecclesial transformation means to reopen our traditions from the perspective of the primacy of gospel-praxis. The official motto of the ecumenical movement, John 17, 21 points to the main aim of our unity: “that the world may believe”. It is not only our mission which is difficult to credit because of our division, but Christian contribution to human dialogue is also weakened by this.

UNITY AND CREDIBILITY

While we are in the demanding but worthwhile process of building up a wider human community or religious (*inter*)*communion*, there are three Biblical passages to lead us in our present twofold dialogical task, reconciliation. 1 Corinthians 5, 18 enlists different *fruits* when speaking about the diversified gifts of God: “All this is from God, Who through Christ reconciled us to Godself, and gave us the *ministry of reconciliation*.” It is God Who is the source of reconciliation, and from God’s reconciling act we are able to bring reconciliation to the world.

Matthew 5, 23-24 strongly questions our *credibility* as Christians without making peace: “If you are about to offer your gift to God at the altar, and there you remember that your sister or brother has something against you, leave your gift there, in front of the altar, and go at once to *make peace* with your sister or brother; then come back and offer your gift to God.”

In Colossians 3, 13-14, forgiveness and love are bound together with *unity*: “*Forgive* one another, whenever any of you has a complaint against someone else; you must forgive each other, in the same way that the Lord has forgiven you; and to all these, add *love*, which binds all things together in *perfect unity*.”



Without *forgiveness*, Christianity loses its identity. Dialogue is an *intermediate stage* between separation and unity. It is of such an importance that dialogue can be defined as one of the marks of the Church, who tries to create a *climate of reconciliation*.

SPIRITUALITY OF DIALOGUE

After the dialogue of intellectual truth, we have to concentrate on the *spiritual* dialogue of truth. The change it entails is conversion, *metanoia*, the change of our heart. In this respect, the theological dimension of the climate of reconciliation could be enriched by the radical concept of *kenosis*, the way of *creative transformation*.

As early as in 1964, a document of the ecumenical movement (*Christian Encounter with People of Other Beliefs*) spoke about the abandoning of much that is familiar, about a painful and dangerous *self-emptying*. In a kenotic way, God has *relativized* Godself in history.

The doctrine of kenosis can be applied both to God and to Christ, thus having a Theocentric and a Christocentric emphasis. Through such self-emptying at each step, room is made for the other. This kind of kenosis is the final proof of our definitive *God-centeredness*, which could be seen even in *self-emptying* at the doctrinal level, in the name of *love*.

In the parallel of dialectic, question and answer, or thesis and antithesis, leads to a deeper knowledge and truth, to *synthesis*. There the negation of negation provides us with an excellent opportunity for a *double self-denial* or *double kenosis*.

Epoché (or *reduction*) is a similar concept used in theological thinking. It means to *suspend* our judgement and place in *brackets* our prejudices and assumptions to create a situation of *silence* within ourselves in pure transparency and receptivity. This requires a *severe ascese*. We should regulate, however, this kind of self-emptying, because if we are empty, we do not have anything to share. That is why *epoché* should endue the *double nature* of Biblical kenosis in order to be full and empty at the same time, fully *divine* and fully *human*.

EMPTYING-OUT

Emptying-out or *kenosis* in its verbal form appears only in five places of the *New Testament*. In Romans 4, 14 it means 'null'; while in 1 Corinthians 9, 15 it means 'to deprive'. In the other three places, its meaning is connected to 'emptiness'. 2 Corinthians 9, 5 speaks about the fear that the boasting of Paul with the congregation might prove to have been *empty*.

1 Corinthians 1, 17 tells us about the fact that if Paul proclaimed the Gospel with eloquent wisdom, the cross of Christ might be *emptied* of its power. The Biblical and theological basis, which we are looking for now as a theoretical background for dialogue, as a true paradigm-shifter, can be found in the *kenotic hymn* of Philippians 2, 5-11.

"Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, Who, though He was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but *emptied Himself*, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted Him and gave Him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in Heaven and on Earth and under the Earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

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On this text, we can ground the *kenotic theology*, and this theology we intend to use to understand the true challenge of dialogical behaviour. When God decided to engage in dialogue with the world, God decided to do it through a special form of communication: to be in *communion* with the whole creation. God chose to be *fully human*.

