

Canadian Roman Catholic/United Church of Canada Dialogue

Report of the Dialogue on the Theme: *Sin, Reconciliation, and Ecclesial Identity*

NOVEMBER 2000 – JUNE 2004

I. THE THEME:

Following a fruitful discussion of Trinitarian language at baptism, the Canadian Roman Catholic/United Church of Canada Dialogue sought another topic of mutual interest and lively concern. Realizing that both churches were addressing issues around past failings, and involvement in sinful action, current demands for forgiveness, and the search for reconciliation, we agreed to study this reality further.

The concrete events we had in mind were a) the Demand of Pardon expressed by John Paul II in the year 2000 for past faults committed by members of the Roman Catholic Church, b) the United Church of Canada's response to past antisemitic behaviour; and c) the reactions of both churches to the Indian Residential School issue in Canada, including official apologies.

These events inspired us to question the underlying theological comprehension of Sin and Reconciliation and to consider if it would be similar or different in each of our churches. As a further step, we wished to explore the ecclesial identity of the two churches as expressed in the approach of each church to corporate and historical responsibility. What concept of church is implied in the way we talk about the sins of the church and approaches to reconciliation? What does it mean to be "church" when that communion is tainted with collective sinful past activities? What can we learn from one another about what it means to repent of actions taken in the name of our churches?

In this way, "Sin, Reconciliation and Ecclesial Identity" became the focus for nine dialogue meetings between November 2000 and June 2004. A list of dialogue participants during this period is attached as Appendix A.

II. THE PROCESS:

During our first meeting on this topic,¹ we explored the theme of "Sin, Reconciliation and Ecclesial Identity" by considering: the Roman Catholic International Theological Commission text *Memory and Reconciliation*; the United Church of Canada's *Apology to First Nations People* (1986) and *Apology to Former Students of Residential Schools* (1998); the Touchstone article *Lessons from the Residential Schools*; and the United Church of Canada statement *Bearing Faithful Witness* (concerning the United Church of Canada's relationship with Jewish people); as well as a reflective reading of the first three chapters of *Genesis*.

¹ Montreal, November 30 to December 2, 2000.

As involvement in the Indian Residential Schools in Canada² was a common historic point for both of our churches we chose this as a case study for our broader question. Our knowledge of the case study was broadened during our second meeting³ by a viewing and discussion of the video *The Healing Circle*, which presents the healing process in the Indian Residential Schools aftermath from the perspective of the Anglican Church.

The sources considered during the first and second meetings plunged us immediately into a complex jungle of issues: sin and right relationships; good and evil; the purification of memory (whether we can, through confession and/or apology, be freed of the burden of sin); and the capacity of the church to sin and to forgive. These have remained the dominant issues of the dialogue throughout our subsequent meetings.

We began our dialogue theme with the suspicion that the two churches would differ essentially in their self-understanding as churches and therefore in their means of defining and dealing with sinfulness, especially concerning the whole body of the church. However, it proved difficult to get a clear understanding of the churches' positions. We often had to reach conclusions on this matter through statements on related topics.

During the second, third, fourth and fifth dialogue meetings⁴ we looked at the general way in which *Sin and Reconciliation* are presented and understood in our churches. We realized that these themes are at the heart of the Christian message and mission and therefore omnipresent in biblical sources as well as in all types of church documents and materials. We examined doctrinal statements (including historical statements); theological reflections; teaching material (both adult catechisms and Sunday School curricula); liturgical material (the United Church of Canada hymn book, and liturgies from both churches for repentance and reconciliation); biblical hermeneutics; suggestions for preaching; and church documents on social sin in a specific context. We complemented the official texts by presenting our personal understandings of sin and reconciliation and by giving our personal interpretations of relevant biblical passages.

As we began to explore the different texts, we realized that there was a significant gap between the official theological position held by each of our churches, and the actual practices within individual church parishes or congregations, practices which are deeply influenced by our contemporary culture. A medical model of sin as sickness, with no personal responsibility attached (sometimes referred to as "no-fault"), seems to be a common attitude in society. This attitude affects the mainstream Christian church. The word "sin" has virtually disappeared from the everyday vocabulary of our churches. We confirmed our intuition on this point by reading Barbara Brown Taylor's book *Speaking of Sin: The lost language of salvation*.

