

“The Road to Reconciliation”
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Introduction

Three commemorations being held this year make the theme “The Road to Reconciliation” especially timely. In November, we will mark twenty years since the fall of the Berlin Wall, an event emblematic of the collapse of Communism in Europe. It was perhaps this event more than anything else that set off a renewed and intense interest in reconciliation. While the theme of reconciliation had been explored intermittently in the decades before, much of the advances in our understanding of reconciliation can be traced back to what happened in Berlin and throughout Eastern and Central Europe in those days. The undoing of forty years of repression – in many instances a repression that was built upon a prior history of fascism – seemed a daunting task then, and continues to be so today.

2009 has been designated by the United Nations as the International Year of Reconciliation. This proclamation was prompted by the awareness that that protracted armed conflict has devastated and continued to devastate so much of the world. A renewed effort to overcome the trauma of war and to build a different kind of society – both locally and globally – seemed a particularly apt undertaking at the end of the first decade of the 21st century.

Focused more closely on a single continent, a third event brings the theme of reconciliation into the foreground of our attention. In October of this year, the Second Special Synod for Africa will be celebrated in Rome. Its theme is: “The Church in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace.” The lineamenta and instrumentum laboris both recognized how poverty, exploitation, and war have colluded to make contemporary Africa anything but a site of justice and a haven of peace. What is especially significant, from a church perspective, is that the instrumentum laboris appears to take the theme of reconciliation beyond its more traditional theological boundaries of sin and penitence.

All in all, a good time to be sojourners on the “road to reconciliation,” as this symposium is intended to be. I want to thank the Paulist Reconciliation Ministries and the School of Theology and Ministry of Boston College for staging this very timely symposium and inviting me to be a part of it. “The Road to Reconciliation” as a metaphor suggests that we are indeed on the move, and that there is a certain directionality to our movement. I would like to take this road metaphor and use it to pose two questions.

The first is: Just where have we come on the road to reconciliation? Taking the International Year of Reconciliation as an opportunity and invitation, I would like to take stock of where we have come and what we have learned over these past twenty years about reconciliation. The learning curve has been a steep one, in many ways – both in the sheer number of events that have called out for reconciliation, and in the density of questions that have emerged from those events. Much of this presentation, therefore, will be given over to charting that road to reconciliation as it has unfolded before us over the past twenty years.

The second question is contained in the title of this presentation: Is the “road to reconciliation” principally about looking backward – healing the past – or looking forward – building the future? Responding to this question will require a different perspective than the one needed to answer the previous one. It will involve stepping aside, as it were, and trying to locate the multiple discourses of reconciliation within the larger landscape of the past two decades. Why did interest in reconciliation emerge as such a compelling topic when it did? What does it say about what preceded it and what we hope will follow? The final part of this presentation will be devoted to suggesting some responses to that question.

As can be seen from the breadth of these two questions, all I will be able to do here is point to signposts along the road, and not give any thorough treatment of any specific topic. While there is a measure of frustration built into such an approach, this attempt to grasp the big picture has the advantage of offering a wider perspective that might help us address some of the thorny issues involved in reconciliation and perhaps throw some light on puzzlements we experience along the way.

Where Have We Come on the Road to Reconciliation?

“Map is not territory,” religion scholar Jonathan Z. Smith reminded us some years ago.¹ A map is an attempt to understand better a terrain, and the relationships between its various parts. A roadmap is not the road itself, but a stylized representation that is intended to help us navigate a road’s twists and turns, its smooth and its rough parts.

Before embarking on tracing the road to reconciliation, however, it behooves us to consider a bit the territory itself, the terrain that has created the need to chart roads to reconciliation. I have already noted that there was a dramatic increase in events that drew attention to the theme of reconciliation. Just what were those events, and how did they engage the theme of reconciliation in those years? Let me trace briefly some of those events, and note how they provide the contour and texture of the landscape of reconciliation.

