

Reconciliation in Cuba: bringing down walls, building a peaceful coexistence

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INTRODUCTION

Reconciliation and reconstruction are two faces of the same process used to lay down bridges of communication, dialog, truth, justice and love.¹ Cuba is already undergoing a process of reconstruction. Slowly, wall by wall, block by block—but these walls are being brought down peacefully, while our national coexistence is rebuilt. This is my experience and my hope. I will attempt to express my reasons for them.

Germany and Cuba: such different nations, histories, cultures, but with a strong commonality in dignity and vocation: the individual. This is the common path that allows us to learn from every historical experience. Nothing that is human is foreign to us, no wall should separate the human family, the global village, that we must all share; the common destiny of freedom, justice and peace that we all deserve.

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There is a visible symbol, almost sacramental, of what divides mankind: walls. There is another universal symbol of reconciliation: the falling of walls. The Berlin wall is the paradigm of divisions and its fall the prophetic news of our vocation toward universal fraternity. It is not only beneficial to learn from this process, it should also be the obligation of all peoples and cultures on Earth.

There are still walls in many places, between different philosophies, cultures and political projects. Cuba is no exception. Who could say that Cuba has nothing to learn from Germany? There are still many walls in Cuba, but many have fallen. There are still walls inside individuals, but there is also a symbolic wall of rock and cement. I believe it is the only such wall in Cuba. I am referring to a wall that was built in Pinar del Río, on December 15, 2009, to confiscate a meeting hall used by Proyecto Convivencia (“Coexistence Project”),

¹ Cf. “Hacia la reconciliación nacional”. La libertad de la luz. Editorial in the publication *Vitral*. Editorial No. 32, July-August 1999. Editorial Instituto Lech Walesa. Varsovia, Polonia, 2006.

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our vocation and work plan, whose name speaks for itself. Currently we meet next to the wall, on the portion located in the yard that was generously donated by one of the Project's members, the economist Karina Gálvez.

I believe that to continue to promote a peaceful coexistence, precisely next to the walls that attempt to separate us, gives us a good reason to participate in this seminary where we will attempt to learn from the German experience in this global issue of reconciliation.

I would like to begin once again by highlighting that reconciliation is a process, an itinerary, a road that is not always linear. Along these lines I would like to recommend a solid analysis made by Fr. Robert Schreier titled "A Roadmap to the Reconciliation Process," published by the Cuba Study Group. In it, this priest expert in these issues, states: "in its simplest form, reconciliation is about rebuilding "right relationships" where those relationships have been broken, twisted, or harmed in any kind of way. It is about rebuilding those relationships, sustaining those relationships, and being faithful to those relationships. So, reconciliation is never just about one person, one wrongdoer, or one victim; it is about the relations between them. It's about rebuilding first of all trust; and trust can only be rebuilt if there is safety. Safety. Trust. And it's a long process."²

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An authentic reconciliation process should sequence and simultaneously mix the following irreplaceable ingredients:

1. Truth
2. Justice
3. Forgiveness
4. Magnanimity
5. Inclusion
6. Ethical and civil reconstruction
7. Weavers of peaceful coexistence

The useful and efficient methodology of "short steps, long sight" is valuable in this process. These are steps, not goals in and of themselves. But each steps brings another, one after the other that may create an itinerary for personal and social development for the preparation of free citizens and responsible nations. Reconciliation does not need irresponsible citizens or pariah nations. A single step does not make a path. Nor can tomorrow's step be taken before today's step. But we can speed up the rhythm and lengthen the steps. Perhaps we Caribbeans can learn this rhythm towards reconciliation and peaceful coexistence.

1. THE SEARCH FOR THE TRUTH

Wounds must heal properly. Where there has been opprobrium it cannot be said that there was respect. All wounds must be cleansed firmly and delicately, with justice and peace, and without cruelty. Together we must seek the portion of the truth that we each possess and assume it with serene honesty. The acknowledgement of past mistakes, of their causes and consequences, requires a certain nobility.

Truth Committees have performed, when they have performed properly, a clarifying and transparent service that has saved years of suffering to people, families and nations divided by walls, conflicts and death. To ignore

² Schrieter, Robert. "A Roadmap to the Reconciliation Process." First Conference on Reconciliation and Change. Miami-Dade College, Miami, FL. 14 September 2012.