² For more information, see United Church of Canada, Residential Schools at <http://www.united-church.ca>.

³ Montreal, March 29-31, 2001.

⁴ Montreal, March 29-31, 2001; Montreal, November 8-9, 2001; Montreal, May 9-10, 2002; and Montreal, December 5-7, 2002.

One of the contexts in which we, as churches, are still talking about sin is our recognition of structural” or “systemic” sin. In our fifth dialogue meeting we tried to explore the ways in which our churches deal with this reality by looking at a number of official texts from the Roman Catholic Church (*Do Justice, Mater et Magistra, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Populorum Progressio*) and the United Church of Canada document *To Seek Justice and Resist Evil: Towards a Global Economy for All God’s People*. We also hoped to get a clearer picture of the question of “Ecclesial Identity” through examining each church’s position with respect to systemic sin.

During the sixth and seventh dialogue meetings⁵ we returned to our original case study, the Indian Residential Schools. We reviewed our general conclusions on Sin, Reconciliation and Ecclesial Identity in the light of the concrete action our churches are taking today in their relationship with the native peoples of Canada. We listened to presentations of church material: the United Church of Canada document *Justice and Reconciliation*; and the Roman Catholic document *Let Justice Flow Like a Mighty River*; and as well as summaries by church representatives Gerry Kelly (Roman Catholic Church) and Jim Sinclair (United Church of Canada) on the steps taken by each church towards reconciliation with native peoples. We used our knowledge of these concrete actions to refine our understanding of the theme of Sin, Reconciliation and Ecclesial Identity.

III. THE FINDINGS:

The abundance of material we studied was at times overwhelming, and it was not always easy to stay focussed on our theme questions. We found that it was easy to say much about any aspect of the discussion, and difficult to synthesize, or clearly identify, the distinctive theologies of our traditions.⁶ Yet we continued to experience, as a dialogue group, the power of the issues we were attempting to comprehend. Within that complexity and conviction, we have been able to enumerate several themes that emerge from our work.

Although all of the following points are interrelated, we can see three primary foci within our understandings of Sin, Reconciliation and Ecclesial Identity: shared foundations; points of divergence; and common emerging issues. Shared foundations are those areas in which both churches share a common understanding of and approach to the theme issues. Points of divergence are those areas in which the understandings or approaches of each church are different. Common emerging issues are areas in which tension is being felt in both churches.

1. Shared Foundations:

a. *The fundamental nature of sin and reconciliation.*

We agree that *sin is a reality* in our world, although people may not always use this theological term to describe it. We also agree that *sin and reconciliation are at the heart of the Christian message and mission*. We cannot talk about who we are as human beings and who God is in relation to us without reference to these realities.

⁵ Montreal, May 1-2, 2003; and Toronto, November 27-29, 2003.

⁶ For a fuller discussion of these issues, please see the Dialogue document entitled "Remarques méthodologiques".

As Paul wrote:

All this is from God, who reconciled us to Godself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God reconciling the world to Godself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. (2 Cor. 5:18-19)

In the gospels, Jesus often tells those who come to him for healing that their sins are forgiven. Christ's coming into the world and his death reveal to us God's grace and action for reconciliation. However we might describe sin, reconciliation, and ecclesial identity, we recognize that they are inseparably linked in our churches' faith and witness. We find multiple manifestations of the churches' dealing with these issues.

b. The definition of sin and reconciliation.

We agree that *sin is fundamentally a breaking of relationship: with God, with one another, and with creation.* This understanding of sin can be traced from the earliest biblical texts to the current documents of our churches – catechetical material and liturgical resources. Likewise, *reconciliation means the re-establishing, the healing of relationship: with God, with one another, and with creation.*

On the human level, we find this understanding of reconciliation in the churches' attempts to foster justice and healing for victims of the Indian Residential School system.⁷

Dialogue members discussed a model of the steps necessary for the process of reconciliation between persons, which is consistent with both our traditions. This arose out of the Indian Residential School reconciliation process. These steps include:

- The telling of truth about what has happened;
- The acceptance of responsibility and expression of remorse on the part of the offender;
- The willingness of the offended to enter into a trusting relationship with the offender;
- An agreement on the nature of the emerging relationship and on the periodic assessment of its integrity.