I have already mentioned what might be considered the inaugurating event of that period, namely, the end of Communism in the countries in East and Central Europe, symbolized in the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The relatively rapid collapse of a whole political and economic order had two seismic effects. First of all, it opened the possibility for the reconstruction of nation-states and their societies now freed from an imposed Marxist-Leninist ideology. The homo sovieticus, the “New Man” of the workers’ paradise, had turned out to be a hollow figure, lacking the capacity to build a cohesive, vibrant society. The surveillance and terror tactics of state security police had undermined the basic trust needed to have a thriving civil society. The lies that had been proffered as the truth needed to be named and counteracted. Those who had been declared enemies of the state needed to be rehabilitated. All in all, there was a daunting menu of issues that needed addressing before those nation-states could gain some measure of normalcy.

Second, the shifting away from the bipolar geopolitical order allowed a whole series of local conflicts to erupt. Some of these were long-simmering ones, bearing the marks still of the European colonial era. Others were efforts of groups to gain autonomy as nation-states. In the Balkans, in parts of the former Soviet Union, as well in Africa and Asia, conflicts surged throughout the 1990s. What was striking about nearly all of them was that they were armed conflicts within states, rather than between them. The human cost, especially to non-combatants, was often devastatingly high. Peacemaking that entails reinforcing borders was already a familiar solution; but what did peacemaking mean when there were no physical borders, and erstwhile enemies lived next door to one another? The genocide in Rwanda in 1994 became emblematic of the human consequences of such conflicts.

There were other events that contributed to the interest in reconciliation. 1992 was the United Nations’ International Year of Indigenous Peoples, marking the five-hundredth anniversary of the arrival of Europeans in the Americas. This prompted native peoples of that hemisphere, as well as peoples in Australia, New Zealand and some of the Pacific Islands, to set before the world the dehumanizing effects of half a millennium of colonialism and cultural destruction. How to acknowledge and then address these issues, how to think of possible reparations, and how to restore dignity and honor to devastated cultures took on an awareness and an urgency not previously known.

1994 was the UN’s International Year of Women, marked by a World Conference in Beijing. What this event prompted was a new focus on the plight of women and of children around the world. Violence – especially domestic violence – against women and children, human trafficking, and discrimination against women could no longer be treated as a taboo subject. Domestic violence – physical and sexual – was present in every society and every class.

Yet another prominent theme of reconciliation in those years arose out of the end of other kinds of repressive governments – in this case not Communist ones, but avowedly anti-Communist security states. The end of these governments in Latin America had gained momentum in the 1980s, but the response to their violent pasts was usually one of amnesty and impunity for the wrongdoers. Truth commissions, as an alternative to a war crimes tribunal, had been proposed and were sometimes enacted in many countries, reaching as far back as Bangladesh in the 1970s. But it was the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions that convened in Chile, and thereafter most dramatically in South Africa, that caught the world's imagination. Imperfect as TRCs have been, they seemed to address in some measure the need to set the historic record straight about what had happened, to allow those who had been silenced to speak, and to propose to the successor governments some measures of redress. Today, hardly any conflict ends without a call for such a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, although the conditions under which they can be effective are relatively narrow. They have come to be in the minds of many one of the few remedies we have at hand to heal wounded pasts.

Two final occurrences that have contributed to the atmosphere of a search for reconciliation deserve mention: one general, and one more localized and specific. The general one can be found in the multiple effects of globalization. Alongside its many benefits are a host of negative consequences. The human cost of migration and the plight of immigrants are most noticeable – not that there were not migrants before, but globalization has changed the conditions under which they live. The economic downturn we are now experiencing has some of its most severe effects on those who did the least to cause it. The way wealth is generated and distributed in the global market causes division and polarization. And in the media, the very contrastive nature of how information is transmitted plays into the hands of demagogues and divisive figures. The fact too that news transmission is now constant means the conflicts found anywhere are reported everywhere. In the midst of the flood of information, images, and relentless demands for attention, we are discovering that much of our communications media is having a markedly paradoxical effect on the social fabric. Rather connecting us to one another, we find it dividing us – people are retreating into enclaves of the like-minded and are actually being insulated from pluralism rather than being engaged by it. The polarizing rhetoric that marked so much of the first decade of this new century is a result. Part of the appeal of the Obama presidential campaign for many was the possibility of overcoming this pounding polarization.