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the suffering of so many is to “falsely close” the healing necessary for a peaceful reconciliation process. This is, in first place, the honest search and recognition of the truth. Truth to serve as experience. Truth as an alert call. Truth not to ruthlessly rub it in the face of the adversary without forgiveness. There is no reconciliation in pretending, nor in airing dirty laundry, nor in judging by the criteria and values of the present the attitudes and events of the past. It is necessary to find the truth in context, the historical truth, anthropological truth, and sociological truth.

1.1. The Historical Truth

It is necessary to rescue the historical truth. It needs to be rescued in its complexity and context. It should not be mutilated or manipulated for the benefit of the parties. It is the search for a multifaceted and complex truth. Mons. Adolfo Rodríguez, the well remembered bishop of Camagüey, used to say in his reflections:

A conflictive past weights as a mortgage on the head of many, and what it is even worse, on the memory of the heart, the memory of despicable attitudes by both parties, discriminations, discriminations, offenses.....does not allow anybody to be strictly neutral and available to finally turn over the past to God's mercy, the future to God's providence and the present to search for the Window of God. It would not be right to believe that in the Church we don't have anything that we must repent for and that our hands are clean from all responsibility. Some individuals seem to abandon the hope for a reconciliation and for unity, as if this image were for always the image of the future, as if there was no other alternative than to look at each other like this and treat each other like that....(notes for the spiritual line for Lent. 1991, ítem 10, page.7).

1.2. The anthropological truth

First it is necessary to identify and heal anthropological damage in order to empower the individual in search of the truth. We have dedicated part of the efforts from the extinct Centro de Formación Cívica y Religiosa (1993-2007) and its heir, the Proyecto Convivencia (2007-2013), to the study of what we call “anthropological damage”³. This is the deepest and gravest wound that the totalitarian Marxist-Leninist system has inflicted on controlled and depersonalized societies. This disaster is perhaps the basis and cause of the economic, political and social failure of these systems, whose model does not work precisely because it is contrary to the natural order. If the reconciliation process fails to recognize this anthropological rupture, it will commence on false footing and find much human fragility that will threaten its complex itinerary of falling walls and building a fraternal coexistence. The protagonists will fail. That is what we said during the IV Semana Social Católica de Cuba, held in Matanzas on 1999:

“At the root of any reconciliation attempt is the anthropological concept that inspires each of the parties. These models of humanism do not only trace the main features of men and women, subjects and receivers of reconciliation, but it always determines the methods, means and style in which this process is assumed or not.”⁴

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3 “El daño antropológico en Cuba”. La libertad de la luz. Editoriales de la revista *Vitral*. Editorial No. 74, julio-agosto de 2006. Editorial Instituto Lech Walesa. Varsovia, Polonia, 2006.

4 Valdés Dagoberto. “Participación ciudadana y reconciliación nacional”. Memoria de la IV Semana Social Católica. Ediciones Vitral, 1999.

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Therefore, at the very foundation of the road to reconciliation, there must be an articulate and systematic, educational and ethical process, with the reconstruction of the individual, both the victims as well as the victimizers, as its central objective. In this sense, it is also important to identify, not equate nor invert, the roles of the victims and victimizers, and to avoid confusing them. Although we all are somewhat responsible for the divisions of families and nations, we don't all have the same culpability. In our search for the truth, it is indispensable that we differentiate between the common or shared culpability of social participants.

1.3. The truth about society

It is here—in the essence of a depersonalizing and massifying humanism faced with a new comprehensive, liberating humanism that empowers individuals and overcomes individualism with a thorough process that makes free citizens responsible and participating—where the search for the truth begins for a society that seeks to work toward reconciliation. Transparency and fraternal behavior pave the path toward the dismantling of delation. Reconciliation seeks the truth about society, not only to recognize false ways to build communities, but also to seek, among all, a model of coexistence based on recognition of the truth about history and about men, the respect for human rights and political rights, and the promotion of education of the virtues and values inspired by the sources of true contemporary humanism.