While reconciliation on the human level is seen in very similar terms in our churches, some differences occur when it comes to the way reconciliation is lived in relationship to God. This is discussed below under liturgical practices and the role of the church.

c. Personal, corporate and structural sin

We agree that *there are different levels of sin: personal sin, corporate sin and structural sin.* Scripture speaks of sin, reconciliation, and discipleship in a variety of ways. When we turn to biblical texts, we see that sin and sinfulness are presented as both individual and

⁷ United Church of Canada, *Justice and Reconciliation: The Legacy of Indian Residential Schools and the Journey Toward Reconciliation*, (2001).

collective, willful and “no fault.” There is no *one* scriptural formula for forgiveness and reconciliation, and the subsequent life of sinners in the community takes different forms in different passages. Our traditions of interpretation further contribute to the plurality of the biblical witness. This variety does not diminish the authority of the biblical texts, but instead reminds us of the depth and complexity of the questions we face. Christians have realized that sinful actions can be part of a broader context and that one can therefore distinguish between individual and structural sin. In Canada, the Indian Residential Schools issue is an example of the overlap between the two.

d. *The church as one body.*

We agree that ecclesial responsibility transcends the limitations of time and personal responsibilities. Concerning “ecclesial identity” we agree that each church in its visible form constitutes a body. That body can act as a corporate entity and can be held responsible for its actions.

This is evident in the *1998 United Church of Canada Apology*:

To former students of United Church Indian Residential Schools, and to their families and communities... We know that many within our church will still not understand why each of us must bear the scar, the blame for this horrendous period in Canadian history. But the truth is, we are the bearers of many blessings from our ancestors, and therefore, we must also bear their burdens.⁸

This is also evident in the Roman Catholic document *Memory and Reconciliation* which quotes Pope John Paul II:

because of “the bond which unites us to one another in the mystical body, all of us, though not personally responsible and without encroaching on the judgment of God, who alone knows every heart, bear the burden of the errors and faults of those who have gone before us.”⁹

2. Points of Divergence

In our study and discussion, two areas stood out for us in terms of different approaches, or at least a different emphasis, between Roman Catholic and United Church of Canada theology: our *theological anthropology* (who we are as human beings, and how we come to sin); and our *ecclesiology* (the nature and mission of the church). Woven into our understanding of both of these concepts are subtle hermeneutical differences, which cause us to focus the issues in different ways.

⁸ Right Reverend Bill Phipps, Moderator of the United Church of Canada, *1998 Apology to First Nations*. Full text available at United Church of Canada, Residential Schools at <http://www.united-church.ca>.

⁹ International Theological Commission, “Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past,” *Origins*, Vol. 29, no. 39 (March 16, 2000), p. 627.

a. Theological Anthropology: Sin and Human Responsibility

We come to the question of humanity's sinfulness in slightly different ways, which then affect how we understand reconciliation, and, ultimately, the role of the church.

Roman Catholics start the doctrinal discussion with the premise that the human being, created in the image of God, is essentially good in its nature. Thus the human freedom to choose is stressed. When humans choose evil, it is always under the guise of a good. That is, human beings are oriented toward goodness, and an ethical choice is always one that the chooser *believes* to be a good one for oneself. However, Roman Catholics would state that within this freedom, *sin impairs the human will's ability to choose the good*. "Thus sin tends to reproduce itself and reinforce itself, but it cannot destroy the moral sense at its root."¹⁰

United Church of Canada traditions of Reformed theology begin with the premise that the human being is 'fallen' due to the first sinning of our ancestors, and has lost the ability to choose the good. In the *Twenty-Five Articles of United Methodism*, Article 8 (Of Free Will) states:

The condition of man after the fall of Adam is such that he cannot turn and prepare himself, by his own natural strength and works, to faith, and calling upon God; wherefore we have no power to do good works, pleasant and acceptable to God, without the grace of God by Christ preventing us, that we may have a good will, and working with us, when we have that good will.¹¹

The following is an example of a prayer from the present United Church of Canada hymn and worship resource, which echoes this line of thought:

We confess the self that is not aware of sinning; the heart that is too hardened to repent; the pride that dares not admit it is wrong; the righteousness that knows no fault; the callousness that has ceased to care; the blindness that can see nothing but its own will.¹²

Having noted this historical position, we also note that it is increasingly common in contemporary United Church practice, including liturgical life, to operate from a more optimistic understanding of the human being, as having essential goodness and capacity to turn toward the good. A fuller discussion of this phenomenon is set out below under "Emerging Issues".