The other area that has impelled some to seek reconciliation is the state of the Roman Catholic Church in this country. The sexual abuse scandals that began to be reported in 2001 are emblematic of this. Interestingly, a similar wave of sexual abuse had been reported ten years earlier but had not had the same social impact. The anger, alienation, and erosion of trust that the more recent reports evoked come now upon the accumulated anger and alienation caused by a host of other issues besetting the Church (to be sure, some of these are shared with other Christian Churches) regarding authority, teaching, sexuality, and identity. As I understand it, it is precisely these divisive issues that the Paulist Reconciliation Ministries feel called especially to address.

I have given this extensive list of deep wounds, long-standing grievances, senses of violation, and ruptures of trust to give some idea of the terrain that roads to reconciliation attempt to negotiate. Rebuilding shattered lives, communities, and nations; assuring safety in the most intimate of settings; redressing long-standing crimes against culture and race – all of these have converged, as it were, to create an atmosphere that makes us look to reconciliation as a way through so much pain, suffering, dislocation, and lost opportunities. What the last two decades have done – both for long-standing grievances and misdeeds committed more recently – is create an expectation that something can be done to aright all the wrongs that have been perpetrated against individuals, communities, and nations.

As I look over the terrain that we are being called to traverse, I can discern three roadmaps to reconciliation that have been traced across this territory in the past twenty years. In each of these roadmaps, we learn something about reconciliation itself. We see how the resources – especially of Christian faith – help us negotiate what is often rugged and unforgiving terrain. But we also will see where these roadmaps fall short – where they miscalculate the steep grade that needs to be climbed to attain

reconciliation, where they encounter chasms of alienation and suffering that they cannot bridge. Let me turn to them now.

First Roadmap: Reconciliation is about the Human Heart

The first roadmap sees reconciliation achieved principally by a conversion of the human heart. Only when we have changed the individuals in a society will there be any hope of changing society itself. Put another way, it is reconciled individuals who will make a reconciled society.

On this view, reconciliation is not something we do, but rather something that God is doing to us. This is certainly the central point of St. Paul's message of reconciliation, our principal source for thinking about a Christian understanding of reconciliation. As he sets forth eloquently in the fifth chapter of the Letter to the Romans, we are reconciled to God because while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Rom 5: 8) Paul reminds us here and elsewhere that all reconciliation comes from God (cf. 2 Cor 5:17), and this reconciliation not only frees us from alienation from God, one another, and the entire cosmos; it also makes of us a "new creation," something utterly transformed.

Such a "vertical" understanding of reconciliation, that is, the relationship between God and all that God has created, has been and continues to be at the very heart of the Church's teaching on reconciliation. It focuses upon how individual wrongdoers are reconciled to their Creator. Liturgical texts and practices of reconciliation all give expression to this teaching.

While such an approach to reconciliation is, for Christians, incontrovertible it is often difficult to find ways of translating it into "horizontal" reconciliation – reconciliation among human beings, at both the individual and collective level. Here there is a focus on beginning with the victim and the healing of victims rather than dealing with the perpetrator. While Christians believe that it is only God who has the perspicacity to comprehend the enormity of evil and the consequences of evildoing, the emphasis on the repentance of the wrongdoer runs into the fact that, in human realities, wrongdoers often do not and will not repent. Where does that leave the victims?

A more victim-centered approach to reconciliation is of course possible within the framework of Christian faith. The option for the poor and the accompaniment of those who are marginalized, as exemplified in the message of the Hebrew prophets and in the praxis of Jesus, provide an ample base. Much recent effort in developing a theology of reconciliation has been trying to explore these possibilities. Yet to date, there has been little liturgical support for the care of victims. The apologies Pope John Paul II offered within the context of Evening Prayer on the first Sunday of Lent in 2000 are at least a harbinger of what might still come.

The instrumentum laboris for the upcoming Synod for Africa gives a very good summary of this first road to reconciliation, based on the conversion of human hearts. Although it encourages acts of advocacy, charity, and education, it centers on the sacraments and the growth in holiness of individuals as the key to reconciliation in Africa. There is a deep truth here: without a cadre of truly reconciled individuals, one cannot hope to transform a society. As an example, one can speculate what the end of the apartheid era might have looked like were it not for the vision of Nelson Mandela and the way Desmond Tutu led the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. But at the same time, focusing only on the state of grace of individuals does not seem to begin to reach far enough into the huge problems that Africa faces today – problems that are also outlined at the beginning of the instrumentum laboris.

