# Ministry of Reconciliation: Methods Rooted in Spirituality

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#### Introduction

In my preparation for being with you this evening and in the days ahead, I have spoken with different members of your congregation, especially your elected leadership team members, and they have shared with me their thoughts- their hopes and dreams- for this assembly. They have also made available documents and reports which have chronicled your recent exploration of your charism of reconciliation. Without presuming that I have more than a superficial knowledge of your community, I can tell you that my experience of those conversations and readings of those documents has had a very familiar feel to it. Simply, my own congregation has been on a similar journey of discovering as we have danced with the same set of questions: What is a charism of reconciliation? How does this charism influence our lives together? How does it empower our apostolic mission?

During this presentation and in the process of the next couple of days we are going to focus more on the practical than the theoretical; more on ministerial method than on the theology or spirituality of reconciliation. I know that this presentation is part of an ongoing communal reflection on your charism reconciliation. Two members of my congregation have preceded me in participating in this process. Last year Robert Schreiter gave this keynote address and he spoke of the charism of reconciliation and its practices. While my topic this evening is similar, I will not plow the same field. It is my hope that you will see this presentation as complimentary and a development of his thoughts. While I owe much of my understanding of reconciliation to Bob's work in developing a foundational theological understanding, this evening I'm going to place the greater focus on ministerial methods. Some of you participated in the community retreat preached by Joseph Nassal this past summer. In a similar way, this evening is not intended to be a spiritual conference and the spirituality of reconciliation is not my focus. However, my classmate and I have drunk from the same well and so some overlap in thought might be evident.

My congregation began the Precious Blood Ministry of Reconciliation (PBMR) in 2002. It is a ministry sponsored by the two US provinces of the Missionaries of the Precious Blood. The decision to begin that work was a direct result of my congregation's struggle to understand the charism of reconciliation. In particular, we found strong motivation to act in response to the frustration shared by our members in struggling with the question: If reconciliation is our charism-how do we do it? A primary charge given to the founding members of PBMR was to discover the answer to that question and to be a resource to the members as they integrated the charism of reconciliation into their lives, and more particularly, in their ministries. The primary focus of my presentation this evening will be to share with you the things that we have learned in developing that ministry. Please do not hear my sharing as a suggestion that the Missionaries of La Salette should imitate what we have done, rather I offer it as an example of

how another congregation has come to address our shared questions about incorporating a charism of reconciliation into our apostolate. But before I describe the work that we do, it important to first highlight the orientation or thinking that we have found necessary to engage in this work.

# **Some Foundational Understandings**

While I have said that my focus is on ministerial method and not the theology or spirituality of reconciliation, I want to begin by remembering that the ministry of reconciliation is more spirituality than strategy, because reconciliation is first and foremost the work of God. This understanding, for which we are indebted to Schreiter, is an essential counterweight to the emphasis that I am going to be placing on ministerial methods and the development of pastoral skills for responding to conflicts and for affecting reconciliation. While a spirituality of reconciliation can be, even needs to be, a **lived** spirituality, there is no such thing as a reconciliation technician. We believe that all can be reconciled to God through Christ. That was the wondrous mission of Jesus. What we do is to participate in the continuation of the reconciling mission of the Christ.

At the PBMR, Paul's message to the Corinthians about the ministry of reconciliation is our constant touchstone.

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. [2Corinthian 5:17-20]

The ministry of reconciliation begins with what God does for us. That gift of reconciliation come with a commission to continue what God has begun through Christ. It is not our work, but God's work being continued. The importance of this text is that it presents to us an understanding of reconciliation that is both charism and commission. This twofold dynamic present a pattern that must be incorporated into our lives as redeemed members of the Body of Christ and as an apostolic community. While this dynamic proceeds on both the vertical and horizontal planes, like love of God and love of neighbor, it is best understood as one continuing action, not two separate actions. That dynamic of a duo direction is a constant in our ministry of reconciliation.

