

**TANGAZA COLLEGE**  
**CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF EASTERN AFRICA**

**UNVEILING THE THEOLOGICAL MEANING OF  
RECONCILIATION AMONG THE THARAKA COMMUNITY**

By  
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A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the BA degree in  
Religious Studies

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## **DEDICATION**

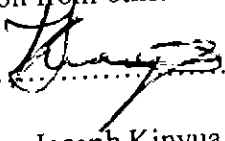
This work is dedicated to the people working in the pastoral field in Tharaka community.

### DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, declare that this is my original work and has not been submitted to any institution for academic credit.

Information from other sources and people consulted have been acknowledged.

Signed: .....




Joseph Kinyua.

14/2/2002

Date

This work has been submitted for examination with the tutors' approval.

.....  


Fr. George Kocholickal

14-02-2002

Date

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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## INTRODUCTION

The Church has opened the doors and windows to other religious and cultures wanting to enter into a true dialogue with them. It is in this respect that the following pages attempt a possible study of the Tharaka views of Reconciliation and the Catholic rite of Reconciliation. This is just the beginning of a long process of research and discernment for myself first of all, and may be for other people in the pastoral field as well.

In this research I want to study how the Tharaka people understands reconciliation and what meaning it has in the Church. I myself coming from the Tharaka community want the Gospel to take deep root in this culture. The Sacrament itself is under threat and few people go for Reconciliation these days. I want to see people going for the Sacrament of Reconciliation and accepting it in their own life and culture. Therefore, it is an attempt to see elements in Tharaka which could be used in the liturgy and inculturation. Many people lack both proper study and knowledge of the sacrament and they are carried and absorbed by non-Catholic ideas, for instance the teaching that one can confess directly to God.

I hope that this research will encourage and prompt the peoples to value and seek reconciliation in their lives to be in good relationship with others and God.

The sources used in this paper is from materials got through observation and interviews carried out, and also by listening and attending talks on reconciliation. There has been informal dialogues and group discussions. I have also read books

on reconciliation about the Church. After having done that I have used a critical-comparative method in this paper.

The first chapter looks at reconciliation in Tharaka and how it was understood, received and celebrated. The second chapter studies the Sacrament of Reconciliation in the Church, how the Church understands reconciliation and how important the sacrament is to the people. The third chapter puts together the first and the second chapters by looking at reconciliation as the source of healing to both traditional community and the Church. Here the elements of inculturation are discussed, which bring together ideas and values in the first two chapters. Lastly, there is a personal reflection in which I put down my own opinion and understanding on reconciliation.

In all this, it has not been easy to come up with materials ready without problems. I have encountered problems of delay, gathering and lack of response from some people interviewed. With all these problems and others, I have not fully exhausted the material and much remains still to be researched by others and me too to contribute.

## CHAPTER I

### RECONCILIATION AMONG THE THARAKA PEOPLE

#### 1. WHO ARE THE THARAKA PEOPLE?

The Tharaka people are Bantu people living in the Eastern province of Kenya. They are found in the lower part of Meru, occupying the Eastern and South Eastern part of Meru, on the lower Eastern part of Mt. Kenya.

Tharaka is a tribe by itself, although it has been grouped among the seven major sub-tribes of the Meru Community. These sub-tribes are related, but there are differences in their languages.

The Tharaka occupy the low country near the Tana River valley, bordering with the Kamba community. It is one of the smallest sub-tribes within the Meru community. It occupies a semi-arid area, which receives low rainfall. It is hilly and stony. The climate is hot and warm all through the year.

The Tharaka people have their own cultural elements, which distinguish them from other tribes. They are still holding many traditional and cultural elements even though some have changed in form and methodology. Among these is the rite of reconciliation and how it takes place. In this chapter we are going to see how reconciliation is achieved among the Tharaka, but, before that, it is better to give a brief definition of the term reconciliation in the way the Tharaka people understand it.

## **2. DEFINITION AND UNDERSTANDING OF RECONCILIATION IN THARAKA**

Reconciliation is a way in which people who have wronged each other come back to peace and understanding. It is a process by the individual or community, a rite or a celebration that restores back the broken relationship between two people, families or between people and God. The Tharaka people live in a community and it is something strange for an individual to be alone. Among people in a family, clan or community there is a strong bond of relationship. This relationship brings people together to protect each other, to care, to love and they feel that they belong to one family. However, it is normal that sometimes people break this relationship either by words [quarrels or insults], failure to observe set norms or divine laws. Sometimes people betray their friends, and this causes anger, full of vengeance, hard feelings and anxiety of every kind in the family. When such things happen, the friendly and desired relationship is destroyed. This implies that there is evil, and evil is something disliked since it brings death, hatred, and all kinds of evil making human life unsettled and unworthy of living. In such a situation, therefore, the relationship or tie between people must be restored, and this requires reconciliation.

Reconciliation involves dialogue, acts and signs to show that there is forgiveness and acceptance. Thus reconciliation is an act of condemning the evil, forgiving and resolving to be good, do good and follow the norms of the society. Reconciliation is forgiving and coming to re-establish the broken relationships, friendships and become one again in peace. So, reconciliation as a phenomenon is not new to the Tharaka people. Even before Christianity introduced the concept of reconciliation, the term already existed in Tharaka, and we shall see in the following

sub topics ways within the same or different families that were used to heal broken relationships.

### **3. FOUNDATION OF SACRIFICES OF RECONCILIATION IN THARAKA**

Evil in every society causes certain psychological, physical or spiritual problems. In this case, the one who does wrong has a guilty conscience, and tries to make a very fast move to reconcile with the one he or she has wronged, lest evil befall on the individual, family, clan or the entire society, depending on the wrong committed. It is in this line that reconciliation in Tharaka takes many forms depending on the gravity of sin and on the person offended.

In Tharaka, religion has set-norms that need to be followed. This is to say that religion in Tharaka teach elements required for right relationship between people and the divine. Anything that is outside, or which disrupts what religion teaches implies impurity or religious defilement.

There is a tradition among these people, based on beliefs in the existence of spirits and of God who is the creator of all things. According to this tradition, mediation between Him and people was done by the spirits [usually called nkoma cia ba cucu] through special people [diviners]. The elders [Njuri ncege/akuru ba kiama] had the role to teach and pass to the next generation, through oral tradition and experience of participation, what is to be done and maintained in every form of relationship.

Whenever evil comes in, it affects the members of the society, and evil is therefore regarded as an attack on the divinely ordered world and a breaking of relations with the spiritual guardians of society. The elders had given set rules to govern the society and different group of people according to their age or status.

Each class of people in a particular kind of family or clan had its own set of rules that governed them, and breaking one of them resulted in sin. There were also rules guiding all the clans in general. There were rules that governed everybody in the society, and breaking of these rules was sinful and affected not only the individual but also the family and the clan to which the person belonged. The sin of one person could therefore affect the entire society so that it was not an individual case.

The concept of evil that called for reconciliation according to Tharaka people, however, did not depend on the knowledge and willingness of the person as it is today from the Christian point of view. For example, if a person who did not know that cutting a tree in the sacred places was an evil act did it, the effect was felt not only on the individual level but also on the whole community. In such a case, the whole community was involved in making that individual person undergo a cleansing ceremony to reconcile him/herself with the spirits and the community, whether he/she was willing or not.

Since evil affects the whole life of people, the elders administered severe punishment and sometimes condemned wrong doers to death if they did not listen to what was demanded of them. However, it did not imply that if reconciliation took place, no penance or punishment was administered. It was due to this fact that they would not accept mere words like "I am sorry" or "I apologize". They liked to see actions that accompanied the words so as to prove that one was really sorry and realized the mistakes as something bad. Actions were always present in every form of reconciliation. This can be demonstrated with a few examples. A man who sinned against his step mother, and the mother curses him, would go to her with a present like honey, snuff, a goat, beer or anything else and say sorry to her. The material

good or property is a visible sign, accepted in addition to words, of asking for forgiveness. This was known as "kurinda kirumi". The mother would then appreciate the gift and bless him or anoint him with lamb's oil (maguta ma ng'onde).<sup>1</sup>

A young man who misbehaved in front of his mother or father-in-law could not just say "sorry". He would get a he-goat and take it to them and say "sorry". It was called "kuruta nthenge". They would slaughter it and share the meal after which he would be blessed. Another example could be seen in the case of a girl who failed to respect her aunt, or misbehaved in front of her. She was supposed to make some porridge and take it to her home. At that moment she would reconcile with her aunt.

