

## RECONCILIATION AND VICARIOUS REPRESENTATION

Without doubt, one of the central ideas of Christian teaching is the idea of reconciliation. Saint Paul uses the word *katallagē* (from the verb *katallassō*). Even though this word actually means reconciliation of the world with God, it is worthy of note that the New Testament uses the word *diallassō* to express the reconciliation of human beings with one another. This fact prompts us to reflect on the relationship between our reconciliation with God and our reconciliation with one another, particularly because the New Testament sees a connection between forgiveness by God and forgiveness among one another. “For if you forgive people their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you” (Mt. 6:14).

## MINIMIZING OR EXAGGERATING THE IDEA OF SIN

When using the term *reconciliation*, the New Testament proceeds on the assumption that the world and the individuals in it find themselves in a situation of sin, spiritual peril, discord, and enmity, a situation that determines radically human beings’ relationship to God and to one another. We must pause already at this sentence.

For us whose ears are accustomed to religious phrases the Church’s teaching about a situation of spiritual peril as a presupposition of reconciliation and redemption seems perfectly obvious. But it is not obvious. We need not even look beyond our own cultural [256] sphere to awaken to the fact that Christianity’s teaching about a situation of spiritual peril is being profoundly threatened. In my opinion the threat is coming principally from two opposite directions. *On the one hand, the universal peril that sin implies is not being grasped in its full import.* What we Christians call sin,<sup>1</sup> real evil in the world, is not evil but only “What is known as evil.”<sup>2</sup> It is a manifestation of unavoidable friction in the process of evolution, depending only on conditions prevalent in society which can be restructured in such a way that this evil will once and for, all vanish from the world, from society and from the life of the individual. In depth psychology sin is dissipated as though it were nothing more than an anxiety dream. Society can form and train people in such a way as to produce pure harmony both in the individual and on the social level, even though it might still take a little while until this universal pacification is achieved. And if all that does not suffice we are told that good and evil, day and night are equally parts of the basic and obvious elements of reality which condition one another reciprocally. This being the case, one can and must make one’s final peace with evil; one must live with one’s “shadow.”<sup>3</sup> Evil is just as necessary as good to bring reality to its perfection, and if we are wise, we will not let it provoke any short-sighted protests.

Evil is rendered innocuous. It is no longer affected by the radical protest of the holy God to whom we ascribe no evil, separated from it as he is by an infinite distance, and who says an inexorable no to this evil of real guilt incurred by creaturely freedom – even though we

<sup>1</sup> See A. Görres and K. Rahner, *Das Böse: Wege zu seiner Bewältigung in Psychotherapie und Christentum* (Freiburg/Breisgau, 1982).

<sup>2</sup> See K. Lorenz, *Das sogenannte Böse: Zur Naturgeschichte der Aggression*, 25th ptg. (Vienna, 1970).

<sup>3</sup> See C. G. Jung, esp. *Mysterium Coniunctionis: An Inquiry into the Separation and Synthesis of Psychic Opposites in Alchemy*, *Collected Works XIV*, translated by R. F. C. Hull, 2nd ed. (Princeton University Press, 1970).

cannot understand how God nevertheless could will misery, pain, and death to his creatures and permit the real evil of guilt freely incurred to enter a world which has been created by him and for all of whose reality he must bear the responsibility. In the mental climate of today the radical nature of the Christian idea of sin is not being grasped in its full import. But the Christian idea of sin is so radical that the holy and all-merciful God's response to it, wherever [257] and whenever it is not extirpated, must be condemnation to that eternal loss which is hell. And this remains true and retains its radical existentiell significance even if we have the right to hope – but not the certainty of a theoretical assertion – that God will have mercy on all.

But there is also a second, fundamental heresy that contradicts the Christian idea of sin. *The free decision within history is so absolute that this decision, if really made in radical freedom, is irrevocable and no one can reverse it.* Here freedom is conceived to be so autonomous that it is no longer encompassed by the greater power and freedom of God, and so the culpable decision of a human being is inherently so irreversible that this evil decision can neither be forgiven by God, nor does freedom ever forgive itself its evil decision. According to this view evil is something absolute. Human beings are not even permitted to have the desire of having their abysmal guilt forgiven. This guilt would not really be the radical act of freedom – so the argument goes – unless it were understood as radically definitive and irreversible.