It is an awareness of the grace of God and the efficacy of that grace in our own lives that forms the pastoral heart needed to be God's ambassador. Without that spiritual awareness, without the personal discernment which grounds are own lives in a redeeming relationship with Christ, we cannot effectively continue Christ's reconciling mission.

In his recent book, When Blood and Bones Cry Out; journeys through the soundscapes of healing and reconciliation, John Paul Lederach acknowledges that there are diverse understandings of reconciliation. Within those diverse understandings, he notes two areas of consensus. The first is that the focus of reconciliation must be on relationships, not the issues or events which may be the cause of conflict and division. Within a culture that place a value

on "tackling problems head on," this can be a significant and difficult shift in understanding. Problem solving and the mediation of conflicts have sometime been presented as methods that lead to reconciliation, but this is a false path for an ambassador of Christ.

Because of the focus on relationships, in our language about reconciliation we often use spatial metaphors of encounter. Last year you heard Schreiter employ this language as he spoke "creating space" as a framework for the understanding the practice of reconciliation. He emphasized the need to create the alternative social situations needed for reconciliation to occur. His emphasis was on creating places that were safe and hospitable, which allows trust to be restored and relationships (and memories) to be healed. As we explored ministerial methods in our work at PBMR, we have found this metaphor to be very useful because it helps us to keep the focus on the restoring of right relationship and not just problem solving.

While the focus in reconciliation is on the relationship, yes, issues do need to be addressed. In Lederach's earlier work (See **The Journey Towards Reconciliation** and **The Little Book of Conflict Transformation**) he writes about how to maintain the necessary relationship focus while also addressing the conflict directly. He does this with a useful distinction made between conflict *resolution* and conflict *transformation*. The distinction is to approach a conflicted situation as a opportunity to positively affect, to transform, the relationships which have been damaged by conflict. As a trained sociologist, he urges that the underlying causes of the conflict, the context and underlying patterns of behavior, be identified. He proposes that the work of reconciliation must not only address the episode of conflict, but that underlying epicenter. An example of this will hopeful illustrate the distinction.

I worked for a number of years with the Archdiocese of Chicago's Office of Conciliation. As a member of the Advisory Board for the Ministry, we would review the pastoral interventions of the director. One parish kept appearing in the work of the director. First it was a conflict among the pastoral staff. Then there was a conflict between the parish (pastor) and the school (principal). Other episodes of conflict arose and someone at the parish would call on the Conciliation Office to help mediate a resolution. Conflict were resolved, but reconciliation was not effected until the underlying epicenter of the conflicts were addressed. At the epicenter were issue of power and authority and got expressed in questions like: How do decisions get made? How is legitimate authority exercised? Whose parish is this? The episodes of conflict arose because at the center of their relationship were differing ecclesiologies and understandings of the role of the pastor. Once the epicenter was also addressed, the episodes of conflict were less frequent and when they occurred the parish was better able to deal with them without assistance. In a ministry of reconciliation it is tempting to focus on the problem and to implement problem solving strategies, but the minister must be able to see beyond the presenting difficulty and address the less obvious underlying conditions which impact the relationships. Put another way, the ministry is don't just putting out fires; we also need to help make things fireproof.

The ministry of reconciliation is about the restoration of right relationships. The concept of *shalom* found in the Hebrew testament is more than the absence of war; it is a description of a people living together in right relationship. The Gospel imperative to create the Reign of God found in the preaching of Jesus, is for the creation of a communion of peoples that are redeemed and loved by God and who live together in a right relationship; a relationship that embodies *agape* and is a model of justice. It is these biblical principles of right relationship

what must direct our work; and the concept of right relationship serves as a sort of synonym for reconciliation.

