

Circle of Reconciliation, Thursday, October 27, 2011

Halifax, Nova Scotia

Speaking notes, Sister Donna Geernaert, Sisters of Charity-Halifax

Good afternoon. Thank you for the invitation to participate in this circle of reconciliation. I've been asked to speak briefly about three questions: how do communities reconcile? how can we advance reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples? And what are the Sisters of Charity-Halifax doing to advance reconciliation?

First, how do communities reconcile?

For the past several years, I have been actively involved in efforts to reconcile communities – more specifically in seeking to promote unity among Christian communities. Divisions among Christian communities go back more than 1500 years. Based on what were seen as matters of principle, these divisions have led to wars, economic and social oppression, revenge, stereotyping and ongoing distrust. Since the beginning of the 20th century and from the 1960s on in the Catholic Church, a commitment to seeking reconciliation has had a significant impact.

Divisions among Christian communities may be likened to a dispute within a family and the focus has been on restoring a unity which was lost. As in a family dispute, a difference occurs, harsh words are spoken, positions solidify, enemies are identified. And unless there is a clear change of course, the walls of division which have been erected seem unscalable. What can be done to bring about reconciliation?

The search for Christian unity has a spiritual foundation in the belief that Jesus calls his followers to be one and that the following of Jesus already gives a basic unity. Those involved in seeking Christian unity over the years have found three ways to be most effective: prayer and ritual action, dialogue about the sources of division, and working together on common projects.

Dialogue, in particular, has played a key role. While talking may seem like a simple thing to do, dialogue is much more than talking and is much more challenging. Dialogue presupposes equality and mutuality, a willingness to recognize each participant as a true partner. It requires deep listening, an ability to hear what is not being said as well as what is being said. In dialogue, each participant speaks their own truth and is at the same time committed to hearing the truth spoken by their partner.

Long-standing divisions will not be healed by words alone or even true dialogue. Ritual actions and common projects support dialogue and also play a significant role in building bridges of understanding.

So how does this apply to advancing reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples?

I think that some of what has been learned in the search for reconciliation in Christian communities may also be helpful in advancing reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples.

The path of reconciliation is a lengthy one and the process requires much patience. Divisions

which developed over several generations – and which were so traumatic and painful – won't be resolved within a few years. A healing of memories is essential.

The events of the past which have been viewed in isolation now need to be understood as part of a common history. All of this takes time and so it becomes important to ritualize and celebrate small steps.

A commitment to reconciliation is a commitment to take real action that will lead to changed perceptions and attitudes. It is a commitment to the future.

As a first step, it seems to me that it's important to acknowledge the importance of its spiritual basis. In Christian belief, God is the Creator of the whole human family and indeed, of everything that exists. As children of this Creator God, we are called to live in unity with one another and with all creatures, with the entire created world.

Aboriginal peoples have much to teach non-Aboriginals in this regard. We need to find ways to encourage that wisdom sharing.

The advancing of reconciliation will be a long and difficult process, often seeming to be a matter of two steps forward and one back. A recognition of the spiritual significance of reconciliation not only sustains our commitment to the process but also opens us up to new possibilities.

Reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples may be advanced through ritual/symbolic actions, listening to one another about divisive issues, and working together on common projects ... such as advocacy for housing, clean water, and other needs in Aboriginal communities, for example.

Respect for cultural differences and the history of broken relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples will influence how reconciliation is to be advanced. Common projects and rituals may be more effective than dialogue in moving forward.

Working for reconciliation takes more than ideas, good intentions, and commitment. It advances through specific practices which build communication and trust. It requires accompaniment of victims, mediation, truth-telling, pursuit of justice and healing of memories. The goal is to restructure society so that the wrongdoing of the past can never happen again.

What are the Sisters of Charity doing to advance reconciliation?

Reconciliation is a process which can't be demanded or rushed. Yet, concrete steps have been taken. Our congregation has participated in the Catholic Entities Group from the beginning, working with the federal government on a comprehensive settlement of claims and on initiatives for healing, reconciliation and education. We have provided funding towards healing and reconciliation programs. I have served as co-chair of the "Moving Forward Together Campaign" for the past three years, helping to raise funds towards healing and educational programs. One of our members has been actively involved in the regional working group of the TRC, helping to plan regional gatherings and this national event.

For Sisters of Charity, education has always been seen as a way of improving life, increasing opportunities, and opening doors to freedom for the poor. We first came to Halifax at the invitation of the bishop in 1849 to open a school. And when we were asked to staff the school at Shubenacadie in 1930, it seemed a good thing to do.

It is with great sadness that we have listened to the stories of Residential School survivors. The history of these schools was not one of liberation. They were part of a system that was racist and oppressive. While we wish the past could have been different, our challenge today is to find the kind of education that will liberate. Education that can free this and future generations of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth to fully live and celebrate the richness of all cultures here and across Canada.

This calls for dialogue – a culturally sensitive conversation based on mutuality and equality. We need to continue our deep listening – to the stories of the past, to the pain of the present, to the dreams and needs of the future.

The Sisters of Charity-Halifax has just over 400 members. As a congregation, we are connected to thousands of women and men religious across Canada and internationally. We will share the learnings, share the needs expressed. We can advocate for housing in Aboriginal communities, for instance. As we dialogue, common projects may emerge that we can work on together. And we will hold all peoples in our prayer.

For us as Sisters of Charity, the theme of this national gathering, “It’s All About Love” has a particular significance. Our mission statement is that we “give joyful witness to love: the love of God, of one another and of all persons.” We are committed to furthering the reconciliation process in love ... moving toward a future of healing and hope and right relationships with all.