It is clear that the Tharaka people looked at all this from the religious point of view, because they feared the intervention of divine powers to punish them. In all these examples, I want to say that reconciliation was mediated by elders and was at the base of their religious idea of doing it. It is in line with this fact that reconciliation with the divine was done through expiatory sacrifices. For example there was one occasion during the dry season when the elders gather and sacrifice a lamb. This was called "kuangia mburi" and it involved the elders taking the goat or sheep of one colour and make a procession with songs from one place to another around the village and finally to the sacred grounds. The song was the prayer asking for the end of the calamity facing them. After the prayers, the goat or sheep was sacrificed and destroyed completely either by burning it fully, or by eating it all without leaving any piece for the next day. Such a sacrifice was to ask for God's blessings, and could also be offered to praise the creator for His goodness and blessings over the gifts received. Drought, famine, and earthquake brought the elders

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<sup>1</sup> Muchai Kiugu, 48 years, interviewed on 05.10.2001

together for the reconciliation sacrifice; also barrenness in women or death of somebody in mysterious circumstances could bring them together for the same purpose. Physical defects like being crippled were seen as an earlier offence to the spirits. Even madness was seen as a punishment for evil committed, although it could also be as a result of witchcraft.

Now, if we talk of sacrifices of reconciliation in Tharaka, it is clear that sacrifices constituted one of the commonest acts of worship in their religion. Sacrifices here refer to cases where animal life was taken in order to present the animal in part or as a whole to God, to supernatural beings, spirits or the living dead. Therefore sacrifices were directed to God, spirits, or the living dead. The meaning of worship and reconciliation through sacrifices is explained by Mbiti i.e., that the spirits and the living dead are intermediaries between God and people. In this case the relationship between God and people, the spirits and people, the departed and the living should be maintained, strengthened and respected. Offering sacrifices is therefore a way of restoring broken relationships and strengthening it.<sup>2</sup>

Thus the Tharaka sacrifices were made to God, the author of life. God was prayed during the sacrifices. Again Mbiti finds an aspect in Tharaka religion that is not different from the other African religious beliefs when he talks of God providing the necessities of life and of ways of developing and preserving life. By following his opinion, we see that Tharaka are not outside the African religion and are people who can identify themselves with their neighbours. This will be realized better in the coming chapters as we see reconciliation finding meaning and room of acceptance also in the Catholic faith. This is to say that Tharaka people are human beings who

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Mbiti John S., African Religions and Philosophy, Nairobi: Heinemann Press, 1969. p. 59

share in the nature of humanity through a community whose members support and care for one another in every encounter. Man in the world is gifted with material goods to enjoy so that he may survive in a state of happiness and joy instead of suffering. In this regard Mbiti writes:

According to many stories of creation, man was originally put in a state of happiness, child-like ignorance, immortality or ability to rise again after dying. God also provided him with the necessities of life, either directly or through equipping him to develop them, and man lived more or less in a state of paradise.<sup>3</sup>

The following story will give a better understanding of the above. The Tharaka people have a story that holds that man after creation was not to die because he was given special privileges and rights to stay on earth. He enjoyed every type of food from the vegetation and animals of the earth. As a result of jealousy, the hyena brought death to humanity by asking man to disobey God so that he can have full right and control of the entire world. As a result, God withdrew to heaven and brought to an end the happy relationship between Him and people. Thus today we have wars, killings, diseases, hatred and all kinds of evil that are on the earth. However, man has accepted death as part of the natural rhythm of life. In everyday life, man has a desire to avoid all these kinds of evil and it is for this that he looks for a way to be in good harmony and relationship with others, so that he may not face such calamities as war, diseases and others mentioned above. This relationship is only possible through restoring broken relationships and this is reconciliation. That is why we have the sacrifices mentioned above. Reconciliation sacrifices were not general for all sins or evils done. Different forms or kinds of sins begged for a different kind of sacrifice to be offered. Usually, we can point out three areas

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<sup>3</sup> Mbiti John S., *Ibid.* p. 95

through which one could commit sin: one of his/ her fellow human being; against a group or community, or sin against the ancestral spirits or gods.

### ***3.1 Agents of Reconciliation***

We can talk of three main groups of people who play a very important role in the life of people as far as reconciliation is concerned. First we have the medicine men or the so-called traditional doctors. These were useful source of help to humanity. They were friends to every family and always ready to help and assist the people's needs. They gave medicine from roots, leaves or other parts of a tree. They were healers. In case of conflict between people, they could plant some protective ornaments on the ground to stop or prevent any evil act to the innocent. They also gave help to increase productivity for those infertile and good results were experienced. They detected evil and helped through their works to control the spirits of the living dead from destroying the living, in case they are not pleased.

Secondly, we have the diviners. These were the specialized people who dealt directly with the spirits and the living dead. They passed messages from divinities to man. They could also foretell the future and dangers, or the good to come. The medicine men could then be involved to look and give ways to cope with the situation of that particular time or period of difficulty.

Finally the elders cannot escape being mentioned because they dealt directly with the role of maintaining discipline and observance of the laws. They dealt directly with the clan and families, villages and entire community during times of conflict, war, famine, quarrelling or any other time of need and also during times of joy and blessings. They strengthened, brought understanding and reconciliation to

people through meetings and through listening to the cases of the two disputing parties, and this is done in a similar way in today's courts.

Thus harmony, unity and a continuous flow of life could be kept between all people both alive and dead.

We can now talk about different forms of reconciliation.

### ***3.2. Reconciliation sacrifices between man and man (man - woman; woman - woman)***

For the offences involving two people as above there was a simple process of reconciliation, in which not less than three witnesses were needed. Those to be present were the offender, the offended, parents of both sides, sponsor (parents during initiation) and three or more witnesses<sup>4</sup>. If any person of whichever sex, from the age of ten on, happened to sin or commit a certain evil against a person, to reconcile them and restore the broken relationship was the duty of the immediate nearest person with more experience of life.

The offended usually sent the mediator to the offender with a message asking why such an evil act was done to him or her. The offender could send the mediator with words of regrets and sorrow for the evil done. In most cases the offended accepted the words and agreed to be reconciled. It was a taboo for one to turn down an offer to reconcile with one another. Later they were to choose a day, through a mediator to meet. It was the duty of the offended to choose the venue during the day and not at night. The mediator was to be there as a witness and the two took leaves from a tree ("mururuku," tree and not any other tree) which they had to chew. The green stuff was spit on the palm of each and they would smear the substance on their

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<sup>4</sup> Kathenya M'Nkari, 56 years, interviewed on 18.12.2001

heads. Then each was to pour water from a calabash onto the other person's hands and clean them<sup>5</sup>. Then an animal was offered in sacrifice.

### ***3.3 Reconciliation sacrifice between man (woman) and community***

Tharaka people like most of the African tribes, did everything communally. Every person belonged to a certain group. For example the boys of 1 to 10 years belonged to the class of "nkara", that is immature boys before initiation. From 11 to 18 they belonged to the age of "rugu", that is a candidate to initiation. From 19 to 40 they belonged to the class of "nthaka or ngoromo" i.e., grown up young men and warriors. From 40 to 100 years one is a man in the class of those within the family and mature enough. However, from age of about 60/70 and above, one belonged to the class of elders, called "akuru ba kiama". Women had their different organizations. So, whatever one did affected the entire class of people and also outside, since all formed a one united single chain. Reconciliation, therefore, involved participation of a group of elders as a witness and the process was similar to that of individuals.