To focus solely on individual conversion and union with God is an essential part of any road to reconciliation (from a Christian perspective), but it by itself fails to account for other important features. A society is more than the sum of individuals, and what is called social or structural sin cannot be reduced to the accumulated sins of individuals. To speak of reconciliation only in terms of individual conversion does not adequately deal with the kind of society that needs to emerge from conversion. The flawed character of a view of reconciliation focused only on individuals has been evident for a long time in the

ecclesial and educational ministries of the Church: regular reception of the sacraments and a Catholic education do not inoculate a society against evil practices. The majority of the genocidaires in Rwanda, after all, were Christian – most of them Catholic.

To make the same point in more individual terms: advising a battered spouse to solve the problem of being beaten by praying more and forgiving her spouse does not solve the problem of domestic violence. Some demons may be driven out by prayer and fasting, but others are not. Put another way, the tangled roots of violence and wrongdoing cannot be reduced to individual sin, even though sin is undeniably a part of the equation. Moreover, pastorally, the sole focus on the human heart is likely to sound like advice to endure one's suffering rather than work in some way to overcome it.

So as a roadmap to reconciliation, to see reconciliation only as something about the individual human heart will not in itself get us to our goal. To put it in philosophical language, the conversion of the individual heart is a necessary but not sufficient condition for reconciliation. It provides an important, indeed indispensable resource, and is an important feature for orientation on the road to reconciliation. But we need more.

Roadmap Two: Reconciliation is about Overcoming Injustice

A second roadmap to achieve reconciliation takes a different approach, building somewhat on the perceived shortcomings of the first roadmap. This second approach addresses the complexity of causes that create situations that call for reconciliation. It focuses especially on social factors, and their accumulated, historical effects upon a situation. It tries to discern how different forms of wrongdoing become intertwined and become, over time, nearly impossible to untangle. In nations, histories of colonialism or foreign subjugation are kept in place by endemic poverty and protracted conflict. The dysfunctional systems of families can affect family members for generation after generation. Institutions intended to be beneficent develop repressive and oppressive features that become embedded in their culture. In a word, there are glaring absences of right relations we call together injustice.

The road to reconciliation can be construed as a struggle against injustice. A cry that is often heard in the aftermath of repression in a country is that there can be no reconciliation without an end to injustice, and indeed a punishment of wrongdoers. Pope Paul VI's oft-quoted dictum "If you want peace, work for justice" sums this up succinctly. Especially since the 1970 Synod of Bishops on Justice in the World, and parallel efforts in the World Council of Churches beginning about the same time, the work for reconciliation has often focused on the work for justice.

As well it should. The language of "reconciliation" often can be found on the lips of wrongdoers who want victims to forget the past and the sufferings victims have endured. It is a way of skipping over the issue of justice. The use of amnesty and impunity in Latin America in the 1980s made "reconciliation" a bad word in many of those countries. Justice is clearly understood as one of the central attributes of God in all three of the Abrahamic faiths. The Bible (and the Qur'an) is filled with references to justice.

Without some measure of justice, the wounds of those who have suffered injustice cannot heal. Without the continuing pursuit of justice, efforts and programs of reconciliation will not have authenticity in the eyes of victims. But more important even here than the authenticity that makes for credibility is a faithfulness to God and to God's work in reconciliation. And that work is inconceivable without a continuing pursuit of justice.

