Reconciliation in Judaism and Christianity. A Catholic Persepective

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It is a great honour for me to speak today at the beginning of the Annual Conference of the International Council of Christians and Jews, especially here in Budapest where for many years I have been blessed with friendships, warm encounters and a shared commitment to Christian-Jewish cooperation along the Danube. I want especially to mention my esteemed colleague Szécsi József, my dedicated companion Hausmann Jutta and my dearest friend Várga Béla. Thank you for your ideas, your support and your friendship.

My role on this panel is to give you, as a member of the Roman Catholic Church, a brief overview of what my church has to say and offer on the topic of "reconciliation". This puts me in a good position. During Christian-Jewish meetings, it is often the case that our Jewish partners present many practical insights about what the commandments and the Halakha instruct. We Christians then typically dwell on abstract theological reflections. Well, today is different. When I speak to you as a Catholic today about reconciliation, I shall present theological reflections of course, but on this topic I can also simply say: Go to confession!

1. The Sacrament of Penance

You certainly have encountered the ritual of confession in numerous crime films: In a dark corner of the church, a villain flees into a small wooden closet, the so-called confessional. There he entrusts his burden of guilt to the priest, who becomes a confidant who must carry this burden of knowledge alone from now on. For confessional secrecy is absolute and holy in the church. So immutable is this confidentiality that even many state legal systems take it into account. And if not: Saint John Nepomuk, for example, died in martyrdom in the floods of Vltava river in Prague in 1398 because he did not want to reveal what he had heard in the confessional.

Let's read in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* about the Sacrament of Penance:

CC 1422: Those who approach the sacrament of Penance obtain pardon from God's mercy for the offense committed against him, and are, at the same time, reconciled with the Church which they have wounded by their sins and which by charity, by example, and by prayer labours for their conversion (LG 11).

The Catechism continues with some explanatory sentences on the various dimensions of the sacrament. The keywords are conversion, penance, confession, forgiveness, reconciliation. These are the individual steps that every believer goes through in the act of confession.

CCC 1423: It is called the sacrament of conversion because it makes sacramentally present Jesus' call to conversion [in Hebrew, teshuvah], the first step in returning to the Father (Mk 1:15; Lk 15:18.5) from whom one has strayed by sin.

It is called the sacrament of Penance, since it consecrates the Christian sinner's personal and ecclesial steps of conversion, penance, and satisfaction.

CCC 1424: It is called the sacrament of confession, since the disclosure or confession of sins to a priest is an essential element of this sacrament. In a profound sense it is also a "confession" - acknowledgment and praise - of the holiness of God and of his mercy toward sinful man.

It is called the sacrament of forgiveness, since by the priest's sacramental absolution God grants the penitent "pardon and peace." (OP 46 formula of absolution)

It is called the sacrament of Reconciliation, because it imparts to the sinner the life of God who reconciles: "Be reconciled to God."(2 Cor 5:20) He who lives by God's merciful love is ready to respond to the Lord's call: "Go; first be reconciled to your brother."(Mt 5:24)

[A brief comment: It is notable that the Gospel text of Matthew 5:24 is cited here in exactly the opposite way than the plain meaning of the verse: The gospel is about reconciling with your brother before you go before the Eternal One.]

Let me say this in my own words: Confession as a sacrament is at the core of Catholic identity. A sacrament accomplishes what it expresses; it's not just a symbolic sign. In confession, the church declares absolution with divine authority. God assures the penitent: You may start afresh, you are not shackled to the past and your burden is taken from you. It is both enactment of the promise from God and a rite of reconciliation with the Church. Confession does not undo sin, and it does not replace the repentance and conversion of the sinner, nor forgiveness by the injured. But the solemn promise of the love of God in confession provides a foundation for this conversion and for the remission of forgiveness also on the part of the person who has been hurt by me.

Let's stay with the ritual. The process of confession takes place in the following six movements:

1. Recollection: I recognize that I did something wrong.
2. Regret: I'm sorry for the mistake.
3. Confession: In confession, I profess my guilt.
4. Pardon: I apologise and the priest forgives me in the name of the Triune God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
5. Penance: I will fulfil the task or Penance that the priest has set - fulfilling, for example, a certain number of prayers, works of charity.
6. Resolve to amend my behaviour: I express my commitment not to repeat the same offense and seek the pardon of those whom I have offended.