But this was just one side of the coin: God in this process, which we call *incarnation* (becoming flesh), kept God's nature (which is probably identical with *identity* in the human realm in our day's language), while at the same time embracing human's nature. The process happened without *confusion, change, division* or *separation* (as the Council of *Chalcedon* formulated it in 451). As Basil HUME put it, God, in a wonderful *delicacy of touch*, has translated Godself into human terms.

DEATH AND RESURRECTION

Christ Jesus refused to cling to a definition of Who He was and what rights He was entitled to, in order to go out towards the human and sinful *other*, to take the form of the *servant*, and become *vulnerable unto death*. Our *acceptance of death* is connected with the one and only hope for life. By her own dying, the Church will reveal the Crucified to the world, says Bruce D. MARSHALL.

We can compare the *kenotic hymn* with other Biblical texts such as John 12, 24 (the *grain* of wheat must fall into the ground and *die* if it is to produce any fruit); Matthew 6, 2–6 (not to parade our relationship to the Lord outwardly but to await the reward of the Father Who sees in *secret*); Matthew 16, 26 (to *lose our life* in order to find it); and Matthew 23, 12 (to humble ourselves in order to be exalted).

We are not talking about the dying for the other as the final good. This is a death in the hope of a *resurrection*. In this sense, the possibility of an *eschatological banquet* is the image of the good. "Christ's open-handed gesture of *kenosis* aims and intends to undo Adam's tight-fisted gesture of grasping for *equality* with God" (Jean-Marc LAPORTE SI).

We have to expect the different Christian denominations to act and behave in an attitude of *self-denial, self-transcendence* and *spiritual poverty* when being active in a dialogue. An all-embracing and overwhelming *ecumenical spirituality* consists of an awareness of the guilt and failure of Christians, readiness for *kenosis* and *metanoia*, as well as prayer of penitence, sacrifice and supplication. The way God chose to engage in dialogue with humankind was *kenosis*, and we are challenged to follow Christ's footsteps.

Kenosis means *powerlessness*, continual *purification* from self-centeredness,

growing in *openness*. Prayer and sacrifice nourish *kenotic spirituality*. *Prayer* links one with the goodness and power of God, while *sacrifice* strengthens prayer and promotes communion. In the process of *kenosis*, self-sacrifice unites prayer and sacrifice, when one becomes *prayer-for-others*.

For a Magyar Jesuit, ÖRSY László, ecumenical dialogue is the effort to promote and sustain the *healing process* within the one body. The dialogue of discourse must go hand in hand with spiritual dialogue. The *kenosis* of Christ is the *eternal model* for dialogue in all the communities, because it became the entry point into the *paschal mystery*. *Death* is the door to *resurrection*, as well as *kenosis* is the door to *genuine unity and reconciliation*.

Suggested Reading

- ARINZE Francis: *Letter to Presidents of Bishop's Conferences on the Spirituality of Dialogue*. Pro Dialogo 1999/2.
- Asian Bishop's Institute for Interreligious Affairs, *Interreligious Dialogue. Fresh Horizons for Communion and Cooperation Today* (Hua Hin, 1991). Bulletin (Pro Dialogo) 1991/1.
- ISAKA Yoshiaki, *Dialogue, Dialect, Dialectic, and Diakonia*. Bulletin (Pro Dialogo) 1992/2.
- LAPORTE Jean-Marc SI, *Kenosis and Koinonia: The Path Ahead for Anglican-Roman Catholic Dialogue*. One in Christ 1985/2.
- MARSHALL Bruce D., *Who Really Cares About Christian Unity?* First Things 2001/1. www.firstthings.com/ftissues/f0101/articles/marshall.html
- MILBANK John, *The Ethics of Self-Sacrifice*. First Things 1999/5. www.firstthings.com/ftissues/f9905/articles/milbank.html
- ÖRSY László SI (Ladislaus Orsy), "Kenosis": *The Door to Christian Unity*. Origins 1995/5.
- WILLEBRANDS Johannes, *The Ecumenical Dialogue and its Reception*. One in Christ 1985/5.

NAGYPÁL Szabolcs (1974) is a graduate in law, literature and ecumenical theology. He is Roman Catholic, a theologian in the Békés Gellért Ecumenical Institute (BGÖI) in Pannonthalma, Hungary. He is a former chairperson of KÖD (Magyar SCM), and is currently a member of WSCF European Regional Committee (ERC) and global Executive Committee (ExCo). He is editor-in-chief of Student World and Mozaik.