Along with the need to focus on relationship, Lederach writes that the second point of consensus that he finds in the varying understandings of reconciliation is that reconciliation is "best understood as a process involving some form of movement as in a developmental progression." (When Blood and Bones Cry Out, 5) Any ministerial methods of reconciliation must be a process. Of course, the process of healing of relationships is difficult and complex. Relationships seldom proceed along a linear pathway; there is a circular quality to them. If you think about your own relationships or the relationships which form your community, it is easy to see how those relationships grew stronger or deeper over time and through the repetition of times together in prayer, dialogue, or social events. Relationships need time and attention to grow. The shortest distance from point A to point B may be a straight line, but the journey of reconciliation from conflict to communion is seldom along a straight path. We do not "achieve" reconciliation once and for all time; rather the healing of relationship, which is the mark of reconciliation, usually requires not only sustained effort and attention, but often repeated action. For victims to move from woundedness towards healing, they often need to tell their story over and over again. In our groups with victims they often speak of family members and friends who have tired of the story and who tell them that "they have to get over it and get on with their lives." However, pastoral accompaniment through the repeated telling of the story is often a necessary part of the healing of reconciliation.

There is an image that I use to imagine the work of reconciliation. When I was young and learning how to write with cursive script, the teacher gave us an exercise of keeping the pen on the paper and creating a row of interconnected circles across the page. While there was movement across the page- from point A to point B- it was anything but a straight line. The ministry of reconciliation is often like that; sometimes we go around and around with a needed repetition in the methods that we use, but there is a progression in the relationships as we move from a conflicted place to a place of healing.

### Ministerial Methods- Learning from the PBMR

In the eight years of our experience in Chicago we have learned much through trial and error about the ministry of reconciliation. One lesson has been to stop looking for the **one** perfect ministerial method. Just as different congregations and worship settings require different ways of preaching or the pastoral response that benefits one grieving family will be ineffective with another, it is self-evident that a ministry of reconciliation requires a range of skills and pastoral responses. There is an old expression: When the only tool you have is a hammer then everything looks like a nail. The work of reconciliation is too complex to be tackled with only one tool.

While I will describe two of the methods that we have used effectively, the pastoral skills required are not unique to this ministry, rather it is the using of the skills within the framework of reconciliation that I will describe. The ministry uses many skills: pastoral listening and good communication; the ability to empathize and to make healthy emotional contact with others; facilitation and the ability to be appropriately directive; the ability to help connect the wisdom of the Scriptures to the current situation; these are some of the basic pastoral skill that

we have all acquired and use within our ministries. As I said, these are not new or unique to our ministry in PBMR.

## Accompaniment

One of the characteristics of a Christian spirituality of reconciliation, according to Bob Schreiter, is the believe that that God identifies with the victims and that reconciliation begins with a concern for them. We are called to be in imitation of God's concern and challenged to be in solidarity with victims; those that suffer. We were mindful of this when we began our ministry in Chicago.

The Precious Blood Ministry of Reconciliation is located in the Back of the Yards neighborhood of Chicago. It is a lower social economic neighborhood that experiences much violence. Most of the violence is connected to gang activity. Most frequently, both wrongdoers and victims of violence are Latino or African American youth, although the entire community is dramatically affected. Our Center is literally located on the border between African American and Latino areas and in the midst of various gang turf. Choosing to be on the border was a conscious choice to place our self in the midst of the violence. We use the image of being a bridge as a part of our self-understanding of our role in the community. We are part of that community; we accompany that community.

As I mentioned, when my congregation began this ministry, a primary charge was to develop the practice of reconciliation. Without a clear pastoral plan, we placed ourselves into a community in need of reconciliation, to create a place of safety in the midst of the violence. As naïve as it seems to me now, our only plan was to become a part of the community in need of reconciliation and to respond to what we encountered as Precious Blood people with a charism of reconciliation; we trusted our charism (and the One who gives it) to teach us as we learned by doing.