The personal and complete confession of sins and absolution by the priest are the only way to obtain sacramental reconciliation in the Catholic Church. Until 2006, the Swiss bishops had given the opportunity to dispense communal absolution to an assembled congregation in celebration of the sacrament. This communal form was once common in church history, and the practice in reflected in a common prayer of penitence at the beginning of every Mass.

At this point let me introduce an important distinction between venial-lesser and mortal sin. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC 1854 ff.), venial sins are considered to be less offensive to God than mortal sins. Venial sins are offenses committed out of ignorance or without full intent to harm. To repair these sins the Catechism states that the perpetrator must do individual acts of charity, but does not have to confess the venial sin to a priest.

A mortal sin requires three conditions: The object is grave matter; it is committed with full knowledge; it is done with deliberate consent. It is called mortal sin, because it attacks charity, requires God's mercy and a conversion of heart. This is exclusively accomplished in the sacrament

of Reconciliation. When the will chooses something which is incompatible with love for God (such as blasphemy) or against love for neighbour (homicide or adultery) the sin is mortal.

2. Crisis of Confession

Even if media regularly present personal confessions to an audience of millions today, this individual form of confession in church has fallen into crisis. I have no numbers, but, in my perception, it is largely out of use in German-speaking areas. In reaction, those Catholics who advocate what they call “traditional” or pre-Second Vatican Council Catholic practice, often promote the frequent participation in confession as a foremost sign of Catholic faithful practice. There are movements that take the number of confessions as a measure of evangelization and renewal. A saintly model for this equation is Jean Marie Vianney, the Curé d’Ars, who reputedly sparked a resurgence of Catholic faith in mid-19th century France just by hearing confessions there.

Before the council, Catholics regularly went to confession, but they did not receive Communion. Today receiving Holy Communion regularly is common, but nobody goes to confession. I do not believe that the decline of confessional practice is a sign of the decline of the post-conciliar Roman Catholic Church. I also do not believe that believers today are worse-behaving Christians than past generations. I believe that insistence on an unchanging tradition is often not an appropriate response to the needs of our time, and, in fact, is demonstrably false historically. The practice of the Sacrament of Penance has changed in major ways over the centuries.

Possible reasons for the infrequent practice of confession today could be:

a) In the People-of-God theology of the Second Vatican Council, the communal aspect of being church is being better lived. With the self-confidence of God's people, individual sinfulness is not so much in focus.

b) At the same time, the Church emphasises the healing, forgiving aspect of many other activities: works of charity and dedication to justice, honouring Father and Mother, receiving the Eucharist, praying the Liturgy of the Hours (Daily Office) and the Our Father, and fasting ... (cf. CCC 1434-1439) In all these expressions of faith, God is present and effective and is understood to actively forgive lesser sins.

c) In addition, confession has acquired a bad reputation because of an almost myopic focus in homilies on sexual sins. As Pope Francis has said, “it is not necessary to talk about these issues all the time.” We know today that the greatest sins of humanity are not necessarily committed in the bedroom.

d) Since sacramental reconciliation is compulsory only for mortal sins, the decline of confession can also be related to a new view of the human condition: Live is not the Vale of Tears from one sin to another. There is a greater spiritual self-esteem in today’s Catholics when compared to the sometimes guiltridden spirituality of previous generations. As a beloved child of God, as an image of the Eternal One, each and every baptized person has an indelible dignity; a good life is possible – in the spirit of the biblical Wisdom Literature. CCC 1440 states: "*Sin is before all else an offense against God, a rupture of communion with him [sic!]*." Can the Eternal One be so easily offended? Isn’t God faithful and merciful, and does failure most often simply mean being human? Is not the God experienced by Israel and preached by Jesus one whose mercy and compassion are beyond human calculation (Ex 34:6)?

e) Confession is a sacramental ritual that is rooted in Catholic tradition and whose authority comes from invoking the name of God, represented by the priestly office of the Church. Formal rites,

however, must be intelligible in the society in which they are meant to be practised; thus, the confessional rite may not be what appeals to people today. Some pastors have therefore tried to reinterpret the confessional conversation in the direction of pastoral counselling, but this requires special training.