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2. THE SEARCH FOR JUSTICE

2.1. Natural law. Justice equals ethics.

Reconciliation also means not overlooking justice. It requires that we go to the very base of human ethics: the natural law. In times of moral relativism, where “everything goes” financial interests rule over human rights, the road to national reconciliation must be rooted in the basic dignity of the individual. From the anthropology of Genesis: “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness”, is where all peoples and cultures can find their ethos and what makes us all equal in dignity, rights and obligations before God, or for the non believers, before their own human existence. This ethos becomes natural law, and is incorporated into law on the one hand and into a minimum ethic on the other, without which any reconciliation process will depend on a vindictive and sometimes negative justice system that confirms the old legal adage: “pure or supreme justice is the supreme injustice”. Natural law and a transcendental humanism are the basis for fairness to be ethical. All ethical matters are respected, protected, promoted and they “elevate the full dignity of the individual”. In our culture this was Marti's dream and the basis that he wanted as the Supreme Law of the Republic.

3. THE SEARCH FOR FORGIVENESS AND MAGNANIMITY

All humanistic justice, based on the ethical standards of natural law and the transcendent character of the individual, must be guided by the two most important pillars of individual dignity: forgiveness and magnanimity.

In effect, once the truth about the behavior of victims and victimizers is identified, justice should be administered under an independent legal framework and with all procedural guarantees, protecting the physical and moral integrity of all those involved, and imposing a correction geared towards the moral regeneration of the individual and his reincorporation into

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society. But although this could be the end of the legal process per se, the process of reconciliation requires a capacity to forgive from the victims and members of the community. Punishment without fairness punishes the individual twice; it sentences him to fulfill the penalty and excludes him permanently from social coexistence, regardless of his capacity to be rehabilitated and his effective moral reeducation.

Each family, each school, each church, each association or company, the entire social fabric should heal internally by cultivating the highest level of coexistence: magnanimity, without which all families, churches, association or companies and the whole community will end up imploding, sometimes without the capacity to diagnose the internal malady and allowing the weeds of justice to grow without magnanimity. And finally, that we allow the high levels of the spirit to fall quietly in the lowest levels of rancor and hatred. We must call attention to the need for an education system, both in the family, as well as in the schools and churches, that completes this humanistic education, not only with what is required to compete and gain, but also with what is necessary to forgive and to cultivate a soul: magnanimity.

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3.1 Train citizens instead of victims or subjects

Throughout the process of reconciliation, ethical training must be inseparably tied to civic training. Ethics without civic education may form individualist mystics, or hermits with a rare isolated spirituality. This is the opposite of the true mystics, whose interior strength, and their spiritual dynamism is used to deliver themselves every day to the cultivation of interpersonal relations, and to the weaving of a solidary and participative network within civil society.

This will prevent the creation of second-class citizens. The present processes of socialization are unacceptable since they are based on an irrational and dehumanizing competence, and produce, on the one hand, citizens who feel victimized, and on the other, citizens with very dangerous authoritarian and populist tendencies.

Civic education is not only urgently needed for democratic change in Cuba, but it is also a condition for our national reconciliation process. Civic illiteracy is another of the damages caused by this totalitarian system for more than fifty years. It will take many years to rebuild individuals and a social coexistence based on fraternity.

Cuba needs this urgently. I am speaking from experience. Twenty years ago we started our efforts with the now extinct *Centro de Formación Cívica y Religiosa* from the Catholic Dioceses of Pinar del Río and we tried to expand this ethical belief and civic education through the publication *Vitral*, which attempted to offer a diverse space for Cubans to find “the freedom of light” since 1994. That first project is currently continued in the current project and magazine, *Convivencia* (“Coexistence”; www.convivenciacuba.es).

We base our educational effort towards freedom and the responsibility on the Social Doctrine of the Church and on universal principles recognized by the international community. Simply stated, it is about seeking “all human rights for all”.

4. THE SEARCH FOR INCLUSION

Reconciliation and inclusion are two faces of the same coin. For reconciliation, it is necessary that all walls come down, both physical and geographic, ideological and cultural, religious and racial, and those related to social status and poverty and ignorance, political or generational. A reduced or selective reconciliation is a nothing more than a new form of confrontation.

We cannot reject some guests from the reconciliation table to allow others to seat to eat or talk. It bears repeating: it does not matter how the Cuban puzzle is put together, what is vital is that all the pieces be on the table.