## THE HOPELESSNESS OF GUILT

Between these two extremes which form, as it were, two sides of a single coin, stands the Christian teaching of the guilt of human freedom and its capability of being forgiven by God alone. In order to understand what reconciliation is, we must, before speaking about the forgiveness of guilt by God, deal more explicitly with the question why human guilt cannot be overcome by human beings *alone*.

### *The Dialogical Structure of Becoming Guilty*

The inability of human beings *alone* to overcome real guilt must not be understood according to the model prevalent in civil law where one person commits an offense against another person and remains liable for this even though the perpetrator regrets the offense and wishes it had never happened. In this inadequate model it would not make any difference whether the offense in question caused material damage to the other person or whether it was detrimental to [258] the personal dignity of the other. In any event the “civil law” model is inadequate for an understanding of why human beings are incapable of overcoming guilt incurred before God.

To understand why guilt cannot be overcome we must take into account that a turning back to God, a free repudiation of one's previous decision, being solely a human act as such, still does not mean that guilt is overcome. The inherent hopelessness of guilt is a character of guilt that is obscure and can be explained only with difficulty. The very acceptance of the experience of this hopelessness, our desire to repress which is itself a part of the mystery of guilt, is already a kind of beginning of conversion.

The primary reason for the hopeless insuperability of guilt (as far as one can attempt to give a more precise explanation of this at all) lies in the peculiar dialogical character of human existence in its orientation to God. If this relationship is a free history – free on both sides, therefore on God's side as well – this kind of positive relationship between God and

human beings is not reestablished simply by guilty human beings' attempting to revoke their no to God. God's free action is so integral to this salvific love between God and human beings that human beings must interpret even their own love for God, their freedom notwithstanding, as a gift of God's free love for them. God's personal disclosure and communication of himself in his love for human beings is, however, both in itself and as the possibility of our love for him, God's *freedom*, and it always remains this, regardless of whether one chooses to interpret this love bestowed on the repenting sinner as the abiding *presence* of this unmerited love or as a *new* bestowal of this love on God's part.

### *The Ultimate Validity of Free Human Decision*

To gain an understanding of the inherent hopelessness of guilt, some further elements must be explained. Human freedom must not be understood as the ability to make a choice that always remains open, that can be continually revised and therefore as something that veers off into a void. In spite of its temporal historical character, freedom is inherently the will toward ultimate validity. Only on this basis is it possible to comprehend why a brief temporal human history ending with a person's death can understandably result in [259] salvation or eternal loss. One cannot imagine God as the one who in an arbitrary act extrinsic to it stops this history of freedom which of itself would choose to continue, and nonetheless responds to it with a judgment that is eternally valid. And Christianity does not allow for a "transmigration of souls" that goes on indefinitely.

In this light the real nature of the experience becomes intelligible whereby human beings, even though they exist in a continuous flow of history have the feeling that past events in their history of freedom are not over and done with. Human beings do not experience the past as something that is overcome simply because their present intentions and actions are in contradiction to their past decisions. If people perceive their previous free actions as abiding and irrevocable, if forgetting their actions or repudiating them is experienced as something that is powerless over against the "eternal" element that has occurred in their previous free actions, they do not attach an excessive importance to their previous history. Rather, they experience the real and mysterious nature of their freedom. And if they nonetheless have hope in the possibility that the mysterious "eternity" of their guilt will be overcome, even though a possibility of this kind cannot be discovered in the realm of mere human experience, this kind of hope is an appeal precisely to that mystery which encompasses all human freedom together with its "eternity," the mystery that we call God. If they hope for the forgiveness of their guilt, although they have, for example, the experience that they are and will for all eternity remain persons who have betrayed their love and fidelity and that this stigma of infidelity does not point to what once was and is now over and done with, but identifies them for what they now are, then the basis of this hope is what we Christians call grace and what human beings experience as something that utterly transcends their own freedom.

Is it not almost necessary to say that people have not understood anything about God until they believe and hope that there is one who contrary to all personal experience of freedom is able to overcome the eternity of the evil deed, whereby, as has already been said, this eternity must not be reduced to the idea that what is done can of course not be undone, but that there is really no reason to get upset about this since the past, even though it cannot be undone, is something that is of itself past – as is the case with anything that is temporal and transitory.