What we do in the ministry has evolved and continues to evolve. We are guided not only by a Christian spirituality of reconciliation, but by the principles of restorative justice which requires that attention and concern be directed towards three groups: victims, wrongdoers and the community. We are part of creating a 'restorative community' where the concern of justice is not primarily about punishment, although accountability for one's actions is necessary, but about restoring those affected by violence to just and right relationships. I say that we are "part of creating a restorative community" because we are not there to fix the neighborhood, but to accompany the community. All work is under that umbrella of community collaboration.

Some of our work is with individuals – mentoring of youth or pastorally responding to victims of violence – but mostly we work with groups. And it is the method that we use for that group work which I want to describe to you now.

### **Peacemaking Circles**

An important method in our ministry of reconciliation is the process of peacemaking circles. Superficially it appears deceptively simple – people sitting around in a circle and talking with each other. However, there are underlying principles which guide the practice and makes it an effective tool in a process of reconciliation.

Peacemaking circles is a process which comes out of the tradition of the first nations or indigenous people. While it has resurfaced and developed in recent restorative justice practices, it is an ancient practice. Essentially, it is a value based ritual of communication.

(Here I can only briefly describe the process, the Selected Readings list offers resources for a more thorough explanation.)

Facilitating communication is essential in a ministry that seeks the transformation of relationships. While there is a certain temptation to underestimate the need for facilitation, because we want to believe that people should be able just talk with each other, we can all provide antidotal evidence that people often are not able to engage in honest dialogue with one another, especially in situation of high emotion, such as conflict.

Rituals can create the alternative social reality that is needed for reconciliation. When we gather around the altar, the ritual we use distinguishes that action from the gathering around the dining room table. Rituals alert the participants that something different is going on and how people participate is directed or prescribed. In Peacemaking Circles the ritual guides and assists the participants to communicate. It creates a community that can be a safe place for honest self-revelation. To use Schreiter's imagery, it can create a community of memory that allows those who suffer or who have been victimized to face the past; it can create a community of hope and healing that allows them to imagine a future that is not defined by their wounds. To employ another image, the ritual of Circles are a container that can hold the emotions which frighten us and which we can believe are inexpressible. The rituals of Circles create the space to look at that which has divided people and has fractured relationships and to heal those relationships and to discover peace and justice.

Rituals have rubrics and Peacemaking Circles are no exception. The space is arranged so that chairs are in a circle to indicate the equality of the participants. Someone is designated as the Circle Keeper, but that is a position of facilitation to maintain the integrity of the Circle process, not a position of authority. All participants share responsibility for maintaining the Circle. In the center of the Circle is not a table or other furniture, but the group constructs a center piece which hold objects of meaning specific to that group. The time in Circle follows a prescribed pattern- Opening ritual, Check-in, addressing the purpose of the Circle, Check-out, Closing ritual. One significant benefit to this pattern of interaction is that it helps the process to maintain a balance in the focus of their interaction. A rule of thumb in Circle work is that the group needs to spend as much time focused on the relationships within the group as it dedicates to the issue or purpose for convening the Circle.

It is always necessary to prepare the participants for being in the Circle. An important principle is that all participation must be voluntary. Bringing people together requires that the Circle purpose and process be explained. This is an important part of the work of reconciliation and it is a time of accompaniment. Often part of pre-Circle work is to help those involved to desire reconciliation and to begin to imagine that it is possible. When the desire is to bring together parties in conflict, we may use the circle process to do the pre-work with each of the parties.

Those who make up the Circle define the values which will be maintained and the guidelines which will be followed during their interaction. Establishing these values and guideline is an essential part of each Circle. The process has some foundational values which must be understood and maintained. Respect, honesty, trust, inclusivity are a few of the values that are universal, although coming to a common understanding of those values is not always easy. While it is not always easy to reach consensus on the values, doing so is important and is an essential part of creating the Circle as a place of safety.