Implications: These classical theological arguments became significant for this dialogue, because they result in differing approaches to sin in our pastoral practices and ethical lives.

¹⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (1992), Number 1865.

¹¹ *Twenty-Five Articles of United Methodism*, (1784), "Article 8 (Of Free Will)".

¹² United Church of Canada, *Voices United*, (1996), p. 928.

The **Roman Catholic** emphasis on human freedom leads to a focus on the individual as a *moral actor* faced with choices. It is the church's task to distinguish and enumerate categories, such as mortal and venial sin, or vincible and invincible ignorance, to help the individual to understand the relative seriousness of particular sinful acts.¹³ This enumeration creates the need for the church to provide *acts of repentance* for particular sins, to restore the person to right relationship with God through Christ. The Roman Catholic ritual practice has privileged individual confession in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. This perspective can lead reconciled individuals to understand themselves to have deep personal responsibility for sins committed by the church. However, it can also offer an "out" to individuals, an opportunity to claim a variety of reasons for not bearing ecclesial responsibility.

The **United Church of Canada** emphasis on humanity's state of sinfulness before God has led to a focus on the community of sinners, and this, along with exposure to Social Gospel teachings and the influence of theologies of liberation, has led to a stress on "structural" or "social" sin. The church's task is to help enumerate the sinful situations that blemish creation, such as poverty, oppression, and injustice, and to offer the promise of forgiveness and imperatives for "mending the world."¹⁴ The act of reconciliation in Christ has as its goal a restoration of creation to its God-given goodness. In liturgical practice this has led the United Church of Canada to privilege general corporate confession. The church's response to the confession is an *assurance of pardon*. This understanding can lead reconciled individuals to see themselves as *agents of change* in the restoration of creation. However, it can also lead to a sense of paralysis or hopelessness about the sin of the world, and an inattention to the individual's relationship with God.

b. Ecclesiology: Can the Church Forgive? Can the Church Sin?

Our differing anthropologies imply dissimilar roles for the church in the act of naming sin and proclaiming the good news of reconciliation. These different tasks are reinforced by an underlying differing concept of church. How do we imagine the existence of "the church"? Do we think it simply as the sum of its members or do we accord it an existence apart from its members?

Roman Catholics believe that *the church has a permanent sinless existence*, apart from its human members, who may be sinful and disobedient to God. When Christians commit sinful acts, it is the church's responsibility to call its members to repentance and to forgive them, but not to repent *as* the church. "From a theological point of view, Vatican II distinguishes between the indefectible fidelity of the church and the weaknesses of her members, clergy or laity, yesterday and today."¹⁵

The church has the *authority to forgive sins*, and pronounce absolution to sinners:
"...through the ministry of the church may God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve

¹³ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (1992), The Gravity of Sin: Mortal and Venial Sin, Numbers 1854 to 1864.

¹⁴ United Church of Canada, *Mending the World* (1997), available at <http://www.united-church.ca/mtw/actions.shtm>; and United Church of Canada, Division of World Outreach, *To Seek Justice and Resist Evil* (2000).

¹⁵ *Memory and Reconciliation*, p. 629.

you from your sins.”¹⁶ In the gospels Jesus grants Peter and the disciples this authority, and other early Christian imagery supports this view, calling the church the Body of Christ.

United Church of Canada tradition sees the church as a ‘Body of Christ,’ understood as a gathering together of the diverse gifts of the whole people of God. Within this body, always understood to be a community of sinners, we carry both the faults and the blessings of the community. The church is empowered to *announce the forgiveness of sins* as proclaimed in the gospel, but only God grants the pardon and absolution: “In the name of Jesus Christ, and as one with you in the church, I assure you of this: your sins are forgiven.”¹⁷ When its members commit sinful acts in the name of the church, the church has a responsibility both to call the sinful to repentance and to repent collectively as Christ’s disciples who have failed him and his gospel. Because the church has, as its central mission, the preaching of the message, it can sin, but still bear the good news.