So, when any member broke the norms of the community, the group took the initiative of reconciling the two parties. The sinful member of the group was disciplined through beating, punishment and fine.

The affected group chose representatives who were sent to the elders. On the reconciliation day, the offender was to bring a goat or a bull in addition to the beer prepared for the elders.

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<sup>5</sup> Kinyua P., Mucunku N., Mutegi A., Mucunku S., seminarians of St. Joseph's Major seminary, Nairobi, interviewed on 20.10.2001

### ***3.4 Reconciliation between man and the spirits***

As we have said, man belonged to the community and whatever he did or said was for the downfall or the up lifting of the community. Sin against the spirits brought punishment to the entire community. Thus, the angered spirits and God could bring any kind of natural calamity as a punishment, e.g., drought, famine, diseases, earth quake, etc.<sup>6</sup> Sins against the spirits were murder, incest, bestiality, adultery, planting at night or before the medicine man sow the first seed on the ground, cutting of woods from sacred places, etc. These were checked and punished immediately; otherwise the whole community could be in danger of death as a result of angered spirits punishing them.

Sacrifices were done at the communal level and an animal was killed and blood poured on the soil, sprinkled on trees around and to the people present. This symbolized the loss of life and for this the members grieved and cried for mercy. Nothing from the animal was to remain and was to be roasted and not boiled. The elders prayed for peace, harmony and right relationships between all people.

## **4. THE HEALING EFFECT OF RECONCILIATION**

We have seen above that reconciliation is needed to restore the broken relationships between people and God. Reconciliation brings an end to evil and all its bad fruits. It marks a beginning of a new life that is pure, healthy in relationships and gives satisfaction at all levels of human development, spiritual, psychological, physical, social and spiritual.

Among the traditional Tharaka people, there was no clear-cut distinction between healing and reconciliation due to the connection between “sin/evil” and suffering. However, the sufferer may not necessarily be the sinner. This is because,

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<sup>6</sup> M'iceria, 82 years. interviewed on 22.12.2001

there is always a bond of relationship between an individual and community. So evil brings social effects and thus sin causes suffering. In other words, reconciliation brings healing through the ritual sacrifices of cleansing.

We have seen that the whole life of an individual was joined to his/her family, clan and the whole community. Reconciliation was done either through words of apology, compensation and sometimes taking an oath. All these were followed by ritual cleansing through sacrifices. It was in this way that the offender was reconciled to his/her family, to the offended, the society at large, the ancestors and the spirits.

Once reconciled, there was a satisfaction and better feeling and relationships with others in the community. One felt safe and secure, and in this way we can talk of physical, psychological and spiritual healing as an effect of proper reconciliation. In order for this healing to take effect, dialogue was a vital tool and that is why elders were very instrumental to it and always gathered as witnesses. Thus the role of the elders can be compared to the role played by our modern priests in the sacrament of Reconciliation<sup>7</sup>. Due to this healing effect of reconciliation, a continuous flow of life is ensured and relationships maintained. Thus it is very important for the sinner to be reconciled with people and spirits. People forget the evil done and the conscience is freed from guilty feelings and all this is as a result of the healing effect of the ritual.

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<sup>7</sup> Fredrick Ndirangu, 36 year, interviewed on 03.01.2002.

## CHAPTER II

### SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION IN THE CHURCH

From the beginning, the Church recognized itself as a community of those called by God to be a place of reconciliation and peace in the midst of a godless world.<sup>8</sup> The very words with which our saviour and teacher Jesus Christ began his preaching were based on reconciliation for the men and women of his time. These words were an invitation to acceptance of the good news of love. Christ proclaimed this invitation with the words: "The reign of God is close at hand; repent and believe the gospel" (Mk. 1: 14 - 15). Christ called for a change of heart, urging people to change the direction of their lives, away from sin and all evils, to the bright promise of the reign of God embodied in his life and teaching. Conversion, change of heart and reconciliation are linked. They are based on the encounter with God's will, the acceptance of that will and the ability of man to commit himself to the love of God.

Thus the Church of Christ takes this invitation as a basis for the reconciliation. The Church knows that she especially has been given the ability, and assigned the mission to make known the true and profoundly religious meaning of reconciliation to humanity. The Church is a sign and instrument of forgiveness and reconciliation. Jesus Christ forgives sin through the Church, with which he is united and of which he alone is the controlling head.<sup>9</sup> The Church exercises this power through the ministers of this sacrament. It is Christ who gave his apostles the power to forgive sins. The Church therefore teaches that:

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Herbert Vorgrimler, *Sacramental Theology*, Minnesota, Liturgical Press, 1992, p. 204

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Herbert Vorgrimler, *Op. cit.*, p. 208

In imparting to his apostles his own power to forgive sins, the Lord also gives them authority to reconcile sinners with the Church. This ecclesial dimension of their task is expressed most notably in Christ's solemn words to Simon Peter: 'I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven'. The office of binding and loosing, which was given to Peter, was also assigned to the college of the apostles united to its head. The words bind and loose mean: whomever you exclude from your communion, will be excluded from communion with God; whomever you receive anew into your communion, God will welcome back into his. Reconciliation with the Church is inseparable from reconciliation with God.<sup>10</sup>

Reconciliation is therefore a sacrament for all sinful members of the Church and above all for those baptized who have fallen back into sin. The Second Vatican Council expresses the view of the sacrament in a theological statement: "Those who approach the sacrament of penance obtain pardon from the mercy of God for offences committed against God. They are at the same time reconciled with the Church, which they have wounded by their sins, and which by charity, by examples and by prayer seeks their conversion."<sup>11</sup>

The Sacrament of Reconciliation in the Church is therefore a living liturgy in the form of petition, confession, absolution and penance which makes present the gracious judgement of God on repentant sinners. There is no doubt that this sacrament within the Church is a sensible sign of human conversion from a situation of having fallen into sin to a situation of new life in Christ. The Church always accepts confession of sins by individuals and speaks God's words of reconciliation to them. Thus she teaches that:

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<sup>10</sup> The Catechism of the Catholic Church, Nairobi, Pauline Publications Africa, 1994, Nos. 1444-1445, p. 361

<sup>11</sup> Austin Flannery, "Gaudium et Spes" Vatican II, Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents, Bombay, Pillar Books, 1975, No. 11

The sacrament of reconciliation is the effective memory of God's gracious judgement, in which the love of the Father through the Son and for the Son's sake, in the Holy Spirit, receives all human guilt.<sup>12</sup>

It is in the church therefore that Christian reconciliation takes place through the minister who receives sinners and gives absolution using the words given in the absolution formula. The idea here is that forgiveness is not an act of a human being. The Church through the minister is expressing that which is taking place in the sacrament is God's action, and it is God who is taking the initiative to welcome the sinner. This invitation is seen throughout the salvation history, where God is always merciful and always calls his people to be reconciled with him.

## **1. RECONCILIATION ACCORDING TO THE BIBLE AND THE CHURCH**

The teaching on reconciliation in the Church is not based on any human words and understanding. It is rooted in the divine revelation, in the word of God in the Scripture. In the following chapter we are going to see reconciliation in the Bible, the revealed truth in God, beginning from the Old Testament and finally in the New Testament. We shall end with the teaching of the Church on reconciliation.

Both the Old and the New Testaments stand as a "witness that the community of faith stands under the sign of the forgiving love of God."<sup>13</sup> This is because the human being is a sinner all through in history and he is in need of God's forgiveness. According to the Scripture, God created man and woman, blessed them to be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and subdue it. Man and woman enjoyed good harmony and relationship with God, nature and with each other. Man was created in a state of holiness and justice. The grace of this original holiness was to share in the divine life of the creator. As a result of the devil's temptation, man disobeyed the

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<sup>12</sup> Herbert Vorgrimler, *Op. Cit.*, p. 220

<sup>13</sup> Herbert Vorgrimler, *Op. cit.*, p. 205

word of God. Because of this disobedience his original grace and relationship was damaged. As a result, there is an immediate change in man's condition and relationship with God. God came to man after he committed sin. He called Adam and Eve to question them, and he pronounced the immediate consequences of their actions. The most notable consequence was that they would face death and be cast out of God's direct presence by being banished from the Garden of Eden. Man will also have to sweat to earn a living on earth (Genesis 3: 13-19).