[260] One can, if one chooses to do so, render the mystery of the eternity of a deed freely done more intelligible by distinguishing between a transient action and its permanent consequences. But then again, the understanding gained in this way obscures precisely the

mystery of the freely done deed the eternity of which knows only one who is alone more powerful: God, whose love really overcomes the guilt itself, a love whose incomprehensibility as manifested in this forgiveness is part of the incomprehensibility of God as he is in himself.

## THE INCOMPREHENSIBILITY OF GOD'S FORGIVENESS

In respect to this kind of guilt which affects God himself, which should neither be minimized nor simply absolutized, which human beings alone cannot overcome – although they hope in the possibility of its being overcome and thus they hope in God – Christian doctrine says that God is always ready and willing to overcome it, to forgive it, to be reconciled with humankind and to reconcile humankind to himself. The past is ultimately not an empty room of what once was but is no more, but the room filled with what has been irrevocably done in freedom. Christians believe that God penetrates this room, makes it “empty” and reconciles human beings not only with God himself but also with their own past. If human beings were really to understand their freedom and their guilty actions, they would have to admit that they cannot grant eternal pardon to themselves for these deeds, that they would annihilate themselves if they were to attempt by their own power to separate their free actions from themselves.

However, God bids them to have this hope of reconciliation and forgiveness; he lets them disown themselves without thereby obliterating themselves. We are really allowed to forget our guilt, even though we do not understand how it is possible for us to forget and how it is that our guilt does not eternally remain before us. The incomprehensibility of this ability to forget is ultimately identical with God's forgiving love. We have not accepted this love until we have the confidence in its capability of really overcoming by its own power the eternity of our guilt and of letting it be forgotten.

God's love which forgives and reconciles is really incomprehensible. We are certainly permitted to say that God has allowed guilt to [261] enter this world only because this world from the beginning and irrevocably is already encompassed by this forgiving and reconciling love. From the beginning God has made himself the world's innermost heart in such a way that the freely incurred guilt of humankind pierces God's heart, and even in the face of this thrust his heart is merciful, forgiving and reconciling love. For love would then turn into the judgment of damnation only if a person were to reject it in a final act of freedom.

### *Reconciliation through Jesus Christ*

Christians know full well that God's forgiving and reconciling love that encompasses all guilt has entered the world in such a way that it can never be revoked. This love has revealed itself in the cross of Jesus Christ who has become our reconciliation. Through Jesus' unconditional solidarity with all sinful human beings, as well as in his unconditional love for the Father, God's forgiving love has reached its historically visible culmination in Jesus' death on the cross, because this love has become irrevocable and has found its acceptance in a human being who was conscious of and who willed his absolute solidarity with all human beings. This is why God has reconciled the world to himself in Jesus the crucified. God has not only offered humankind his merciful love that overcomes guilt, but in addition to this he has revealed that this omnipotent forgiving love is so powerful and victorious that it even manifests itself when accepted by human freedom. And so it also becomes reality for its part when human beings accept it.

## *Forgiveness through God's Grace*

If we further inquire how this reconciliation through forgiveness of inherently insuperable guilt is to be conceived, we must first point out that Catholic theology must not conceive this forgiveness as a juridical act, an act that is more or less merely intellectual, upon which there merely follows the communication of divine grace, which is justification. Rather, this forgiveness takes place *through* divine grace, God's very communication of himself. Therefore we [262] must say that guilt is so radical that it can only be forgiven in that God himself in the infinite power of his love and holiness must communicate himself and must make himself a part of the offense of guilt in order that forgiveness and reconciliation may take place. Only in the love which God himself *is* can guilt be eradicated and reconciliation occur. But this is something that happens in a really radical way. Colossians 1:19f., which states that "all the fullness of God" dwelling in Jesus Christ "reconciles all things," cannot be taken literally enough.

## *The Objective Nature of What Happens in Christ's Death on the Cross*

We have now explained the "subjective" nature of the reconciliation of God and the human race, and perhaps we have failed to emphasize that this reconciliation takes place in an "objective" way as is emphasized by Scripture and the teaching of the Church. A more exact idea of this objective universal reconciliation of the world with God cannot be easily expressed in a few words.