At the same time, twenty years in the work of reconciliation has taught us a few things about the pursuit of justice – especially our pursuit of justice as it might be compared to God's own justice. There are three things in particular that we have learned that need to be mentioned here. The first is when justice focuses exclusively on punitive justice, that is, the punishment of wrongdoers, it is inadequate at best and can become deleterious to the entire process of reconciliation and healing at worst. The punishment of wrongdoers can serve a deeply felt human impulse (Jared Diamond and evolutionary psychologists have

ranked it among the basic “adaptive responses” that have shaped human social behavior since we lived in small bands of hunter-gatherers) for retaliation when we have been harmed. Retaliation is intended to deter the wrongdoer from striking again, and fits into a larger social pattern that sees society as an equilibrium among competing, hostile forces. In Western societies, this primitive adaptive response is often depicted as Dame Justice holding a set of scales, herself blindfolded to indicate her impartiality in restoring balance in society. Sociologists studying Western societies have cast considerable doubt on whether punishment for the sake of deterrence actually does create the hoped-for block on future wrongful behavior. Yet it remains an important mechanism at the very least for maintaining the state’s claim to monopoly on violence in society.

From the point of view of reconciliation, punitive justice runs the risk of not actually stopping cycles of violence, but merely sending them into gestation until the opportunity arises for the punished to retaliate against those doing the punishing. Perhaps one of the most graphic examples of this at a social level in the twentieth century was the punishment meted out against Germany by the Allies at the end of the First World War. The heavy fines, the wresting away of territory, and the military occupation of the Rhineland was intended to punish and to humiliate. Many historians consider this experience as preparing the ground for accepting fascism in that country, so much so that recent histories of the period suggest that the twenty years between 1919 and 1939 was but a truce in one, continuous war.

Enacting punitive justice has the decided positive effect of saying that the state will not tolerate such wrongdoing in the future. But it largely fails to create the conditions for a different kind of society; it can only produce its mirror opposite, of not tolerating such acts. It is in light of this that movements for restorative justice have taken on more valence in peace studies, not only in criminal justice systems but also in thinking about the reconstruction of society as a whole.

Worse, a single-minded pursuit of punitive justice can actually make long-term conditions for full reconciliation worse. A much-debated point in this regard at the moment is the warrant issued by the International Criminal Court for the arrest of the President of the Sudan, Omar al-Bashir. He has retaliated by expelling aid agencies that are keeping more than a million people in Darfur alive. One of the dangers in the pursuit of justice in complex situations of wrongdoing is that the concept of justice can become exceedingly abstract, and so do damage to concrete realities rather than ameliorating the conditions and direct experiences of injustice.

A second and related feature of the limits of justice has to do with being able to deal with the cascading effects of long-term injustice. Wrongdoing, social sin, and all their consequences become so interlaced and entrenched in societies that they become almost impossible to eradicate. We chip away at them as it were, either through focusing on individual injustices, or by enacting structural changes that we hope will erase the conditions under which injustice continues to operate. Think for example of the ongoing struggle against racism in this country. Four decades of addressing individual projects, especially in education, and of enacting legislation to counteract discrimination have brought us as a nation a long way. Barack Obama would not be President today without it. Yet we are constantly reminded of how much has to be done, and the vigilance needed to keep from sliding back to an earlier state. Such a realization should not make us give up on the pursuit of justice; on the contrary. But it makes us realize how focused we need to continue to be. We cannot achieve perfect justice. And what does that mean for the healing process within reconciliation?

A third consideration about the limits of justice grows out of another thing we are learning about reconciliation. Reconciliation is about change. We have long known that it involves the change of the wrongdoer, and calls for a series of actions on the wrongdoer’s part: remorse, apology, asking for forgiveness, a willingness to accept punishment or to engage in acts of expiation. But what has become clearer over time is that the victim, too, has to undergo change if there is to be a “new creation.” I am not talking here about blaming victims for the plight in which they find themselves. But at some point victims have to be willing to engage the harm that has been done them, so as to secure – at the very least – a return of the agency that has been wrested away from them to change their relationship to what has happened: to the deed, the wrongdoer, and the larger setting in which all of this happened. We know that

the reconstruction of life after grievous harm and irretrievable loss requires a new set of relationships to oneself, the community, to the past, and even to God. The repair of the web of meaning that situates in a life-giving, interdependent world requires all of this. Often in the pursuit of justice there is a sense that change is only something for the wrongdoer. If that change happens, the integrity of the victim is restored. That is, of course, too simple. It rests on the belief that grave injustice and wrongdoing can simply be erased or removed from the lives of victims without any further consequences for the victim, and the victim can then return to a status quo ante and continue life as though nothing every happened. But profound misdeeds change our lives inalterably. We cannot bring back the dead. We cannot restore a way of life and some networks of relationships that have been irretrievably taken from us. To pursue justice without regard for the change that will have to happen in the lives of victims, then, will only eventuate in a one-sided, inadequate enactment of justice.