After the fall of Adam and Eve, What followed was punishment as a result of failure to be faithful. However, the fall and failure was not the end of the relationship between God and human being. Scripture mentions cases of reconciliation, and this gives hope to humanity. As an example, Samuel talks of making amends if he has taken anybody's ox or wronged any person (1 Sam 12: 3). He questions the people to bear him witness if he has done any of the above, so that he can make an act of purification to be sorry for his sins in asking for forgiveness.

The idea of reconciliation is explained in terms of purification. Purification is required for all creatures subject to sin. The act of purification is in the form of sacrifice as in Lev. 8:15, where Moses slaughtered a bull to purify the altar, and consecrate it by performing the rite of expiation over it. There are also sacrifices for sin in the Old Testament. Priests slaughtered goats to make a sacrifice for sin with the blood of goats at the altar to expiate for all Israel. King Hezekiah ordered a burnt offering and a sacrifice for sin on behalf of all Israel (2 Chr. 29:24). The prince had also to provide the sacrifice for sin, the oblation, the burnt offerings and the communion sacrifice to make expiation for the house of Israel (Ezek. 45:17).

Reconciliation in Old Testament is the final and conclusive act by which the “original relationship between God and man is re-established. It is the end result of the process of re-establishing a broken relationship.”<sup>14</sup>

When we come to the New Testament we have a broader understanding of reconciliation, because human being is a sinner. St. John in his first letter supports this idea of humanity living in a state of sin.

If we say we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and truth has no place in us; if we acknowledge our sins, he is trustworthy and upright, so that he will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all evil (1 Jn. 1: 8 – 9).

We need to purify our lives by saying “no” to sin, and “sorry” for sins committed. This is possible through good relationship with others. Therefore reconciliation is a new relationship we enjoy with God and among ourselves.

St. Matthew underlines reconciliation with one another and even with our enemies and people who persecute us. So then, our relationships with God and others must be friendly. Therefore if we are bringing our offering to the altar, and we remember we have a brother who has something against us, it is better to leave the offering before the altar, and be reconciled with that brother first, and then come back to continue with the offering (Mt. 5: 23 –24). This is to say that the true followers of Christ cannot claim to love God and ignore the demands of love of neighbour, even an enemy. This is why Jesus taught that brothers should reconcile with one another and also with enemies and people who persecute them.<sup>15</sup>

As a matter of fact, there are many instances mentioned in the New Testament about reconciliation. Reconciliation is a fact of life, and for sure everyone will agree that it is part of everyday human experience and people did not wait for the gospel to

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<sup>14</sup> Bauer J. B., *Encyclopedia of Biblical Theology*, London, Sheed and Ward, 1970, p. 730

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Herbert V., *Op. Cit.*, pp. 205 - 207

begin reconciliation. Since I want to illustrate reconciliation in the New Testament and there are many episodes which cannot all be mentioned in this paper, I will look at three reported incidents in the gospels as examples.

The first one is from the narration of Mark, in which Jesus justifies by a miracle the forgiveness he has just granted a paralytic (Mk. 2: 1-13). This narration testifies to the faith the crowd had in the capacity of Jesus to heal incurable illness. The paralytic was brought to Jesus by letting him down through the roof of the house. Jesus saw the faith of these people and he spoke in words perhaps not expected: "My son, your sins are forgiven" (Mk. 2:5).

Actually, this provoked the people present and they began to murmur. They did not understand why Jesus spoke words of forgiveness, because according to them only God could forgive sins. Jesus without discussing this conviction replied by saying that the forgiveness of sins is not more difficult for the Son of Man than healing. By adding deed to word he healed the paralytic and thereby attested that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.

In the second example we have the episode of the woman taken in adultery (in John 8: 1-12), a case that makes much the same point as above. The Scribes and Pharisees did not wish to transgress the Law of Moses even if they personally thought it was too harsh.

This miracle seemed to raise many challenging questions to awake the minds and conscience of people to think and reason, to act according to justice and in response to life in front of the law. The fact that everybody went away when Jesus made the remark that had such a sting in its tail, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her" (Jn. 8:7), implied that, if they had all thought

they were just, the woman would have died. Their sin provoked them to a practical mercy that their purity would have forbidden.

The law becomes cruel when it is in the hands of virtuous folk. Robespierre wrote: "Terror is the emanation of virtue." Terror is violence that is the vehicle of an idea. Jesus does not throw the first stone – he whose holiness and justice is celebrated by the gospels (not that he is inhibited from denouncing the sins of those around either). No, he seeks to break the circle of violence and virtue, violence and the law. The forgiveness he grants this woman opens up a space other than the one in which only the sins of her accusers saved her and their virtues killed her. This space is human.<sup>16</sup>

This story tells that we always tend to judge others without judging ourselves. Christ challenged this fact and gave us an example of how we should have a constant examination of ourselves and know that we need to be reconciled within ourselves and with others. Jesus' example of not condemning the woman is a good example of God who is loving and merciful. He gives room for us to recognise our sin and seek newness of life. This newness is attained only through reconciliation, and Jesus concluded to the woman: "Go away, and from this moment sin no more" (Jn 8: 11).

This aspect of not condemning but inviting a sinner to change and praying for the forgiveness of all is strongly reinforced in the Lukan account of the crucifixion. This is the third example I have chosen on forgiveness. When Jesus was on the cross dying, he did not beseech God to snatch him from his enemies by either confounding them or reducing them to impotence. Instead, Jesus begged his father to forgive them. Thus he prayed to his Father saying, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Lk. 23:34).

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<sup>16</sup> From the lecture notes of Richard Lennan, "Sacraments of Healing, Readings", Sydney, semester one, 2000, p. 37

The stories of the woman taken in adultery and of the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ, are clear on the point that life is not a product of legal justice; that is why Jesus turns the problem of legal justice upside down; for him there is no hiatus between the here-below and hereafter. This comes out in the explicit petition proffered to the disciples: "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."<sup>17</sup>

Reconciliation with God as said earlier is restored if there is a good relationship between people. This is to say that there should be peace among people, and therefore reconciliation is a message of peace.<sup>18</sup> Instituted by Christ, Reconciliation is a sacrament of peace, the peace given by Christ to his apostles after the resurrection. Forgiveness and reconciliation have therefore been understood as originating from the evening of the first Easter. The risen Jesus appeared in the midst of his fearful disciples and after a greeting of peace issued this commission of forgiving sin:

Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you. Receive the Holy Spirit, whose sins you forgive are forgiven, and whose sins you retain are retained (Jn. 20: 19- 23).

Therefore the message of forgiveness is central to the New Testament and it expresses the Christian message of salvation.