Everyone is aware of the attempt to explain this objective redemption and reconciliation by using the concept of the (vicarious) satisfaction which God's eternal Son has made to God's holy justice by his obedience unto death on the cross, thereby wiping out the "sins of the world." No doubt the Son's obedience has an unsurpassable moral value which manifests God's holiness and justice in the world. However, the notion of an exchange of goods or even of guilt being punished in the person of the guiltless Jesus must not be allowed to obtrude itself on the notion of satisfaction for the sins of the world by the Son's obedience. Furthermore, one must not lose sight of the fact that the event of the cross is itself the *effect* and ultimately not the cause of an initiative of God himself which is a result of nothing other than God's free love and his unmerited grace, of a God who reconciles because he is the love that forgives and overcomes all guilt. So for our understanding of this objective reconciliation it might perhaps be sufficient to say here that the Son's obedience, both in radical love for the Father and at the same time in unconditional solidarity with the human race, is the historical event in which God's forgiving love has itself appeared in the world and become irreversible.

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## *Reconciliation with God as the Source of Reconciliation with One Another*

We must point out yet a further aspect of this reconciliation. If there is a unity between God's love and love among human beings, if love among us human beings, as it must be, is possible in its ultimately radical form only because it happens in God and in the mutual love between God and human beings, this necessarily means that a really radical reconciliation among human beings is possible only in God and in the event in which his reconciliation with the world occurs. Discord among human beings, the sheer impossibility of human beings to forgive one another their guilt by their own unaided power is so relentless that only the

reconciling power of God himself can overcome the gulf that divides human beings from one another as a result of their horrible deeds.

Worldly wisdom often demands that people forgive one another, but it is at a loss to know how this can really come about. It feels that people ought perhaps to forgive, but that they are not able to forgive. Hatred, infidelity, elemental injustice, and murder can deal such a lethal blow to our fellow human beings, one from which they can never recover, that it is impossible in this world and its history to see what reconciliation and forgiveness might bring about. Only God's self-communication in love can wipe out that guilt which has created these unfathomable gulfs dividing human beings from one another. But then again this unity between love of neighbor and love of God also means this: when human beings really forgive one another's guilt, something that they are not capable of doing by their own power and therefore when they do it they are consciously or without even recognizing it being borne by God's forgiving love, there is also a reconciliation of the world with God.

Indeed, when one says all these things so glibly and in the routine language of traditional theology, one becomes dismayed and afraid that one is talking recondite theology. But if we pause, reflect, and somehow or other beyond all the routine of everyday existence catch a glimpse of the deadly guilt that puts us at odds with God's holy love and with our fellow human beings, and if we summon up our last energy to hope that this guilt is not the last word in our existence; if we hope with a power which we sense is not our own that our guilt is overcome by an all-reconciling forgiveness, then in this hope we [264] have already said *yes* to him who reconciles all, to him whom we call God. We have affirmed that the dreadful abysses of guilt have even now been overcome by the love of this God, and that in respect to forgiveness there is only one thing that we may not do, and that is to take it for granted rather than to accept it with the trembling and humble adoration of guilty creatures who give honor to God and know that through him they are reconciled with him and with all others.

## VICARIOUS RECONCILIATION

Up to this point we have spoken about reconciliation with God. We have seen that God's reconciliation with the world in Jesus Christ manifests itself whenever human beings find the power to forgive one another their unfathomable guilt. Without formulating it explicitly we have, then, already touched upon a phenomenon that can be perceived in the life of a saint like Maximilian Kolbe. His life is a convincing witness of that reconciling love for the world. His example brings us face to face with the idea of vicarious representation.

However, this idea admits of no simple explanation, and if we want to use it to help interpret our own existence we cannot treat it superficially.

### *The Inadequacy of the Juridical Interpretation*

This notion of vicarious representation can of course be found in the juridical sphere. Without going into a detailed explanation of how one person receives the authorization to act on behalf of another, it is quite clear that one person acting on another's behalf can bring about a situation in which provisions and stipulations are set up which are morally binding on the other person.