I raise these points about the limits of justice to show the limits of this kind of roadmap for achieving reconciliation. In circles where reconciliation is being pursued, inadequate and abstract pursuits of justice can actually hamper the longer-term quest for reconciliation and healing. An example would be the 1997 meeting of the European Council of Churches in Graz. The meeting, intended to explore reconciliation, broke down into competing lobbying groups for different causes, each claiming that the injustices that they had suffered were the most grievous and therefore had to have priority of attention. The World Council of Churches, in some of its documents in that period, had made the pursuit of justice such a central priority that it became impossible to make any other move toward a wider reconciliation short of complete justice. Miroslav Volf, one of the most sensitive students of reconciliation pointed this out at the time.²

Like seeing the conversion of the individual human heart as the best roadmap to reconciliation, the pursuit of justice as yet another roadmap carries with it deep truths that we ignore at our own peril. But as the sole roadmap, it may not help us negotiate some of the terrain on the road to reconciliation. When one deals with long-term wrongdoing, and the accumulation of the effects of social sin, the pursuit of justice becomes a necessary, but not in itself sufficient, condition for reaching reconciliation. If left only to changing the wrongdoing that has been done, and eliminating the conditions that sustain injustice, it may not deal adequately with the other changes that must mark wrongdoers and victims alike.

Roadmap Three: Reconciliation is about Alternative Social Formations

A third roadmap to reconciliation grows out of two sets of experiences. The first set arises from the realization of the strengths and weaknesses of the two roadmaps already discussed. Both roadmaps provided indispensable guideposts on the road to reconciliation, focusing upon the conversion of individual hearts and the pursuit of justice. As we have come to experience the complexity of reconciliation processes – be it in international peacemaking or dealing with polarizations within Church and society – we have also become aware of the limitations of the roadmaps these provide for all the varieties of terrain that a road to reconciliation must negotiate. Hence, the limitations have caused us to ask questions.

The second set of experiences has to do with what has been found to “work” in reconciliation efforts over the past twenty years. Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, for example, have existed at least since 1970. But it was the TRCs in Chile and South Africa that have captured the wider imagination. Efforts at healing of memories, such as the REMHI Project in Guatemala, have also been turned to increasingly as an important avenue to national healing. The increasing attention given to processes of forgiveness constitute yet another venue for reconciliation.

This leads me to propose thinking about a third kind of roadmap to achieving reconciliation. I call it “alternative social formations.” Alternative social formations are sites of liminal performance, often highly ritualized in nature, that provide spaces for engaging in practices that promote reconciliation. They are spaces that are alternative, in the sense that they are not located entirely in the present (therefore only accompanying the victim or wrongdoer in their present state), in the past (therefore dealing with memory and the healing of memory, nor only in the future (imagining or engaging in utopian thinking). Rather they are spaces that allow for movement between all three of these dimensions of time. That movement is

made possible by recourse to ritual, a performance that can link these different dimensions in such a way as to make each and all of them “present” to us.

These spaces have been identified by thinkers such as postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha as “third spaces” wherein reigning patterns of power and domination are deconstructed and even reversed.³ Anthropologist Paul Rabinow speaks of “interstitial” zones, where people come out of their own bounded situations to meet one another in a place that bears some of the marks of their home territory, but is really a new place.⁴

These spaces are primarily social spaces, rather than physical ones – although specific physical sites may become the locales for these social spaces (think of monuments to the dead or public sites where profound social changes began to take place, such as the remains of the Berlin Wall). These spaces are constituted principally by the people who gather there with the intent of enacting something relating to the process of reconciliation. They are “provisional,” both in the sense of temporary, and also in the sense of providing something that the current social environment lacks or cannot bring forward. As such, they are primarily social, rather than physical formations.