The Church as a whole has manifested itself as a place where sinners find life and fulfilment like the woman caught in adultery found peace and fulfilment in Christ. Through many different forms and attitudes, the Church always encourages penitential celebrations. Therefore the church is a place of renewal. It is loved by

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<sup>17</sup> Taken from the lecture notes of Richard Lennan. "Sacraments of Healing, Readings" Sydney, Semester one, 2000, p. 37

<sup>18</sup> Speech by Fr. Orazio Mazzucchi, to the YCS members of all Tharaka secondary schools, Materi Girls Centre 4, 01. 2002

Christ who gave up his life for her (the Church) to make her holy (Eph. 5:25-26) and he united the church to himself as his bride. It is for this that he filled the Church with his gifts (Eph. 1:22-23) and he remains united to it. It is in this body, the Church, that the life of Christ is communicated to the believers who through the sacraments are united in a hidden and real way to Christ.<sup>19</sup>

The Church is the body of Christ, and spreads the truth and grace to all the faithful. The members of the Church, however, we know that they are exposed to temptation and fall into sin. But 'Christ, "Holy, innocent, and unstained" (Heb 7:26) did not know sin yet he "made the sinless a victim for sin" (2 Cor. 5:21) and came only "to atone for the sins of the people" (Heb. 2:17) The Church includes within itself sinners and is at the same time holy and always in need of purification, and therefore she constantly pursues repentance and renewal.'<sup>20</sup>

In its liturgical celebrations, the Church expresses its life when the faithful confess that they are sinners and ask pardon of God and of their brothers and sisters. Thus in the Sacrament of Penance, the faithful "obtain from the mercy of God pardon for their sins against him, and at the same time they are reconciled with the Church which they wounded by their sins and which works for their conversion by charity, example and prayer."<sup>21</sup>

## **2. RECONCILIATION WITH GOD AND WITH THE CHURCH**

Since every sin is an offence against God which interrupts our friendship with him, the ultimate purpose of penance is that we should love God deeply and commit ourselves fully to him. The sinner within the Church, therefore, in the Sacrament of

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, in Flannery (ed), Op., Cit., No. 7

<sup>20</sup> Cf. L.G., No. 12

<sup>21</sup> L.G., No. 11

Reconciliation comes back to God the Father who loved us first. The sinner is united to Christ who gave himself up his life for us (Gal. 2:20., Eph. 5:25) and to the Holy Spirit who has been poured out on us abundantly (Titus 3:6). Reconciliation therefore strengthens the bond of our relationship with God and the whole church, which means the life sharing in brotherhood of all the faithful people of God.<sup>22</sup>

There is no doubt that through Penance we are reconciled with our brothers and sisters who are always harmed by our sin. Christ came to carry out God's plan for the reconciliation of mankind with himself (2 Cor 5:18-20); hence, sacramental forgiveness of sin should be experienced above all as the healing and renewal of one's personal relation with God through reincorporation into the full life of the People of God.

### **3. ROLE OF THE MINISTER IN THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION**

The minister of this sacrament is an ordained bishop or a priest. The minister "has the faculty to exercise that power in respect of the faithful to whom he gives absolution."<sup>23</sup> When Christ Jesus instituted this sacrament, he gave the apostles, and through apostolic succession – the bishops and their helpers, the priests, have the power to forgive sins. The Church holds this in her teaching, and she adds that,

Since Christ entrusted to his apostles the ministry of reconciliation, bishops who are their successors, and priests, the bishops' collaborators, continue to exercise this ministry. Indeed bishops and priests, by virtue of the sacrament of Holy Orders, have the power to forgive all sins "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." Forgiveness of sins brings reconciliation with God, but also with the Church. Since ancient times the bishop, visible head of a particular Church, has thus rightfully been considered to be the one who principally has the power and ministry of reconciliation: he is the moderator of the penitential discipline. Priests, his collaborators, exercise it to the extent that they have received the commission either from

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. John F. McDonald, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 94 - 96

<sup>23</sup> Code of Canon Law, No. 966. p. 175

their bishop (or religious superior) or the Pope, according to the law of the church.<sup>24</sup>

A priest helps the penitent to see and understand the need of not being attached to a particular sin, and to come out of one's pride. A priest gives advice and right counsel on how to do better in the future, living the Christian life. The priest is representing God who forgives sin. He represents also the community of faith to which we belong, the church. He is "the sign and the instrument of God's merciful love for the sinner."<sup>25</sup> His presence allows the penitent to hear from another human being that we are accepted. Accepted as we are (a human being with a tendency to sin, who recognizes and admits our sinfulness, and seeks forgiveness) that we are loved and forgiven by God and the Body of Christ, the Church.

The minister has the most humbling aspect of priestly sacramental ministry in celebrating this sacrament. The priest is a human minister of God's forgiveness through whom sinners are reconciled with God and with the Church.<sup>26</sup> He should, therefore, take the role and responsibility to teach and encourage the people of God to come to the Sacrament of Penance and for this reason he must be available for the sacrament. He is not the master of God's forgiveness, but his servant. He should, therefore, unite himself to the intention and charity of Christ. He should have a proven knowledge of Christian behaviour, experience of human affairs, respect and sensitivity towards the sinners. He is a just man who fears God and prays with and for the penitent. He is, therefore, useful because he brings sinners back to God's love and life, which they have lost. Thus the penitents should go to the minister of this sacrament to arrive at the full freedom of the children of God.

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<sup>24</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, Paulines Publications- Africa, Kenya, 1994, No. 1461- 1462, p. 365

<sup>25</sup> Catechism of the Catholic church, Op. Cit., No. 1465, p. 366

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Code of Canon Law No. 960

The minister also calls the faithful to conversion by preaching God's word, and at the same time, in the name of Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit he declares and grants the forgiveness of sins. In the exercise of this ministry the priest acts in communion with the bishop and shares in his power and office of regulating the penitential discipline. The Mother Church proclaims and supports this idea very strongly and thus she has stressed that,

It is they (the bishops) who regulate the discipline of penance, and who diligently exhort and instruct their flocks to take part that is theirs, in a spirit of faith and reverence.<sup>27</sup>

Actually, all ministers of the Penance absolve the sins of the penitent validly. In order to fulfil their role in this ministry properly, they should learn to recognize the diseases of the soul and be able to apply appropriate remedies. They have to acquire sufficiently the requisite knowledge and prudence to be able to act as wise judges, by means of diligent study under the guidance of the Church's teaching authority, and especially through prayer.<sup>28</sup> They fulfil a paternal function if they receive the penitents and lead them to the truth. By this the minister reveals the heart of the Father and shows the image of the Good Shepherd. It is, therefore, in line to this that the minister comes to know the secrets of another's conscience, and he is bound to keep the sacramental seal of confession absolutely, in order not to stain or spoil the good name, respect and dignity of the penitents. This promotes honesty, trust and confidence in receiving the sacrament.

#### **4. EFFECTS OF THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION**

Penance is a sacrament of healing through which the penitent experiences God's mercy and love. It also gives the power to overcome the forces of evil and

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<sup>27</sup> L.G., No. 26.

<sup>28</sup> John F. McDonald, The Sacraments in Christian Life, St. Paul Publications, 1983, pp. 105-106

helps us to free our selves from the slavery of sin.<sup>29</sup> This sacrament, if received with the right disposition, achieves conversion, spiritual renewal and liberation. The faithful obtains pardon from God's mercy for the offence committed against Him and is brought back again to be reconciled with the Church.

This sacrament for sure reconciles us with the Church and restores the bond of fraternal communion. The Catechism of the Catholic Church says "The whole power of the sacrament of Penance consists in restoring us to God's grace and joining us with him in an intimate friendship."<sup>30</sup> Its purpose is, therefore, reconciliation with God. There is "peace and serenity of conscience with strong spiritual consolation" for those who receive it with the right disposition. It brings "a true spiritual resurrection, restoration of the dignity and blessings of the life of the children of God, of which the most precious is friendship with God."<sup>31</sup> Yes, its effect is mainly the bestowal of God's grace, the sanctifying grace and the sacramental grace. It is also a means for forgiveness and the absolution of sins. We are sure and filled with confidence through faith that our sins are fully forgiven.

It brings us to be alone directly with our loving Father, even though in a state of sin. We are like the prodigal son who returns to his father and is received joyfully, a huge banquet being offered in our honour. But we do not have the jealous elder brother who has not strayed resenting our return. We have only Christ who consoles us and brings us the joy of forgiveness.

We ought to receive it because it is the way Christ intended forgiveness to be sought. Christ never engaged in vain acts. St. John stresses this in his first letter

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<sup>29</sup> cf. John F. McDonald, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 96 -97

<sup>30</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 1468

<sup>31</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church. No. 1468.

when he says: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 Jn. 1:9).