In **The Journey Towards Reconciliation,** John Paul Lederach tell of a story that he wrote and uses in his reconciliation ministry. Called The Meeting, the story is based on the image of reconciliation that is found in Psalm 85. In the Psalm, reconciliation is described as the place where: *Truth and Mercy have met together. Justice and Peace have kissed.* The story is about how those values can come into conflict and the reconciliation which results when those values are brought into a dialogue in which all four values are honored. In the same way in the Circle process, when the participants take the time to share the values that are important to them, they discover a commonality of values which can be the bases for beginning to reestablish trust.

Those gathered in Circle must also establish and agree to the guidelines which will direct their interaction. Again, the principles of the Circle require some guidelines always be used. The purpose of guidelines is to help the group to be at their best together. Maintaining confidentiality, decision making by consensus, speaking and listening with respect are all essential to the process. Often Circles create practical guidelines that are specific to them. (e.g.- no phones; be on time; stay in the circle; etc.)

Another universal guideline is to respect the talking piece; that is, only the one holding the talking piece may speak and all others are to listen. The use of a talking piece is sometimes misunderstood and its importance is underestimated, but we have repeatedly seen its value in creating the alternative social space needed for reconciliation. The talking piece help the participants to speak difficult truths because they know that what they say will be heard with respect. It helps people to speak who have difficulty speaking and it helps those that need help to listen. It's use has a great way of balancing out participation. It slows down the process so that emotions do not negatively control the interaction.

While the process is known as Peacemaking Circles, we employ the method in a wide variety of situations and the process has the flexibility to be used for many different purposes. To name a few: we use the Circle process with support groups for victims and with bereavement groups; support groups for ex-offenders; we bring together wrongdoers and their victims; as an alternative to the sentencing process in juvenile courts; our own staff and planning meetings; community groups working to improve their neighborhood; and many other purposes. The value of this process is not limited to those who work in restorative justice; that is just one of the forum in which we have employed the method. Our restorative justice project in Chicago is the 'hothouse' that we have used to experiment with various methods, and it is in this work that we discovered and have affirmed the value of the peacemaking circle method, but the method can be useful for affecting reconciliation in other settings. If a group has difficulty in communication or especially when the topic to be discussed has a strong emotional impact, this method can help the group to maintain a mutual respectful relationship or to restore relationships which have been damaged.

#### **Beyond Accompaniment or Guided Accompaniment**

An image that I used for reconciliation is the old cursive writing exercise of drawing a row of interconnected circle across the page. This was my way of illustrating the often repetitive nature of the accompaniment of victims or those in need of reconciliation. We sometimes go around and around, but there is a linear progression as well. It is in the telling of the story that the person can come to new understandings and be able to remember what has happened in new way and the grace of reconciliation leads to healing. But if I can continue to use the image, what happens when the pen gets stuck and we just go around and around and

there is no movement forward across the page? What happens when in our accompaniment of a victim we create the safe place for them and continue to allow the victim to retell their story, but there is no movement towards reconciliation? People get 'stuck.' Or what happens in a community or group when they recognize the dysfunction of their relationship and the need for reconciliation, they desire something new, but are unable to imagine and move towards a new way of being together? While the Peacemaking Circle method has served us well in our ministry, it was our encounter with this type of 'stuck-ness' that led us to look for another ministerial method.

Recently, over the past couple of years, we have been developing a ministerial method that has its inspiration in the theory and practice of Appreciative Inquiry (AI). AI is a recently developed theory of organizational dynamics. It is a secular theory that is used extensively in process of strategic planning, but we have found it useful for affecting reconciliation. It is adaptable for use in faith based organizations because it recognizes the autonomy of any organization to define itself with their beliefs and values that they hold dear. As a ministerial method for reconciliation, we have used this primarily with Church groups and it was in my doctoral work that I baptized this theory as Appreciative Discernment (AD), because the key principles translate easily into religious language. By example- while a business does strategic planning, in the Church we discern a faithful future. In the ministry of reconciliation, through discernment people in conflict learn what it means to be in right relationship. With a ministerial method of Appreciative Discernment, they also can make the journey to being that new creation.