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Those excluded should not repeat the example set by those who excluded them, paying them with the same coin, nor can the excluders maintain in their decision and especially in their spirit, that obsessive tendency towards mistrust, caudillismo, sectarianism and exclusion.

To visualize new “places and opportunities” in the community for those who will leave the government apparatus and do not owe anything to justice, is an attitude that favors the reconciliation process. Even those who would have to face justice to pay for crimes of any type, should eventually be gradually reintegrated into the community.

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5. THE SEARCH FOR CONSENSUS

If we accept and promote the inclusion of all the pieces of our national puzzle on the reconciliation table, then it will not be sufficient to keep them isolated in a sort of “Noah’s Ark” without reaching agreements. We must try to reach a minimum, progressive and articulate consensus.

Following this path, we would like to make reference to a meeting of Cubans from the island and in exile that took place in Madrid on July 5, 2013.

The following common positions were identified on this occasion and proposed for the rest of the civil society. It is an ethic of minimum positions, ten points of consensus:

1. We are all members of one nation, whether in the Island or in Exile.
2. We have chosen non-violent struggle using peaceful methods.
3. We believe in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in a plural democracy and in economic freedom.
4. We demand from the government the ratification of all Human Rights Conventions.
5. We promote inclusion and recognize the legitimacy of all tendencies and all pro-democratic social expressions.
6. We are propositional and not hindered by complaints. We are geared towards a positive vision of the future.
7. Civil society, to which we belong, is not just starting, but is in the process of articulation and growth.
8. We recognize the need and relevance of the participation of all Cubans, as well as the support and solidarity from other nations, while respecting the sovereign decisions of the Cuban people.
9. We tacitly agree to avoid all personal attacks and criticism, and renounce all forms of verbal violence, even against public officials.
10. We must implement these basic agreements through certain advisory mechanisms, with rotating and collegiate representation.

These consensus points are only some of the issues that we find among all areas of Cuban society. We know that there are more issues that join us than divide us. These items also show, to some degree, the progress made during our growing trend towards diversity.

The participants appointed a committee to present these results, which should serve as inspiration and commitment for the current and future work of all those individuals who love Cuba and hope for a better future for the country, in peace and prosperity.

6. THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE FABRIC OF CIVIL SOCIETY: THE NEED TO BECOME

WEAVERS OF COEXISTENCE.

On September 8, 2013, the Cuban bishops released their pastoral letter commemorating 20 years from the “El amor todo lo espera” (“Love expects everything”) document, and publicly recognized the incipient reconstruction of the spaces of Cuban civil society. This is probably the item less commented on in the bishops’ letter. There is a petition to create a legal framework that could lead to political changes. There is talk of the petition to deepen economic reforms, but matters of civil society, should rise above political and economic issues. I am deeply convinced that the most important section of the bishops’ letter, that will survive political and economic changes, is the recognition that the development of a healthy and creative civil society will be beneficial for the future of Cuba. In 20 years this will be an required reference for the reconstruction of the Cuban nation. Those still alive will see it.

In this manner, after many years of discreet, patient and risky work, the church bishops publicly recognized and declared that a strong civil society will always be a great asset. I remember that this issue was first addressed in Cuba, not academically but in a social and religious setting, during the II Catholic Social Week held in la Habana in 1994, when Luis Enrique Estrella and myself, presented the paper “Lets rebuild the civil society: a project for Cuba”. At the time nobody talked about the issue and there was talk of putting it in practice. It had only been a year before the Centro de Formación Cívica in Pinar del Rio began its work to foster Cuban civil society. Twenty years later it has become an incipient reality and today it has the recognition of the Cuban bishops.

7. POSSIBLE ITINERARY FOR RECONCILIATION IN CUBA

Itineraries, even those that only indicate the will to move ahead, can help illuminate a path. We submit this proposal to debate:

- Personal itinerary:
- Recognition of personal guilt and a disposition toward change in thought and attitude.
- Recognition of personal involvement and guilt in social or structural errors.
- Contribute concrete and personal acts of reconciliation.
- Elimination of violence of any kind (media, linguistic, interpersonal, judicial, national, international).
- Reconciliation shall include all dimensions of personal life: physical, intellectual, emotional, spiritual, volitional, relationships.