For example, you can contract marriage through a proxy. You can authorize another person to make a contract on your own behalf and you are then bound by this contract. But this legal idea of vicarious representation is no help for the problem we are dealing with here. Our question is whether it is conceivable that another person can [265] relieve me of a moral debt

before God which, in fact, I myself owe to God. If the final answer to this question is no, does anything remain of the notion of vicarious representation in its application to the religious dimension of the relationship between God and human beings?

### *The Action of Another Cannot Be Substituted for a Free Human Action*

The term *vicarious representation* is frequently used in religious language. The pope is called *Vicarius Christi* (the Vicar of Christ) in the Church viewed as a social institution, but this usage is something that pertains to the juridical sphere and need not concern us here. But when we are talking about the vicarious suffering of Christ and understand the phrase “He has suffered and made satisfaction for us” in the sense of vicarious representation, our language is moving on a religious level and raises a question that cannot be easily answered. Can another person really relieve me of a task, or an attitude or a deed before God and oriented to him, of demands which are in fact imposed on me, but which I am not capable of meeting?

This question must not be obfuscated by the obvious fact that the moral actions of one person can be important for another person, and even have a bearing on salvation. If one were to make “vicarious representation” a central feature in the actual realization of salvation as such, it would mean that another person could relieve me of an action that has significance for salvation and results in salvation, one that I myself would be obliged to perform. Thus I would no longer have to perform the action myself and yet I would still attain salvation. Obviously vicarious representation cannot be understood in this sense.

One cannot appeal to the New Testament term *hyper hemōn* to justify this notion of vicarious representation. It is certain that *hyper* is used in a great number of passages to mean “for the benefit of,” and in none of these passages is it necessary to understand it in a different sense. Furthermore, if we look at the totality of Christian theology, we see that its entire tendency excludes vicarious representation in this sense. If one proceeds on the assumption that in the [266] moral sphere people cannot be seriously expected to do something that they are absolutely incapable of doing, that this kind of failure can never be considered culpable, one must also say that as far as salvation is concerned God demands of each individual that he or she do everything significant for salvation and no one is exempted from anything.

To illustrate this obvious fact one can quite properly assert that every human being redeems himself or herself by his or her own free activity, that self-redemption and redemption from outside are not two mutually exclusive concepts. “Redemption from outside” by Jesus Christ does not mean that human beings would be exempted from doing something that they are obliged to do by means of their own freedom or that something would be conceded to them that they cannot do themselves and which would nevertheless be demanded of them. It means that God by his grace, in view of Jesus Christ and his cross, grants and offers people the possibility, in the most radical self-surrender of their existence through faith, hope, and love, of constituting their own ultimate validity in the order of salvation.

Every act of creaturely freedom presupposes that this possibility is given by God. And so the possibility of salvation through God’s free love and therefore through grace is present. But this possibility is realized through our own free action, and we are not exempted from this even though both our ability to act and our very activity are themselves a gift of God’s grace for which we may and must praise him.

To put it another way, redemption from outside is the gratuitous bestowal of our own self-redemption. When this kind of free act through which human beings save themselves is

impossible due to an absence of the presuppositions required for its performance, such persons who have not reached the use of reason may still receive eternal salvation even without having to exercise their own freedom – but this happens only because they have no possibility whatsoever of exercising their freedom in a concrete way. This, however, does not alter anything in the previously formulated axiom asserting the interaction of redemption from outside and self-redemption. So it seems to me that the concept of vicarious representation, when used in the area pertaining to the realization of salvation, is at the very least a concept that leads to misunderstandings, and it would do no harm if we avoided it.

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*The Solidarity of Human Beings Extends to Their Free Acts*

What, then, are the true and valid elements that are evidently envisaged in this problematical notion of vicarious representation? What it means is that there is a solidarity of human beings with one another and with the God-man that extends right into the ultimate root of our existence, into the area of those decisions that are relevant to salvation. What it means is that there is a human solidarity that has a bearing on *salvation*; in other words, that the concrete reality of every spiritual subject, known as a human being, is codetermined by the totality of this world and such a reality cannot be completely expressed without codetermining the totality of the world. A distinguished physicist once observed that Sirius trembles when a child throws its doll out of its crib. The history of the physical world together with intellectual and spiritual history, that is, the sum total of everything that happens and the deeds that other people do are the biological and social elements which are always at work determining us, and there is no escaping them. In every one of the free actions we perform we are the beneficiaries of our historical heritage and we are dependent on it, regardless of whether we appropriate it to ourselves or protest against it.