In order to compare *absolution* in the Roman Catholic Church and the *assurance of pardon* in the United Church of Canada one has to take into account that the act of reconciliation is a sacrament for the Roman Catholic Church and carries the whole understanding of a sacrament with it. In the United Church of Canada, the church lives out its general responsibility to proclaim the gospel through the assurance of pardon. The role and the importance of the act are understandably not the same.

The dialogue group felt that in naming these divergences at the core of our liturgical life we touched on the central aspects of our respective ecclesiologies. These ecclesiologies have a number of implications for the life of the church in the world.

Our understanding of our differences was deepened through the insights of the **Reformed/Roman Catholic International Dialogue**. The Reformed/Roman Catholic International Dialogue document, *Towards a Common Understanding of the Church* offers two conceptions of the church that help to flesh out the distinctions we noted in our own dialogue: the church as the “*Creatura Verbi*” (creation of the Word), and the church as the “*Sacrament of Grace*.” For the United Church of Canada, reconciliation and action rely on God’s creative Word of grace; the church’s faithfulness depends on listening for and mediating that Word in the world. For Roman Catholics, the church is an instrument of the unique mediation of Christ: it effects what it represents. While we would both claim both concepts as significant for faith, it is clear that our two traditions each tend to live more fully out of a different one. As an unfailing sacrament of grace, the Roman Catholic Church can speak with one voice, and can maintain its identity even in the midst of the sins of its members. As a church dependent upon the Word, the United Church of Canada is constantly discerning its path; in the process it must acknowledge a plurality of voices. Its identity is deeply challenged by the sins of its members.

At the seventh dialogue meeting¹⁸ we realized another important reality that comes into play as we look at our churches’ reactions to the legacy of Indian Residential Schools. Our

¹⁶ "Rite of Penance," *National Bulletin on Liturgy*, Vol. 34, no. 164, p.21.

¹⁷ United Church of Canada, *Celebrate God's Presence*, (2000), p. 666.

¹⁸ Toronto, November 27-29, 2003.

public stand is determined not only by theological and ecclesiological characteristics (for instance, if the church as church apologizes or not) but also, to an important extent, by the concrete historical form, constitution and legal structure of each church.¹⁹

While the United Church of Canada, as national church, is a creation of the Canadian Parliament, the Roman Catholic Church is an international body. The Roman Catholic Church has not carried responsibility for the running of Indian Residential Schools. Corporate entities, like religious orders or dioceses, were involved in supporting this system.²⁰ This may explain some of the differences we can observe today in the acceptance of corporate failings and repentance.

3. Emerging Issues:

As noted above, our contemporary context points to places where our two traditions appear to be moving closer to one another, or are being confronted with similar challenges.

a. *The Decreasing Emphasis on “Sin”:*

In both our traditions, in Canada, we see a decreasing emphasis on sin in preaching, teaching, and pastoral care. In studying congregational resources (e.g. Sunday School Curricula) we had the impression that the term and the notion of sin was avoided as much as possible. While it may be more pronounced in the United Church of Canada, in both denominations we sense a discomfort with the language of sin, especially in relation to the individual.²¹

Many cultural influences are at the root of this development, among others individualism, relativism, psychological theories and a life-style that concentrates on the “here and now”, without any notion of an “afterlife”. We agreed with Barbara Brown Taylor’s assessment in *Speaking of Sin* that contemporary society, including the mainstream Christian church, has adopted a medical “no fault” model of sin as sickness, with no personal responsibility attached. This model has implications for both our traditions. Representatives of our churches are very careful in speaking about sin, as they are afraid of turning people away. We observed that many people come to our churches only as long as it makes them feel good. To talk about sin would be counter-productive in this context. And if we do not talk about sin we cannot talk about reconciliation. As we noted earlier, we realized in our dialogue the centrality of sin and reconciliation for our Christian faith. The Dialogue raises the question for our churches: Where are we if we drop what is integral to our faith?

¹⁹ The United Church of Canada was legally created by the Parliament of Canada (1924) and the various provinces of Canada (1924-1926).