Social itinerary:

- Creation of a Truth and Reconciliation Committee in Cuban civil society with the participation of Cubans from the Island and in the Exile.
- Petition for a general political amnesty.
- Demand the ratification of all Human Rights covenants already signed by Cuba.
- Promote permanent and multifaceted dialogue within the Island community.
- Promote permanent and multifaceted dialogue within the Exile community.
- Promote permanent and multifaceted dialogue among Island and Exile communities.
- Perform acts and events, for communities and groups, of reconciliation.
- Create inclusive spaces for participation and exchange among Cuban civil society groups and associations, in the Island and abroad.

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- Work for a reconciliation process to be institutionalized with adequate laws until the amendment of the Constitutions, in order to create a new legal framework for peaceful coexistence.
- Increase autonomy and articulation among political, civil and religious groups.
- Promote the formation of workers, artists, economists and lawyer groups, as well as other professions, from different perspectives, incorporating people of different religions and political views.

Suggestions for the State:

- Favor the creation of spaces for pluralist participation.
- Eliminate belligerent, divisive and intolerant language and methods.
- Open a center for the study of the national reconciliation including academics from Cuba and abroad.
- Grant political amnesty and reincorporate those displaced by political, religious and economic, reasons.
- Promote dialogue with the Cuban diaspora through cultural, academic and family exchanges, in both directions and under the same conditions and proportions.

CONCLUSION

I would like to summarize the reasons that we have to be hopeful by using a Bible reference that feels like it was written for the Cuban people today. Its urgency and currency are paradigmatic:

Christ is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. (Ephesians 2, 14-19).

Reconciliation is crowned by peace. Christ set the example for tearing down the dividing wall by crucifying His own flesh without hurting anyone else. This is the only way to destroy the basis of the wall that divides us with hatred and rejections of our own people. Reconciliation is not an end in and of itself, as we said from the beginning, it is the road to make all Cubans, wherever they are and however they think, citizens of the same country.

If we empower each other, we will not only tear down walls, but we will build the highest degree of human coexistence: a society “with all and for the good of all”.

I repeat, and I believe that I will repeat until the end of my life, the glorious words of Jose Marti, with which I leave with you as permanent “homework” to feed the mystic of reconciliation among Cubans. I believe that together with the Montecristi Manifest, it could become the Magna Carta of the Cuban reconciliation:

With the pain of the entire country we suffer and for the good of the country we build and we reject revolutions of exclusion or factions... nor will we obfuscate nor cower ourselves. We don't force nor exclude. What is the highest freedom, if not to employ it for the good of those who have less freedom than us? What is faith for, if not to impassion those who don't have it?... It is true that the first signs of a nascent people are not discerned nor obeyed by anyone but republicans souls.....And that is what we are doing here, crafting without boasting, a future where we can all fit.⁵

So be it.

Reconciliation is not an end in and of itself...it is the road to make all Cubans, wherever they are and however they think, citizens of the same country.

⁵ Martí, José. Discurso del 10 de octubre de 1881.

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Lay Catholic and intellectual born in Pinar del Rio, Cuba on August 4, 1955. In 1974, after completing high school, he was prohibited from studying sociology—his career of choice—because of his faith. He graduated in 1980 with a degree in agricultural engineering from the University of Pinar del Rio. After working for over 26 years in the *Empresa de Tabaco de Pinar del Rio*, he was fired on May 2, 1996 because of his work as director of the Catholic publication “*Vitral*,” and sentenced to over 10 years of forced work in a rural brigade collecting palm fronds in Cuba’s countryside. For over 40 years, he has been a layman committed to Cuba’s Roman Catholic Church. He served as founder and president of the *Comision Catolica para la Cultura de la Diocesis de Pinar del Rio* from 1987 to 2006. In addition, he served as a member of the board of *Encuentro Nacional Eclesial Cubano (ENEC)* in 1986. Mr. Valdes serves as founder and director of the *Centro de Formacion Civica y Religiosa (CFCR)* since 1993 and as director of his *Revista Vitral* from 1994 to 2007. He currently serves as director of the digital publication *Convivencia Cuba*.