Originating in the works of David Cooperrider at Case-Western University, it offers a radically different way of thinking about organizations and how the organization can be changed or transformed. Our traditional understanding of organizations is based in the physics of Sir Isaac Newton. Maybe you remember his "big clock theory?" He propose that the world is like a big clock; all the parts of the world are interconnected like the mechanisms of a clock. So if the world, or an organization, is broken, it is necessary to take the clock apart and identify the broken part and repair it so that the world or organization can be restored to perfecting working order. In contrast to this mechanical model, AI proposes an organic model for understanding organizations. In AI, an organization is seen to be an organic whole and the integrity of the whole needs to be maintained in the process of affecting change or transformation. To describe this more, let's look at some key principles.

Appreciative Inquiry is a theory of social constructionism. Simply, it says that an organization creates itself- that the organization culture, they way the organization functions and its structures, how people relate to one another- are decision that can be made and controlled by the members of the organization. The primary means of self-directing is through the dialogue that the members have about their organization. Through this inner dialogue, the members of the organization define who they are and their purpose. In tandem with this constructionist principle is the anticipatory principle. The theory holds that an organization will create the future that they anticipate, because that dominates their inner dialogue. Therefore, the inherent and important theory of organizational change is that a organization will move towards that which it most frequently talks about and its image of its future. So if you want a positive future, it is necessary to create a positive image of the future and to allow that inner dialogue to pull the organization towards that desired future. Let me offer an illustration.

During the 1990, the inner dialogue that dominated my province was all about our pending death. We talked about our dying. We talked about the fact that we were getting old and that we were diminishing in size. We were so pessimistic about the future that some members seriously were asking if it was just to even invite young men to join us-it would be like asking them to come to do the funeral. With that conversation dominating our selfassessment, is it any surprise that we had no vocations-our province had only a couple new members during that decade. We were creating the future that we most dreaded, because the inner dialogue and underlying attitudes were dominating how we were acting and those actions were self-defeating. In 2000 we engaged in a pastoral planning process in which we came to a vision of a future in which we would be smaller, but be dynamic and vibrant. A part of that future was to embrace new ministries that were responsive to the signs of the times, even as our diminishing personnel resources required leaving traditional ministry sites. That planning process empowered our decision to start the reconciliation ministry in Chicago. Now, most of our members were not planning to move to a violent neighborhood of Chicago and work in this ministry with Latino and African American gang bangers, but starting that ministry (along with other initiatives) changed how we think about ourselves and how we talked about ourselves. As our inner dialogue changed, how we acted also changed. Today we have some vocations, less than we would like, but even though are candidates might not aspire to work at PBMR, they come because they like being a part of a community that believes it can be dynamic and vibrant, even though smaller. They come to a community they recognize as a place of faithful possibilities. We are not the same province that we were in the 1990's and we no longer talk about dying. That is an illustration of the principles of AI and the power of a vision and positive dialogue to transform an organization.

To express these AI principles in the language of Appreciative Discernment– humankind is created to be co-creators in the work of God. We are given a vision of the Reign of God and we are able to live that vision into reality. Through remembering and retelling of the stories of Jesus, we keep that vision before us, because if we believe in the vision and if we keep faith, all things are possible with God– even our living together in right relationship with God and one another.

The application of the theory of AI can take many forms and the encouragement from the theory's advocates is for the discovery of creative variations of a generic process. That process begins with the absolute requirement to choose a positive focus or topic for the inquiry into the organization. Only a positive image will lead to a positive action. As the organization begins its process, we address that topic by inquiring into the life-giving stories of the organization. In those stories we locate particular themes and use those themes to delve deeper into the organization. Through the dialogue about those themes we create a shared image of a preferred organizational future and then find innovative ways to create that future.