f) Where in the past one might have seen too much sin on every corner, today it is sometimes the other way round: There can be a failure to be self-critical, to be aware of your own inadequacy, your own mistakes, the consequences of your own actions and the responsibility you have for them. But our society today seems ensnared in a discourse where each individual and each group feels like a victim, absolves itself and seeks out only the faults in the actions of others. (*cf.: Regina Ammicht-Quinn: Opferkonkurrenz,* www.feinschwarz.net/tag/opferkonkurrenz/ *[10.06.2018]; Anselm Neft: Das große Mimimi,* www.zeit.de/kultur/2018-05/opferkultur-debatte-sexismus-freiheit-gesellschaft *[10.06.2018], Markus Himmelbauer: Von Opfern und Opfern,* www.furche.at/system/showthread.php?t=59314 *[10.06.2018*])

3. Beyond Individual Perspective: Structures of Sin

g) Last but not least: Confession forgives my personal guilt. In our privileged life as inhabitants of prosperous North, however, we experience more and more an entanglement in structures of sin, which clearly feels that our collective conscience is directed against God's will. We can feel profoundly powerless against social sin: for example, if we bring to our mind the environmental destruction caused by our lifestyle; if we know that our everyday objects and clothing have come to us through exploitation; if we look at the way we deal with the poor, the socially weak and strangers in our country and worldwide; if we are even involuntarily involved in the mechanism of financial aggrandisement and speculation. Unlike individual sin, classical or traditional confession cannot provide ritual means to address these sins embedded in social structures and habits. Entangled in structures and habits, on another field, this is also me as Austrian within the not cleared continuities of authoritarianism and the unsaid family-traditions of the Nazi-era.

What does it look like if we do not speak of individual sin, but of communal guilt, in which I am involved? In 1987, Pope John Paul II, in Sollicitudo Rei Socialis, moved away from an individualistic description of the causes of failed economic development and spoke of "Structures of Sin" (SRS 36):

If the present situation can be attributed to difficulties of various kinds, it is not out of place to speak of “structures of sin," which (…) are rooted in personal sin, and thus always linked to the concrete acts of individuals who introduce these structures, consolidate them and make them difficult to remove. And thus they grow stronger, spread, and become the source of other sins, and so influence people's behaviour.

For *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, the overcoming of these hostile conditions is only possible through individual insight and improvement, "*only by means of essentially moral decisions. For believers, and especially for Christians, these decisions will take their inspiration from the principles of faith, with the help of divine grace*." (SRS 35)

On the news portal of the German Bishops' Conference I found a sermon by the Bishop of Münster, Felix Genn, under the title “Reconciliation”. The world has a longing for peace, he states. Why do we not have peace? One reason for the clashes among peoples, for the divisions in Europe, for the endangering of life in the whole creation, also in marriage and family, is in the opinion of the bishop "*the lack of reconciliation and mercy*". "*Divine Mercy alone can bring peace and reconciliation (...) to the entire world, in great international relationships, as well as in the workings of creation and the healing of breaches in our families and communities*”, Genn emphasizes. (www.katholisch.de/aktuelles/aktuelleartikel/ genn-ruft-zu-frieden-und-versohnung-auf

[04.06.18]) This evocative appeal does not seem to me to be very theologically profound, nor is it an enlightened analysis that helps to concretize ways of reconciliation.

More recently, let's look at the encyclical *Laudato Si* of Pope Francis, who sets out basic considerations for peace and justice in a global perspective. In the English version we find the word “reconciliation” four times: First, it is stated that St. Francis of Assisi realized universal reconciliation with every creature (LS 66). Then a quote from Saint Paul’s letter to the Colossians (Col 1: 19-20, LS 100), which combines Jesus’ offering of himself with reconciliation and peace:

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

And then there are two references to a letter from the Australian bishops (LS 218) dating from 2002:

The Australian bishops spoke of the importance of such conversion for achieving reconciliation with creation:

“To achieve such reconciliation, we must examine our lives and acknowledge the ways in which we have harmed God’s creation through our actions and our failure to act. We need to experience a conversion, or change of heart.”