Going for this sacrament is also a way of learning how to be humble before our God. It is inseparable from the gospel which teaches that whoever humbles himself will be exalted (Mt. 23: 12). Through confession we have an assurance of forgiveness because through a priest, Christ gives us an assurance as he gave authority to his apostles to forgive sin. Through a priest we also get advice on how to keep off from sin in future. Prophet Malachi reminded us this when he said in his prophecy that,

The lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and men should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord of Hosts (Malachi 2: 7).

So, during confession, we get absolved from sin, obtain advice on how to behave in order to live a spiritual good life and we are spiritually nourished and satisfied. Confession, therefore, gives us God's grace and spiritual nourishment for our spiritual life. Those who refuse the sacrament of Reconciliation do not receive the above fruits.

## **5. EFFECTS OF SIN**

Many sins cause a lot of harm to our neighbours. They also injure and weaken the sinner as well as his relationship with God and neighbour. Sin brings a disorder in the society, and through it we have war, murder, hatred and enmity, among other evils. Sin is an act against God's order, against one's neighbour or a person's life and dignity. In African religion, sin is also against the spirits of our ancestors and the living dead. Due to this, African religion holds that sin is wrong, bad and is a

destruction of life. Thus it always has a consequence to be borne, for example calamities, for it is never neutral.<sup>32</sup>

To a greater extent, sin is connected to life, community and God. Sin is understood, therefore, as a breaking of one's community code of behaviour. Sin in this case destroys life. It affects life which is a gift. In many African tribes, and also among Christians, life grows in relationship with others and God. The process of growth is linked with responsibilities. Any sin committed causes the breakage of this responsibility and its relationships. Hence sin separates and divides humanity in their families and religion. That is why we have instability, injustice and corruption in our society.

It was a sin of disobedience, the fall of Adam and Eve that brought the loss of the original grace and state of holiness that allowed us to share in the divine life of the creator. Sin wounds relationships and, if it is towards another person, it brings attitudes of mistrust, and lowers the dignity and spoils the image of the sinner as he loses respect. As a result, sin brings shame and guilty conscience, and the human mind and spirit is wounded. If a friend betrays another friend, there comes anger, vengeance, hard feelings and anxiety of every kind. One feels lonely if the act is so great, and loses friends. All these are effects of sin and that is why people seek forgiveness and reconciliation to create a positive and better image again, to be recognized, respected and feel one in unity as they identify themselves with others and God in healthy relationship.

Sin causes withdrawal. The prodigal son in the gospel of Luke (Lk. 15: 11-32) withdraws himself as a whole from the charity and love of his father. He wishes to

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<sup>32</sup> Cf. Laurent Magesa, African Religion. The Traditions of Abundant Life, Nairobi, Pauline Publications, 1996, p. 150-151

be perfectly autonomous in regard to his father and to be independent of his charity. Sure, sin in his case is refusal to be with his father. This refusal causes withdrawal and leads to the misuse of his fathers' given goods. This brings the hostility of a man against God. So we can say that sin brings refusal of God and refusal of a positive self-image.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. Fedele Pasquero, I Will Follow You, Meditations on Jesus, the Divine Master, the Way, the Truth and the Life, New York, Alba house, 1992, pp. 15 - 17

### CHAPTER III

#### RECONCILIATION SOURCE OF HEALING TO BOTH TRADITIONAL COMMUNITY AND THE CHURCH

The sacrament of Reconciliation is a sacrament of healing. Sin leaves ugly scars on the person who commits serious sins. The scars can be emotional and psychological with even physical effects. This sacrament is therefore a gift of God for the spiritual healing of these scars.

The human conscience is not free after a grave sin is committed. I know of a case where a young girl was engaged in abortion when she was in school. She did it so that she continue with her education without being sent home, because the law said that, if any girl is pregnant, she should go back home and not to come back again to study since she is a mother. She did it successfully without the notice of her parents or friends back at home. After school, she went to work in a hospital. She could not do her job well because the cry of children made her remember her mistake of killing a baby in her womb. She suffered for many years and she was growing thin and spending a lot of money in the hospital for check up and treatment. She was suffering from the inward wound that affected her responsibility, emotions, psychology, physical health and so forth. She had to leave her job because she could not continue at a certain moment. She later joined a seminar that was concluded with a long retreat and this changed her whole life. The speaker touched her problem, unaware of it but all in all she came forward in tears, expressed her guilty feelings and all that was in her mind to the priest who had preached. From him she received

spiritual nourishment, proper counselling and finally sacramental penance with absolution. From then on her whole life was completely changed.

She became a balanced person with good relationships with her people and children and became more active. This story illustrates how the unseen scars of sin that affect the conscience and psychology of a person can be healed if reconciliation is administered in conjunction with the help of skills of spiritual direction and through counselling as well. All these are both means and gifts to us for healing.

Reconciliation in the context of healing inner scars therefore filters down and out what one is feeling to be impossible or what brings shame and lack of acceptance of the self. In such a way, reconciliation can really heal and the minister should try to accompany the person to attain this healing well.

In African religion, wrongdoing relates to the breakage of specific codes of behaviour in a community. Individuals have to observe them to preserve order and assure the continuation of life in its fullness. Breaking community codes of behaviour endangers life and this is considered to be a bad, wrong and sinful act. If there is a violation of any code of behaviour, shame is the source of great disturbance in the inner self and of guilty feelings, which deny full participation in human life with others. Depression, alienation, self-doubt, isolation, and loneliness, among other results, slowly by slowly destroy the person inwardly. Sin is a kind of murder of the soul that brings a foundation for a kind of death in life and makes one have complete and total hatred within oneself. As a result, purification rites in form of prayers, sacrifices and reconciliation are the best tools to end any disorder or spiritual sickness caused by sin.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Laurent Magesa, *Op. Cit.*, p. 166

In every society there is a need for healthy relationships, harmony, unity and peace. And this is what this chapter is looking at. Healing is needed for sure after one is wounded by sin. If one is suffering inwardly and has inward disturbances, life becomes difficult and meaningless. Reconciliation makes one come to a different way of seeing life and he gets assured that life is not completely lost.

If we go back to the example of the adulterous woman in the Gospel, we realize that the attitude of Jesus towards sin is to console, give hope and strength. The joy of happiness, peace of heart and love are more experienced in reconciliation.

Reconciliation helps to seek a just and lost balance in life. It restores the lost balance because through it, the penitent senses a heart of love and care when he hears the words – “your sins are forgiven” or “I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, the Son and of the Holy Spirit”. This is how we hear the call of Jesus to open the door of our heart to receive him.

## **1. HEALING SATISFACTION IN THE SACRAMENT**

“Satisfaction is the expiation of wrongdoing, especially the penance imposed by a priest before giving sacramental absolution. Satisfaction consists in the penitent’s willingness to accept the penance imposed and its actual fulfilment. The effect of all these elements is to remove more or less the temporal punishment due to the sins confessed.”<sup>35</sup> The penitent is helped to develop a deep spirit of repentance and a sense of responsibility for sins committed in regard to the members of the community. It is through reconciliation that the sinner is inspired to undertake some special and charitable work which will counteract the social aspect of sin and keep one alive in the community.

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<sup>35</sup> John A. Hardon, “Satisfaction” in *Modern Catholic Dictionary*. London, 1981, p. 490

In this way, it shows a continuous lasting struggle of a human being in society between good and evil. Yes, there is a healing satisfaction in reconciliation if one does the act of charity to repair the harm caused by sin. Satisfaction for sin has many forms and these could include prayers, acts of charity, good works, services, donation of time or money or other material goods, material return of stolen good, payment of compensation for injuries caused, and fasting. The purpose of this is to help one towards a journey of renewal of life and spiritual discernment. Such an act is a simple justice that means a lot to the offended party. The sinner recovers back the full spiritual health by a simple gesture beyond the words expressed in sorrow. This means that there is something to amend for sin, and this is what satisfaction for sin is all about. It is this that makes one do penance willingly, taking into account a journey towards spiritual good.

