The Importance of Working with Scraps: Reconciliation in Difficult Contexts

Joseph C. Liechty

Every reconciliation process will require some level of agreement between antagonistic parties. Perhaps the bare minimum will be an initial agreement to meet, or at least openness to meeting sometime in the future. And as a process develops, it's hard to imagine that increasing agreement, at least in some areas, will not be a natural marker of progress. That said, approaches to reconciliation that minimize the necessity of agreement, while welcoming it when it arrives, are likely to work best, especially when the conflict is entrenched and the differences are great. Reconciliation workers need to be prepared to work with scraps; in fact they probably need to relish it.

As with most of my convictions about reconciliation, the importance of working with scraps arises from the context of Ireland and Northern Ireland, where I worked for twenty-four years. I moved to Ireland in 1980, and over the next decade, as I got acquainted with people and with the issues, there was very little progress toward ending violent conflict in Northern Ireland and little reason for optimism. Deaths due to the conflict had fallen from the highs of the early- to mid-1970s, but at nearly 100 deaths per year, it was very damaging (the equivalent in tiny Northern Ireland—a population then of about 1.5 million, the size of Connecticut—of a war claiming 20,000 deaths per year in the United States), and it seemed as if it could go on forever. Politics provided little hope, as every initiative seemed quickly overwhelmed and swept aside, although, looking back, it is apparent that some principles were being established that would eventually come to fruition. The British army couldn't defeat the IRA without completely unacceptable costs, and while the IRA equally couldn't defeat the British Army, it seemed able to sustain a long war. There were various interesting reconciliation initiatives going on, and a recognizable and fairly wide-ranging reconciliation community, but it seemed so frail against the forces it was trying to turn.

In these circumstances, I became an admirer, and sometimes the friend and encourager, of those who found within themselves the courage and imagination to pursue reconciliation work when any kind of success seemed so distant, if it seemed possible at all. "It is not up to

you to complete the work, nor are you at liberty to give it up." [1] I didn't then know this saying from the Mishnah, but it captures so well the stance taken by these Northern Ireland reconciliation workers. And this was not a ground-down, gloomy stance, simply allowing them to trudge drearily along; many of them, much of the time, were somehow buoyant. It was a wonderful community to be received into.

I formed in my mind a kind of pantheon of exemplary workers with scraps. High among them was Diane Greer, who was, when I knew her in the 1990s, a Protestant community worker in Derry, Northern Ireland. Bloody Sunday 1972, when the British Army killed thirteen unarmed Catholic civil-rights protesters or bystanders in Derry, had been an unstaunchable wound in the Northern Ireland Catholic community throughout the Troubles. In 1998 the British government announced as part of growing moves toward peace in Northern Ireland that it would create a Bloody Sunday Inquiry to re-examine the evidence. Catholics received the news with attitudes ranging from caution to cynicism, and yet establishing the tribunal was itself a kind of vindication, and it promised the possibility of further vindication. My enemy's gain necessarily being my loss, Derry's Protestant community, once a politically dominant minority but now small and dispirited, did not receive the news well. Recognizing that Derry Protestant's had never really addressed Bloody Sunday and needed to, Greer and others tried to organize a public debate in the Protestant Waterside area to get Protestants talking about the issues. Some such effort was probably necessary, deep background work for reconciliation in Derry, but it was also emotionally excruciating—it proved a step too far, and the event collapsed and had to be cancelled. Greer said she was "exasperated and desperately disappointed" about the cancelled meeting. "I feel sad about my own community's lack of maturity. But I am also struck by how hurt that community is. … They feel they are being wiped out slowly." For Greer, exasperation did not mean exhaustion. "Let's look at it this way," she said, "we had a very important event which almost happened. We can work on that." [2] Viewed in a certain light, such words can reasonably be regarded as self-deluded folly. But this is the kind of apparent foolishness that on deeper examination is revealed to be necessary wisdom. If the only scrap you've got is a good event that almost happened, you work with that.