Take, for example, the Thursday demonstrations in the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires by the mothers of the disappeared. These demonstrations eventually brought down the junta in Argentina in 1983, and continued for more than twenty years to call attention to the continuing need to pursue justice. After impunity of the wrongdoers from the dirty war was lifted, these demonstrations linked the nation back twenty years to the times of the wrongdoing itself. It might be helpful to mention here other examples. I have already noted Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, and the REMHI Project in Guatemala at the end of the civil war there. Here are some others:

The use of “healing” or “listening” circles to help individuals deal with their wounds as victims. There victims gather in safe and hospitable spaces to examine their traumatic pasts and seek new narratives to tell their stories.

Programs against racism, such as Clarence Williams’ “racial sobriety” project, that combines insights from Alcoholics Anonymous with dealing with the enduring challenges of racism.

Building monuments to the dead, such as the Ojo que llora in Lima, or the Vietnam memorial in Washington, DC.

Efforts of the Catholic Common Ground Initiative for annual meetings of dialogue, plus the annual lecture.

I do not want to give the impression that all these alternative social formations are highly formalized undertakings, such as some of those that I have mentioned. Sometimes they are moments within other activities. I am thinking here of Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s exhortations to forgiveness given regularly during sessions of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, or rituals many women’s groups have developed to heal from abuse, increase individual agency, or form life-giving communities.

The point of focusing upon these alternative social formations is to call attention to some important learnings about reconciliation and the road to reconciliation that the last two decades have given us. Attending to these alternative social formations help highlight some of these learnings. Let me try to enumerate some of them for you here.

We sometimes focus inordinately on reconciliation as a goal, and forget how much of it is a process. That process is not simply a means to an end; that is, something we do and then discard upon reaching the goal. It is also part of the goal itself. If reconciliation is about change in all the parties involved, that change is more than a matter of mind. It is inscribed in our bodies. Alternative social formations are the inscribing moments.

Even though we are speaking of the “road” to reconciliation, reconciliation as a goal is rarely reached by a linear process. There are many reversals, doublings back, twists and turns, dead ends, and other vagaries along the way. The repetitive character of these alternative social formations remind us of this,

and embed the practices of reconciliation within the social fabric, not as a once-for-all event, but a recurrent (although we also hope, cumulative) process toward an end.

This non-linear quality of reconciliation holds not only for our spatial experience, but also for our experience of time as well. We find ourselves turning back to the past as our present changes, we find ourselves re-imagining an already imagined future. The ritual quality of many alternative social formations helps us negotiate this moving in and out of different experiences of time.

Reconciliation as a goal is only partially imaginable. We cannot envision it entirely ahead of time or project the present experience into the future as such. As such, our experience of reconciliation is always incomplete. From a Christian point of view, we yearn for eschatological fulfillment, when "God will be all in all" (1 Cor 15:28).

I hope these general suggestions give some idea of what I am coming to believe is an important part of the work of reconciliation, namely, attending to the role of alternative social formations as a constituent part of the process. It gives us a different roadmap through the terrain of healing and reconciliation, having as a particular strength an appreciation of the role of the practices of reconciliation as moments of an anticipatory experience of reconciliation, as well as signposts of just how far we have come and still need to go. At the same time, such an approach too has its limitations. One can come to dwell in these alternative social formations as a kind of haven on a painful path, and not want to leave their provisional comforts. One can become transfixed by the moments of healing in such a way as not to be willing to continue the onward journey. As a roadmap, these alternative social formations do change our perception of the contours of the terrain. But again, map is not territory.

Conclusion: Healing the Past or Building the Future?

I return to the title of this presentation: Is reconciliation about healing the past or building the future? In a road that is as much marked by paradox as another other trope, the answer is: yes. Both are essential dimensions. To be sure, depending upon the terrain that needs to be traversed, there may be more emphasis on one than the other. For the generation that has experienced acute loss and trauma, the past may be pre-eminent. For their children and grandchildren, the future may be the preoccupation. In the next presentation, I will turn to these questions in more detail, and look at how a community of reconciliation must be such that it is at once a community of memory and a community of hope. The nature of wounds that wrongdoing wreaks upon the human heart and the human community, no single dimension will suffice for the healing. Healing is something that must embrace all of the dimensions of the human condition and the human journey.