While flexibility and creativity is encouraged in the use of AI theory, one process has emerged and been proven to be effective, the 4-D process. The 4-D process is named from the four steps in the process—Discovery, Dreaming, Designing and Doing It. This is the process that we use in the reconciliation ministry and we will use it for our work these next couple of days. In your assembly packet is a figure of that process and I will explain it more thoroughly as we begin our work together tomorrow.

In Peacemaking Circles, focusing on the damage caused to the relationship and the causes of the conflict is an ordinary part of the work. But as I mentioned, there are times when people get stuck in that negative focus. The value of Appreciative Discernment is that it offers an alternative ministerial method that can assist the process of reconciliation to continue. The difference is found in the setting aside of the actual conflict and the damage it has caused to the relationships, in favor of focusing on the desired reconciliation and the new creation which reflect a restored relationship. The process begins with discovery the blessing and presence of God in the current situation and working together to create a vision or dream of a reconciled future. We then designing the way to live that dream into reality.

While accompaniment is an important aspect of a ministry of reconciliation, in the Appreciative Discernment process, the minster takes a more directive role in guiding the work of the group desiring reconciliation through the facilitation of the 4-D process. For that reason, I call it Guided Accompaniment and the image that I use to describe it is that of a wagon master. When wagon trains made the journey to the western part of our country, they depended on a wagon master who knew the way. The wagon master did not decide the destination, but he knew the terrain and the way to make the journey. The wagon master did not get up each morning and ask people where they wanted to go; he would lead the way. In a like manner, with an understanding of the reconciliation and the process of Appreciative Discernment, we have been are able to assist churches and faith communities to get to where they wanted to go-to lead the way for them to become a community living in right relationship with one another and God.

Let me offer one quick example. My initial experience of using this method was with a Catholic parish in which the pastor had been removed because of sexual misconduct with youths of the parish. This had an obviously distressing effect on the life of the parish. My involvement with the parish began almost 18 months after that event. The interim and new pastor had facilitated much work with the parishes as they explored their feelings and concerns. At my point of entry into the process, the parish was asking the question: How do we move forward, not forgetting the past, but not letting the past dominate our future? Through a 4-D process exploring the topic of: Walking in Faith and Moving Forward with Christ, the parish was able to discern their faithful future and begin to move towards that vision.

#### **Sacrament of Reconciliation**

While not a significant part of our work in the Precious Blood Ministry of Reconciliation, I want to speak briefly about the sacrament of reconciliation, because I know that it is a stated concern of some of your members. As we began the ministry in Chicago, this was also an expressed interested of the members of my community and they looked to us to answer the question- Does our understanding of the charism of reconciliation impact the way in which we celebrate this sacrament? While the concern of our ministry has been directed in other ways, we did try to encourage our members to reflect on that question and to explore new ways of thinking about the celebration of that sacrament.

For those of us who are ordained, celebrating this sacraments is a part of our ministry. I don't believe it is necessary to speak of sacramental theology or the richness of this sacrament as a celebration of the redeeming love of Christ. While I can give witness to the power of the sacrament to be a moment of conversion and transformation in the life of believers, I can also

say that more often, the celebration of the sacrament has been more routine and simply a part of the devotional life of the penitent. The overall decline in the number of people coming to the sacrament and its diminished importance in the life of most Catholics is well known and documented. Perhaps the importance of this sacrament in the shrine ministry of your congregation would tell a different story.

In the first couple years of our ministry, taking advantage of the increased interest in celebrating the sacrament during Lent, we developed a resource to be used in our parishes. We suggested a very simple pastoral approach that provided some catechetical instruction to assist a parish to prepare to celebrate a communal penance service. We provided a four page pamphlet to be distributed in the parish on the Sunday before the penance service, a plan for a communal service and some ideas for the preaching during the service.

We did not offer a new way of celebrating the sacrament– the ritual is prescribed. Primarily what we offered to our members was a small change of focus. Traditionally, the scriptural foundation of the sacrament is found in Mathew 16:19. Speaking to Peter, Jesus says: I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. The change we suggested to our members is that they approach the sacrament with a different scriptural emphasis, the passage I quote earlier from 2 Corinthians 5:18 – All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.