²⁰ In 1991, the Oblates, a Roman Catholic missionary order, acknowledged its role and responsibility in running numerous residential schools, and apologized to native peoples at Lac Ste. Anne, Alberta. For the full text of *An Apology to Native Peoples* see <http://www.turtleisland.org/news/oblates.pdf>.

²¹ Mgr. Adam Exner in his presentation to the synod of 1983, “Le problème du péché et les signes d’espoir” (CECC, 1983), said “De nombreux sondages menés au Canada démontrent que beaucoup de catholiques ont perdu le sens du péché. La pratique du sacrement de réconciliation a diminué de façon sensible.”

b. The Link Between “Social” and “Personal” Sin:

Both our traditions seem to acknowledge the link between the personal and the social, and the need to represent that link catechetically, liturgically, and in our life in the world. An attempt to balance out a one-sided approach can be observed in both churches. The Roman Catholic Church has traditionally emphasized personal sin, but has recently developed penitential rites for groups. In the same vein, the United Church of Canada, which has traditionally emphasized corporate sin, has recently prepared liturgies for individual confession.

Social teachings and theologies of liberation and social gospel have emerged in both our traditions in the past century, and Canadian Christians, including Roman Catholics and United Church of Canada members, have spoken with one voice to name many social issues which are also concerns of the Gospel.

c. Ecclesial Identity and Questions of Responsibility

In this context, the whole discussion which arose in relation to the Indian Residential Schools presents an interesting occasion and challenge for the churches to reflect anew and to talk again about sin, reconciliation and ecclesial identity. They cannot do this without clarifying at the same time their ecclesial standpoint.

From the Roman Catholic point of view there is a growing awareness of the impact of individual responsibility on the whole body most especially when the individuals hold positions of leadership. This has been evidently verified in the question of the Indian Residential Schools. But there is tension between the individual responsibility and the responsibility of the collective whole to which the individual belongs. To what extent does the individual responsibility impact the collective whole and to what extent does the collective whole bear the moral responsibility of the individual.

From the United Church point of view the whole body is more clearly involved. It is the United Church of Canada as a collective body that took the responsibility for the Indian Residential Schools. It therefore took, as a body, the responsibility of the actions of the individual. Here the individual's responsibility tends to be lost in the collective whole. To what extent is the responsibility of the collective whole appropriated not only by one or two individuals but by each member of the collective whole and to what extent is the individual, as a moral actor, responsible for his personal actions.

The ecclesial identity of both ecclesial communities are here at play. One would insist on personal responsibility, the other on collective responsibility. Yet in both cases the individual members of both churches are also involved.

Appendix A: Members of the Dialogue

| Church | Name | Staff or Member | Term |
|--------|-------------------|-----------------|------------------------|
| ACC | Ann Cruikshank | observer | Nov 2000 to April 2004 |
| RCC | Donna Geernaert | staff | Nov 2000 to Dec 2002 |
| RCC | Mary Jean Goulet | staff | Dec 2002 to June 2004 |
| RCC | Bertrand Blanchet | member | Nov 2000 to May 2002 |
| RCC | Luc Bouchard | member | Dec 2002 to June 2004 |
| RCC | Gilles Bourdeau | member | Nov 2000 to June 2004 |
| RCC | Anne O'Brien | member | Nov 2000 to Nov 2003 |
| RCC | Derek Simon | member | Nov 2000 |
| RCC | Thomas Potvin | member | April 2004 |
| UCC | Steven Chambers | staff | Nov 2003 to June 2004 |
| UCC | Chris Ferguson | staff | Dec 2002 to May 2003 |
| UCC | Peter Wyatt | staff | Nov 2000 to March 2001 |
| UCC | Sandra Beardsall | member | Nov 2000 to May 2003 |
| UCC | Blake Hanna | member | Nov 2000 to May 2003 |
| UCC | Doug Norris | member | Nov 2000 to April 2004 |
| UCC | Angelika Piché | member | Nov 2000 to June 2004 |
| UCC | Laurie Smith | member | Nov 2000 to June 2004 |

ACC denotes Anglican Church of Canada

RCC denotes Roman Catholic Church

UCC denotes United Church of Canada