Usually the confessor assigns good works to be done by the penitent as a way of restoring the order disturbed by sin and also as a remedy for sin. This is, in other words the act of penance or simply "penance". The sinner accepts the satisfaction during the sacramental celebration of Penance after the confession of sin.

Actually, all these forms should be related to the sins confessed and help restore the good order lost by sins. It should be noted that satisfaction is not a price that one offers for the forgiveness of sins, because the gift of God cannot be bought.

Reconciliation is not giving material goods like a millionaire giving some of his wealth as a donation to the church. A sinner gives something yes, but he should give himself above everything else. Reconciliation is not achieved by just any single act of charity. It is a commitment to love God and a continuous verification of who we are and of our self-giving to Christ and God. It is a continuous verification

because we have to verify successively throughout our lives who we are in our relationship to God. We give ourselves to God fully and not in parts. Thus reconciliation is not just words, "O God my God, I am sorry". No, it is a step to conversion, a change in the whole person.

Therefore, satisfaction is a sign of personal commitment that Christians make to God in the sacrament, to begin a new life.<sup>36</sup> Actually, not only in the Church is satisfaction present, but also in the traditional community. The traditional community has no name for it, but I really see it in the act of the gift that accompanies the words of the penitent asking forgiveness. We saw in the first chapter that the Tharaka don't accept mere words like "I am sorry", or "I apologize". They like to see actions that accompany the words to prove one's sincerity from his heart as he repents. These actions, even though in the form of sacrifices, food or other material goods, are all similar to the Christian "penance" in the sacrament of Reconciliation within the Church.

## **2. PUNISHMENT AND PENANCE FOR SINS**

Punishment and penance for sins have connection with the term "satisfaction" as discussed above. They are not means to buy forgiveness and mercy of God, but rather an opening of the human heart to ask for trust in God and receive the mercy which God gives freely. I am here looking at punishment and penance for sins in reference to religious practice and a sacrament of the Church. The religious practice results from the need to undo the wounds and scars caused by sin.

We have seen above in earlier chapters that sin or evil breaks relationships between people and God or among people themselves. Evil affects the whole life of

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<sup>36</sup> Cf. James Dallen. "Satisfaction" in Fink E. Peter (ed), The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship. Minnesota, Liturgical press, 1990, p. 1143

people and this is why the Tharaka elders administered severe punishments to the wrongdoers. It means that punishment for sin is geared towards death or condemnation of both sin and the sinner. It is also a way of teaching and correcting the wrongdoers and others.

Since sin has a social dimension, an individual, for the purpose of obtaining blessings for serious cases, did not conduct reconciliation services in the traditional Tharaka community. Blessings were bestowed from the sacrifices which became a gift from the invisible mystical powers. And this was involving the elders through the act of religious worship and practice. Punishment was directed towards correction and change of one's behaviour. In sacramental penance we talk of change of life which is a conversion from sin to life in Christ.

The punishment or penance to the sinner is therefore to bring discipline, warn and teach people on the effect and pain of sin to the individual and the community at large. It is just like the act of beating a child after a mistake done. The child learns immediately and even becomes more careful in the days to come.<sup>37</sup>

This is to say that punishment and penance have positive effects in both traditional and Christian communities. And for this reason they should not be regarded as negative tools that always become enemies to life.

### **3. COMMON ELEMENTS IN THARAKA AND THE CHURCH**

Traditional Tharaka people value very much the community aspect of life and attach great importance to companionship. They like to be part of the group where they can share with others their sorrows, love, happiness and hardships. To live apart from the whole and avoid companionship is still foreign to most Africans. A

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<sup>37</sup> Mr. M'nkumbuku Meeni, 49 years, interviewed on 28.01.2002

collectivist spirit is one of the essential elements of a Tharaka personality in the traditional society. Social efficiency depends upon the cohesion of the group. All things are interconnected and all hold together.

The individual is subject to the requirements of society. All that strengthens tribal life is morally good. Thus we have virtues highly valued by Africans such as brotherhood, family-hood, hospitality, friendship or friendliness, sympathy and companionship among the many others unmentioned.<sup>38</sup>

Now if we compare this on with our Christian idea of the sacrament, we realize that the social aspect is underlining the two communities. Our sacraments have a social significance as well as a personal one. They unite a Christian by a saving bond in the mystical body, the Church in true solidarity with all the other members in the kingdom of God. A baptized sinner has not only offended God by sin but also the community of worship and salvation, which is the Church. This is to say that everybody offends the whole community by sin because of the social effect it has. By the divine pardon granted by the Church, the person has a duty of reparation and expiation before the community for the hurt his sin has inflicted on the Church and her children.

Reconciliation is a message of change of life and conversion. To a God-fearing person, sin is felt as a great elimination of life. It actually harasses the individual mind, heart and life of those who are not in constant brotherly relationship with others. The fact of reconciliation becomes the mystery of conversion.

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<sup>38</sup> The speech of Mr. Paul Kirimo, a teacher giving talk to Matakiri youth of Gatunga parish - (30.17.99) on traditional values that united our traditional societies in the past and now have lost value in our modern days.

Conversion is for the sake of reconciliation as well as a consequence of it. Just as the divine and human elements and contribution cannot be isolated from one another in salvation history, the same occurs in the mystery of conversion and reconciliation. Divine initiative and human response are inseparable. A complete change or conversion is in fact a process in which the penitent is so deeply and personally engaged as a human and a Christian, though a sinful one, that the personal involvement and response contribute to the constitution of the sacrament.<sup>39</sup>

One is in constant struggle to change and better the broken relationship that brings unity with others and God. This entire struggle for a better life is in the way not realized immediately by the community. We can, therefore, say that reconciliation is a message of peace and understanding to both Tharaka and Church people. In fact the Gospel teaches that “blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be recognized as children of God”. And again you should “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your father in heaven” (Mt. 5: 9, 44 - 45).

Peace is very important for our world today. If there is peace, there will be justice. And these are possible through forgiveness. Hence peace, justice and forgiveness are three conditions that should exist together for a better society. True peace is founded on justice and on the form of love which is forgiveness. If we want to come to the end of the crimes in the present world today, then the three demands (peace, justice and forgiveness) should be promoted by both tradition and Christianity. This will bring acceptance of each other as well. Without this we have

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<sup>39</sup> Cf. Dallen J., The Reconciling Community: The Rite of Penance, New York, Pueblo Publications Company, 1986, p. 253

broken communities. Reconciliation will attain its full meaning and value only if it is well administered to produce these fruits that we all desire in our lives.

It is unfortunate that this is not the case in both the Tharaka and Church community. This is realized by the big demand for peace in the society. It is due to this demand that the communities need elders or priests to continue supporting the people in their lives. So, in both, the role of a priest/ elder is common for the effective administration of the sacrifice or the liturgy of reconciliation.

Another common element is the presence of punishment/penance and also the involvement of the community that is supporting and strengthening the individuals. Just as the Church's rite of reconciliation often helps to reach that perfect contrition which comes from charity and enables the faithful to attain God's grace through their desire for the sacrament of Penance, so it is also meant to give a new hope and rebirth, a change of heart to the person who accept to celebrate it. The traditional Tharaka on the other hand express this in the common sharing in the rite of penance.

The rite of reconciliation too brings much hope to the Tharaka people and the entire Christian community. It is a new beginning and freedom for both parties that had offended each other. This eliminates any doubt and suspicion in regard to relationships and one sees oneself forgiven and having the possibility of improvement and of a better new life.

#### **4. ELEMENTS OF INCULTURATION**

At this point, it is right to discuss if the reconciliation rituals of the Tharaka give light for a meaningful promotion of liturgical life in a Christian community. But before that, let's define the term inculturation first.

**Inculturation** is the term that refers to the incarnation of the Christian message and of Christian life in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements, but also directs and unifies the culture, transforming and remaking it, so as to bring about a new creation.<sup>40</sup> We experience Christ's presence in our culture and he becomes part of our culture in our every day life and we are able to understand and live his message better.