The "change of the heart" mentioned here implies that justice and solidarity in the world arise through a sum of good individual actions. Reconciliation remains here in the traditional Catholic context of the individual's examination of conscience. Of course, like John Paul II, Pope Francis also discloses in his reflections the need for a more conscientious political formation (LS 197: "*What is needed is a politics which is far-sighted and capable of a new, integral and interdisciplinary approach to handling the different aspects of the crisis.*"), but he does not bring this – as far as I can see – into connection with the theological aspect of reconciliation.

In *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis' letter on Love in the Family, the word "reconciliation" occurs several times - clearly, it is about the relationship between individuals. In periods of crisis in partnership and family (AL 236) the document offers a framework for the conditions for reconciliation:

The arduous art of reconciliation, which requires the support of grace, needs the generous cooperation of relatives and friends, and sometimes even outside help and professional assistance.

Here we significantly find awareness that the grace of God needs (also) human processes and structures with which it can work. There are, of course, a few examples of this insight: For example, the peacemaking, reconciling practice of the Community of Sant'Egidio in Rome, which goes beyond dealing with individual guilt only and is not based solely on some form of mediation but rooted in deep spiritual dimension.

4. If human strength is not sufficient

Let us apply the three-step process of Conversion, Penance, and Satisfaction (CCC 1423) to structural guilt: Let's talk about Christian-Jewish relations. The plea for forgiveness by Pope John Paul II in the Holy Year 2000 has named the guilt of the sons and daughters of the Church toward the sons and daughters of the People of the Covenant, the Jewish people. The "Theology of Contempt" and its consequences are now recognized, the need for conversion and the will to penance are painfully apparent. A consequence of this was formulated by the German bishops in 1980, and repeated by the Bishops' Conferences of the GDR, FRG and Austria in 1988 for the

50th anniversary of the November Pogrom. The bishops wrote in their statement "Accepting the Burden of History":

Christians' duty of love for the Jews also includes the perpetual prayer for the millions of Jews murdered throughout history and the constant appeal to God for forgiveness of the multiple failures and numerous failures that Christians have committed in their conduct towards the Jews. (www.dbk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/veroeffentlichungen/deutsche-bischoefe/Db43.pdf,p.6 [09.06.2018])

Whether this "satisfaction" is sufficient, whether the church's firm purpose of amendment is thoroughgoing, we will continue to discuss in Christian-Jewish dialogue and enact in cooperation: What fruits we can see at what level or even want to see. "Perpetual prayer" and "constant appeal to God" are certainly appropriate when it comes to the church's failures toward Jews. On the practical level, however, this evocative formula is very ambitious. What use is such honourable intent, if only empty words remain and little action? In addition to the prayer, there will be other demands: at least courageous advocacy against racism and anti-Semitism in everyday life, which - as we all know – grows increasingly loud. A conversion in doctrine and preaching, both for individuals and for the church as a whole including its leaders remains a vital task. We know that if the culprits are not at fault, failing to recognize and confess, the next generation feels guilty. It is also the fault of the Austrian church having patronised and supported this cover-up. Reforming a large and ancient organization requires different processes and strategies than personal reformation.

This last step of confession, satisfaction, the resolve to amend my behaviour, seems to me most demanding when dealing with structures of sin. We know about the needs and goals of how our society and world order should change; they are clearly formulated. Sin was often named, the theological basis exists. The will of individual believers to change something in the world is also given – hardly anyone wants the world to continue on its current course. So we find conversion and penance. But my individual conversion, my insight and good will cannot change the misguided process. I can feel with a good conscience that I would have tried after all. But that does not change the entanglements in which I am bound and which I really want to dissolve.

Perhaps this is why the popularity of esoteric and shamanic rites is so great today because they successfully address the tension between a global crisis and my own helplessness. They unite me with a global, even cosmic dimension. We need the everlasting help of God so that we do not overburden ourselves with the commitment for a peaceful, just and solidary world and the burden of our duty and our human limits will find its peace and comfort under the wings of the Eternal One. And we need a Catholic rite just for that, a rite not for my pure soul but for jointly actualized responsibility.

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