I'll cite just one more member of my scrap-working pantheon, Alistair Little. When in 1975 Little, then a Protestant paramilitary, went to prison for murdering a Catholic, he was something of a cause celebre, because at just seventeen years old he was the youngest

person imprisoned for a Troubles-related killing. As sometimes happened, thirteen years in prison was the occasion for a slow and difficult transformation, and, long before he was released, he had renounced violence and his paramilitary membership. He has worked ever since at reconciliation-related projects. In 2003 Little spoke to the students in a Belfast masters program in reconciliation studies that I was directing, and I learned that he bridled at the term "reconciliation," which he believed had become politicized and therefore sullied. When asked to define reconciliation, he therefore responded with some irritation, but also powerfully and memorably. First, he said, reconciliation is when you recognize that your enemy suffers, because to recognize suffering is to recognize a common humanity, and that is what you have been blocking out. That's a severely minimalist definition of reconciliation, but it makes immediate sense. His second definition of reconciliation was more difficult: reconciliation is when you go to a meeting with your enemies and nothing goes right, and you come back out of the meeting madder than when you went in. This is reconciliation, he said, because six months earlier, you wouldn't have consented to be in the same room with those people. A situation like this might also be interpreted as one in which the willingness to meet, the very beginning of the will to reconcile, was growing tentatively, but perhaps it was too early to actually meet. That's not how Alistair interpreted it, however, and in any case, note that we are very far from agreement here, and that's all right. If all you've got is the will to meet but not yet the skill, that's the scrap you work with.

As scraps start to accumulate and we see the possibility of them being turned into something beautiful and useful, fruitful reconciliation processes can still flourish in the face of substantial, potentially difficult disagreement. My friends in the organization known in the 1980s and 1990s as ECONI (Evangelical Contribution on Northern Ireland) are a useful example, because they did vital reconciliation work in the face of both differences within evangelicalism and differences with Catholicism. Over the centuries and down to the present day in some ways and contexts, Northern Ireland has to a significant extent kept alive Reformation era invective: Protestants are heretics, the pope is the antichrist and Catholics by extension antichristian; Protestant churches are not true churches, the Catholic Church is not Christian, and so on. ECONI was therefore remarkable for being founded in the mid-1980s, not to express evangelical grievances but to challenge the failings of the evangelical community in relation to the Troubles, including its sometimes virulent anti-Catholicism and the related social and political degradation. To do this work, however, ECONI did not require a uniform stance concerning the Catholic Church. What might be

called ECONI's left wing accepted the Catholic Church as a Christian church, which they disagreed with in various ways while also happily accepting that they could learn from Catholicism. The ECONI right wing did not differ *doctrinally* from traditional anti-Catholicism: the Catholic Church is so radically flawed that it cannot be considered Christian, and Catholics who become Christians should leave it. On a kind of middle ground, some evangelicals did not accept the Catholic Church as Christian, but readily accepted individual Catholics as Christians. What united the three stances within ECONI was a firm commitment to the proposition that, however one evaluates Catholicism, this must not lead to further hatred and violence, whether directly or indirectly. At the very least, positive, respectful relationships in civil society and civil rights and fair treatment for all are a necessary standard, and friendship and cooperation with Catholics are possible, regardless of one's stance toward the Catholic Church.

ECONI's ability to work together despite these theological disagreements was no small feat in its own right, because long-term, endemic conflict heightens the fear of betrayal, of loosened standards that will diminish our unity in the face of threat from outside. Neither did the range of theological conviction prevent extensive work with Catholics, or with differently but equally estranged liberal Protestants. ECONI's essentially repentant, confessional stance and their consistent willingness to engage with an incredibly wide range of religious, social, and political groups were such a gift to Northern Ireland that potentially hurtful theological judgments by ECONI members did not hinder their work with others.

