

Reconciliation Through the Blood of Christ

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Several years ago I began a retreat for a community of women religious. The campus included the residence of retired Sisters, who, while not required, were invited to sit in on the conferences. The theme of the retreat was the biblical concept of reconciliation.

During the first conference an eighty-five old retired Sister sat in the front row – a seemingly permanent scowl on her face, and her arms crossed across her chest as though ready for a good fight. I was a bit distracted! After the conference she immediately approached me and said forcefully, in a gravelly voice, “I’m not making this retreat, but I want to talk to you!” There was a parlor next to the conference room, and I thought we’d better get this over with. So, I ushered her into the nice, bright room and offered her a chair opposite me. She began: “Reconciliation, reconciliation, reconciliation! I’ve got it up to here with reconciliation!” – indicating her chin. My first reaction was to point out gently that she need not make the retreat. However, she surprised me by adding: “but I never recognized my need for it until this morning. I did not have a word for my experience.” Alienation was the key term. Over the next hour and a half she told me about her life’s experience, beginning in her early days with her family and extending to the present. Lots of alienation, anger, frustration, isolation.

The classical biblical concept of sin is that it has consequences: alienation in four relationships: within oneself and with others, the land, and God. When God made a covenant with Israel at Mt. Sinai, God promised to take care of the people in every way. On their part, they were to observe *torah* (a Hebrew word usually translated as “law”).

The purpose of the commandments is to establish, maintain, and restore (when necessary) right or just relationships. Justice is the prerequisite to peace (*shalom*). The covenant is sealed with a blood ritual, the blood of a bull poured on the altar (representing God) and sprinkled on all the people – to indicate that new life now flows from God into the people.

Jesus emphasizes the purpose of the Law in the Sermon on the Mount, getting at the underlying causes of sin – what we have called the “capital” sins. Unrestrained anger easily leads to murder. Lying disrupts trust in a family or community – or among nations.

When Jesus is asked which of the 613 prescriptions of *torah* is the greatest, he quotes Leviticus (love God totally) and Deuteronomy (love one’s neighbor as oneself). The *torah* has to be applied to new circumstances in every generation, relying on the wisdom of the past. It is sometimes easy to play one commandment against another, but this often frustrates the true purpose of the law: reconciling those who have been alienated.

The new (or better, renewed covenant) was sealed with the shedding of Jesus’ Precious Blood. It reminds us of the unconditional, enduring love God has for each of us and all of us – without exception. It also calls us as missionary disciples to be reconcilers in a world that desperately needs healing, reconciliation, renewal. The Holy Spirit will help us do precisely this if we keep our focus on the word of God and live as people with hope and trust in God’s care and ability to set things right.

Oh, my elderly women religious friend made the rest of the retreat – with a seemingly permanent smile on her face!