In the Christian understanding of the world and of our existence this solidarity extends right into the area where our ultimate decision of salvation is made. This human solidarity is not just something that pertains to our visible society and our secular history; it is also present in that area where we freely determine our ultimate relationship to God extending beyond all immanent reality even though it might seem that our decision is being made in radical loneliness and isolation. Each one of us determines by our own free actions what we will ultimately be in eternity, and this ultimate validity is our own and it cannot be transferred to someone else. But this ultimate validity – no matter whether it amounts to a final yes or a final no – is compounded of all the presuppositions of such an ultimate validity as has resulted from our own free actions, and therefore it consists of all the elements of necessity and freedom that have been present in human history as a whole.

Indeed, it is a conviction of Christian faith – regardless of how this can be explained more precisely – that even the future, which obviously [268] means nothing more than what has not yet come to be, is already present as a codetermining factor in our own situation of freedom. Otherwise there would be no sense in saying, for example, that those people who before Christ achieved a Christian salvation in freedom are also essentially affected by Christ.

In the one single history of the world and of salvation throughout all times and places all human beings stand in solidarity with one another; the situation and the possibilities of the freedom of all are jointly conditioned by all for all. And this is still a reality even where someone might raise a final protest in freedom against this solidarity. This solidarity extends to the utmost limits of reality, even though this one single “field” of that free existence does not, of course, simply manifest a purely homogeneous structure, even though each person does not stand in solidarity with the other in exactly the same way.

## SOLIDARITY IN JESUS CHRIST

Our Christian faith further affirms that this single field of unlimited solidarity is ultimately constituted, or, if you will, consolidated by the deed of the one Jesus Christ who in love freely given remained steadfast in his predestined solidarity with human beings and did not renounce it even when it meant for him the cross and the death of one forsaken by God. That each one of us is in this sense responsible for the salvation of the other is, in the words of Pope Pius XII, a mystery that makes us tremble.<sup>4</sup>

The truth of mutual responsibility also implies the converse. Our own salvation, however much it be our own act, remains a gift bestowed on us by the love and fidelity of all the people in the entire history of humankind.

If we consider this sentence from a human point of view, its interpretation would have to be restricted exclusively to the idea that [269] the acts of all other human beings are an essential element of the situation of freedom which constitutes a part of the final and definitive free act of a human being. But if we consider this sentence in the light of God's initiative, its interpretation can be expanded. We must call to mind the words of Paul (Phil. 2:13) that not only the ability to perform a free act but also the very act itself, however much it is inalienably our own, is God's doing, who causes our own action in accordance with his loving purpose. And we must further call to mind that this action of ours is given to us by God as his grace because and to the extent that he wills the salutary good of this entire history of humankind. Therefore we can also say that the solidarity linking us to one another and to Jesus Christ is an essential element not only of the structure of our situation of freedom but also of our free acts themselves that result in eternal salvation.

The freely given love of Jesus and of all human beings who throughout the whole of history have attained their salvation in Jesus is present in the freedom of our own final decision. The bond that links us to one another is not only one of example and instruction. Our solidarity extends into the inmost recesses that lie at the mysterious roots of our existence known only to God in his omniscience, since he alone is the one who sees and wills the totality of the world and its history in the interdependence of all its parts. Extravagant and absurd as the conclusion may sound, it remains nonetheless true in the light of what we have said that, in the most fundamental sense, we live and attain our final validity in eternity not only as a result of Jesus' love, but also that in our own existence *our* lives and actions stem from a solidarity with Maximilian Kolbe. And we may even say that *he* took his martyrdom upon himself in virtue of his solidarity with our good and evil actions.

It may truthfully be said that the entire history of humankind and the history of salvation is one great symphony of praise to the love of the God who moves the sun and the stars.

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<sup>4</sup> See *Mystici Corporis*, no. 43: "A truly awesome mystery that can never be considered sufficiently: that the salvation of many is dependent on the prayers and voluntary acts of penance of the members of the mystical body of Jesus Christ which they take upon themselves for this purpose, and on the collaboration that our divine redeemer requires on the part of the shepherds and the faithful, particularly the fathers and mothers of families."