Nor did judgment of Protestants by the Catholic Church deter ECONI from cooperating with Catholics. The August 2000 document *Dominus Iesus*, issued by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, was a good test. *Dominus Iesus* made clear that the Catholic Church has no difficulty accepting the Christian integrity of individual Protestants, or even of the Protestant churches themselves, which "have by no means been deprived of significance and importance in the mystery of salvation. For the spirit of Christ has not refrained from using them as means of salvation." [3]Catholics are not, however, to view the Protestant churches as "sister churches," as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) made clear in a letter issued a month before *Dominus Iesus* to the presidents of conferences of bishops throughout the Catholic church. [4] Despite their spiritual merits, Protestant churches, according to *Dominus Iesus*, "suffer from defects" and are therefore "not Churches in the proper sense," but "ecclesial communities." "[T]he Church of Christ,

despite the divisions which exist among Christians, continues to exist fully only in the Catholic Church." [5] The document was big news in Ireland, denounced as bigoted in the media and by some Protestant leaders. When I asked ECONI leaders for their take on the issue, they tended to be dismissive of those who had been surprised. *Dominus Iesus* reiterated what they knew had long been the position of the Catholic Church, and its restatement was no reason not to get on with the work. Protestant-Catholic cooperation didn't depend on theological agreement.

A capacity to work with scraps can arise in several ways. Some people seem to have a gift for it, and sometimes it can be inspired by the will to reconcile or the urgent need to reconcile. For teaching how to work with scraps, however, I know of no better source than Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf's *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. [6] The book has the merit of being theological to the core and yet often expressing wisdom that can be appropriated by people from many faith traditions or none. Writing in the context of the bloody breakup of the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, Volf proposes a method he calls "double vision," a way of searching for "truth between people," [7] one might almost say creating truth between people when no such truth is apparent. He breaks double vision into four movements. "First, we *step outside ourselves*" [8] [Volf's emphasis] to examine ourselves, to understand our assumptions, prejudices, and self-conception. There are limits to what is possible, but we are doing our best "to distance ourselves for a moment from what is inside, ready for a surprise." [9]"Second, we *cross a social boundary and move into the world of the other* to inhabit it temporarily" [10] [Volf's emphasis]. Again there are limits—"temporarily" is key—but we are seeking to understand how the other, those from whom we are alienated, see the world and how they see us. "Third, we *take the other into our own world*" [11] [Volf's emphasis]. This is the movement of judgment: "we compare and contrast" [12]what we have seen, we decide what to accept and reject, we decide what will remain with us simply as extended knowledge and what will change us more deeply. "Fourth, we *repeat the process*" [13] [Volf's emphasis]. This fourth movement is grounded in humility, in the knowledge that at each step we will see through a glass darkly and so we may not assume that we have seen correctly. There are further grounds for humility in the awareness that we do not necessarily get to engage in many rounds of double vision until we are happy that we are ready to act—circumstances will often dictate that we act now, knowing that double vision has given us

some new insight, but still partial and limited.

Elsewhere in *Exclusion and Embrace,* Volf applies the same method to people in conflict seeking an equally elusive state, justice between people. [14] In circumstances where people are in bitter conflict and where there is little or no agreement on what would constitute agreed justice and truth—in fact radically different conceptions of justice and truth may be the source of conflict—Volf offers an elegant and powerful method for working with whatever scraps may be found in the situation. His method is one tool among others; but it is the kind of tool essential for reconciliation workers who recognize that they will need to work with scraps.

1. 1. *Pirkei Avot* 2:16. This text is also cited on occasion as 2:18, 2:21, and perhaps others. This rendition of the saying, the form in which I first encountered it, is available at the *Christianity Today* website (http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1999/june14/9t7084.html) among others. The Jewish Virtual Library translates the saying as, "It is not your responsibility to finish the work [of perfecting the world], but you are not free to desist from it either" (http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/pirkei_avot.html).
2. 2. Quoted in "Bloody Sunday: Still an Open Wound," by Susan McKay, *Sunday Tribune* [Dublin], 30 Jan. 2000.
3. 3. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Declaration '*Dominus Iesus*' on the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church," http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_....
4. 4. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Note on the Expression 'Sister Churches': A Letter to the Presidents of the Conferences of Bishops," http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_..., (accessed May 15, 2012).
5. 5. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Declaration 'Dominus Iesus.'"
6. 6. Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).
7. 7. Volf, 250-58.
8. 8. Volf, 251.
9. 9. Volf, 252.

10. 10. Volf, 252.
11. 11. Volf, 252.
12. 12. Volf, 252.
13. 13. Volf, 252.
14. 14. Volf, 212-220.