The Mathew text highlights an important truth, the efficacy of the sacraments as an occasion of grace and the forgiveness of sin. Ordinarily, the focus of the sacrament is on that vertical plane, that is, our individual relationship with God. In that regard, the sacrament is highly personal and private. This is not exclusively so, but especially in those coming to the sacrament as a devotional practice, I think that it is a primary understanding of the effect of the sacrament. I am forgiven; and yes, I am to go and sin no more.

When we explore the meaning of the sacrament through the lens of the Pauline text there is a shift in understanding that allows us to recognize that, while the sacrament is an occasion of grace that comes as the gift of forgiveness, the sacrament is also a commissioning to be an ambassador of Christ. Reconciliation is a charism, but reconciliation is also a commission. While the celebration of the sacrament is private and personal, it also has a communal quality in the response that it requires from the one who is forgiven. I am forgiven and am sent forth to sin no more **and** to be an agent of forgiveness and reconciliation in the world. When viewed in this way, the sacrament of reconciliation becomes a mediation of grace that happens on both the vertical and the horizontal planes.

I don't offer you any definitive explanation as to the ways this shift in focus might change the way that we celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation. Clearly, it would point to the need for catechetical instruction. This is more possible in the communal celebration of the sacrament than in the ministry with individual penitents. It might be addressed in the choice of scriptural text we use and the need to take the necessary time for including that optional reading in the celebration of the sacrament. It might be incorporated into the counsel that we offer and the act of penance that we propose to the penitent. For those of you who have a particular interest in this sacrament or where it has a more importance emphasis in you ministry, reflecting together on this shift might be a beneficial exercise.

#### Conclusion

As I conclude this presentation I want to share two last truths that we have discovered in our reconciliation ministry. The first is that no reconciliation is possible without the sincere desire of the parties involved to be reconciled and for relationships to be created anew. There is no way to force reconciliation. It may seem obvious that people would desire reconciliation, but often that is not the case. Often those that have suffered the pain of victimization prefer retribution. Much in our culture supports them in this position and until reconciliation is desired, no ministerial method will be able to affect reconciliation.

Often before the process of reconciliation can begin there is a need to help create the desire for reconciliation. There is a prophetic role in the ministry which is to remind those involved of the gospel message. While this prophetic proclamation must be done with sensitivity to the victims and with the caution to not lay an additional burden on those in need of reconciliation, the Gospel message of forgiving one another remains the Good News. The command to establish the Reign of God remains. With pastoral sensitivity we need to help wounded people of faith to respond to the Gospel in their own lives.

In the same way, we have a prophetic role in helping those who have been victimized or those that are engaged in conflict to imagine the situation in a new way; to imagine the possibility of healing and forgiveness; to imagine a new creation. In our work with individuals and with groups, often the force of emotions seem to create an immutable situation with only limited responses. Sharing our believe in the possibility of reconciliation can help others to also recognize its potential. We have discovered that if someone believes that reconciliation is not possible, they will be correct. And if someone believes that reconciliation is possible, they will be correct. Often the first step in our ministry is to help people to believe in the power of God to reconcile all things.

The second truth that we have discovered is that there is a tendency to underestimate what is involved in being a minister of reconciliation. Simply, reconciliation is complex and there are no 'paint by the numbers' ministerial methods. There are seldom 'quick fixes' for relationship. To be engage in the ministry one needs to be grounded in a solid theological understanding through study; to be imbued with the spirituality of the charism as a personal conversion; and to have a breadth of pastoral skills which can be brought to bear in creative ways. All that is needed to engage in this ministry, but I end with the Good News-all this and more is possible for those who faithfully respond to the call to be an ambassador of Christ. Reconciliation is our charism and commission.