Aylward Shorter defines inculturation as the creative and dynamic relationship between the Christian message and culture or cultures. He goes on to point out three notable traits of inculturation. The first is that it is an ongoing process and is relevant to every country or region where the faith has been sown. The Second is that the Christian faith can exist in a culture form. And the third is that, between the Christian faith and culture there should be interaction and reciprocal assimilation.<sup>41</sup>

Talking of inculturation of liturgical rites, the Second Vatican Council has encouraged some new thinking when it said solemnly in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy that "the rite and formulae for the sacrament of Penance are to be revised so that they give more luminous expression to both the nature and effect of the sacrament."<sup>42</sup> In the same Constitution, the Council says that today the rites of the sacraments need adaptation to current needs for in the course of time their meaning has become obscure. Since the faithful are helped by hearing their own language [not only words, but also symbols, and gestures are integral parts of a living language] this may be used in giving sacraments and sacramentals more

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<sup>40</sup> Cf. Schineller P., *A Handbook on Inculturation*, New York, Paulist press, 1990, p. 6

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Shorter A., *Towards a Theology of Inculturation*, New York, Orbis books, 1988, p. 11

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Second Vatican Council. "Sacrosanctum Concilium" (abbreviated as SC), No. 72.

meaning and Local Conferences of Bishops should straightaway prepare rituals adapted to local needs including language needs.<sup>43</sup>

Yes, every community has its own way of worship, and proper to this is the rite and structure of liturgy itself. If we go back to Tharaka, we can say that the sacrifice and the rite of reconciliation strengthen the community at worship. Reconciliation is there because there is a community. Reconciliation is a social reality which unite the members of the community in the identical and respectable body. The Church, presenting the rite of penance to Tharaka people, should explain in detail and show the relationship of Christ the head, with the Church and its members.

Since the Tharaka people have a bond of unity with the spirits of the living, the dead and the ancestors, the Church can draw the community of saints into the service of reconciliation. If this element is well acculturated, it will help the Tharaka people understand and appreciate more the sacrament in question. Actually, this will not be outside the Church's teaching because the Church gives room for certain elements of a particular rites found in the mission countries to be used for adaptation to Christian purposes.<sup>44</sup>

If the rite of Penance is to be renewed and adapted to the Tharaka culture, the social aspect, especially where communal living is still the way of everyday life, should be more emphasised. This will give more light for the understanding and appreciation of reconciliation.

In certain cases for example, if two Christian quarrels and reject one another, they should not be admitted to the sacraments until an agreement has been reached

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<sup>43</sup> SC., No. 62-63

<sup>44</sup> SC., No. 65

between the two and all differences settled through a priest either in private or in a communal celebration. If one is admitted without settling the difference first, then the other party can be heard complaining that the priest has admitted his counter party to the sacraments and not himself in spite of the fact that he was innocent. However, the Church in such cases should be careful not to deny a sacrament to any individual who ask for it, for even Christ did not keep himself off from sinners; in fact, he ate with them at the same table.

New converts are offended to see old Christians who are quarrelsome, and who don't observe the ethics of religion receiving the sacraments without an open reconciliation ritual, however simple it may be. If they are from an open society where reconciliation is received openly, they may think that they have a part to play for the valid absolution of this particular sinner before he is accepted and absolved by the delegated minister. So, the role of individual and communal form and aspect of reconciliation should be expressed well.

The main problem is that in society most people forget the fact that sacraments are not for angels and saints but for sinners. And this is why those who consider themselves right condemn others. But if asked openly to throw a stone, we realize no one can do it. So, there should be a proper approach through teaching in order to avoid judging others in this sacrament. Again people often don't distinguish the material element and formal element of sin, for which a man can receive a sacrament or not. Therefore a good catechism or catechetical instruction is needed in this case.

I also think that if sinners from such a culture are to be admitted to the sacrament, the community should be called first to pray for them. The church officials should always step in when there is a prolonged dispute among the people.

They can help to bring awareness of the need to reconcile, and this could avoid the decrease in the number of people coming for confession in the church, where the priest waits for them. However, such cases should be handled with great care and only for special open known cases in order to avoid scandals and conflict.

In traditional reconciliation there are two kinds of confession: one to an individual person who is offended and the other one to the community. This kind of confession is not outside Christian understanding. St. James can be a witnessing support when he says that we should confess our sins to one another and pray for one another to be cured (James 5: 16). More often if there can be communal penitential services conducted, they will be of great help to people of Tharaka. And again individual confession to priest after the communal celebration should be explained and encouraged. This really touches the psychology and spiritual aspect of the people who share together the responsibility of helping one another to full maturity and in relationships with others and God.

We can, therefore, see in a traditional culture a rite within which our Christian confession is reflected, although in a different way of approach. From this we can learn the social aspect of the sacrament and it is into this that we can plant our sacrament of Penance for Tharaka people and make it meaningful to them, as the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy encourages us to do in numbers 63 and 65 mentioned above.

There should be steps in catechesis on the social aspect of today's communal preparation. This would show that Christians in their service are linked together with the culture which they are evangelising, whether with or without the presence of a priest. If the traditional symbols of reconciliation were used in the sacrament, they

would give more meaning and bring more people to the sacraments in such a culture. They should be studied and explained in detail. Gifts could also be exchanged as symbols of reconciliation also as a response to the gift of forgiveness received by faith and the charity by which we have the responsibility to share within the Church.

## CONCLUSION

In this last part of the paper, I want to give a general remark on reconciliation in line with the topics discussed above. The effort in writing this paper from experience has proven that little is known about reconciliation celebrated in the context of a culture. It is for this that I feel we should be aware that cultures should be studied to help the converts receive reconciliation with the knowledge they can achieve through the reality surrounding them.

Unless there is a teaching that comes down to the life situations of the people, the idea of reconciliation remains high in the sky, on theological level and in the mind of theologians, and has no effect to the people in the villages. The sacrament of Reconciliation is in crisis today because it is losing value. Why? Because if there is no constant reminder to the people, there is a tendency to take it for granted and slowly it loses meaning and value, and as a result a few people go to it.

It is by entering into a people's culture and life that the idea of reconciliation becomes understood and enters deeply into their life, so that they will seek reconciliation freely and accept it as a free gift for salvation. It is in line with this that reconciliation gets its theological meaning through touching a culture, which is the source of life and identity of people.

The rite of reconciliation becomes more relevant if it enters the people and begins from their life within the culture in which they are born and grow. I am stressing the idea of entering into a culture because it touches the history, growth, and development of our on-going process of spiritual growth. A change will only be attained through a new approach to the sacrament of Reconciliation and Penance in

the Catholic Church. That is why the element of reconciliation should be understood and appreciated so that it may have a meaning in the Catholic Church.

The topic in discussion is not new to the Tharaka community. So the way in which it is to be received and bring value within the society and the Church depends very much on the approach or the way in which it is presented. It should be noted that the way it is received is never easily changed. If there are elements of purification, they should not be at once condemned. This will cause a negative reaction and misunderstanding, and the community will form in their conscience a rejecting attitude; hence, reconciliation will never bring the community together. On the other hand, if these elements are used, there is something to learn from them, and there will be a positive impact, and this will be attained through openness to dialogue and understanding.

From the previous pages, it is clear that a number of traditional elements can be received into Christianity and given new meaning. It is these elements that the Church should employ to give the theological meaning of the sacrament. It is from such a culture with those elements that the Church should draw in order to explain better her doctrines for an in-depth evangelisation.

There is a possibility of starting a dialogue between the Tharaka and the Church community. This work is an attempt of dialogue. The ministers could present to others the message of Christ and lead similarly the people to God through the celebration of the mysteries of Christ in the sacraments. It is only in this way that we shall attain the goal of the rite of Reconciliation by transforming the life of people by using the means the tools they already have at hand.

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