



Metropolitan Archbishop of Izmir

HOPE OF RECONCILIATION

Archbishop's letter for Lent 2025

Dear brothers and sisters,

Recently I had the opportunity to visit the jubilee shrine of Three Fountains, the place where Apostle Paul was beheaded, the place where the highest truth of his life was fulfilled: For me to live is Christ and to die a gain. (Phil 1:21). In another way we can say that the whole meaning of life for Paul was Christ; and death could finally be a gain, because one comes to Christ. Through his sacrifice, experienced as a gift of love for Christ, we can have access to the supreme witness of faithfulness to Christ, to the truth that finds its proof in the testimony and the testimony is the foundation of the truth proclaimed: Christ crucified is risen and he is the savior of the world. Christ is the sublime expression of the love of God the Father for each of us, for every human being on earth.

Hope as attitude

Lent this year is a time of grace in which we can live our hope even more deeply by being convinced that the fragility of life, its transience and death are not the final and ultimate realities of this earthly existence. The Jubilee Year is meant to be a time of light on our journey, and it is the light of the risen Christ, who has overcome the darkness of evil and sin.

We all need hope based on the truth that Christ is the Lamb of God who took away the sin of the world forever. But on the other hand, we all need to renew our awareness of the state of sin that is hindrance to life with God; only awareness of sin makes us feel the need for forgiveness. Some have had the joy of not experiencing the crises of life, they did not pass through darkness and were able to touch God's holiness more deeply.

In contrast, others have experienced life's vicissitudes, crises, and the Lord's distance. When in sin the greatest danger is to think: I am no longer perfect, I am no longer according to the rule, so God no longer loves me, God no longer wants me; but I too, in fact, no longer need Him. This is also the way of thinking of Christians baptized in childhood, Christians according to baptism received but not lived, Christians according to name, Christians according to culture and ethnic membership. At the same time, it seems that we hide behind the illusion that we are perfect, that we are better than others, knowing full well that we are not.

On the other hand, all the reasons that we create for ourselves for not living according to the teaching of the Church manifest themselves to be insufficient for being happy, in fact they are obstacles to being close to God. Clashing with reality, looking at the truth willingly or unwillingly, we do recognize, that we need conversion. We need to realize that according to Jesus' parable (Lk 15:11-32), God's remoteness brings us among the "swine" which means isolation, rejection of fellowship, loneliness and despair. If we read the Gospel, above all the parables of mercy, we can realize that our false belief in being perfect saves us neither from the misery of life nor from death. I hope we are still able to understand, that we have been hit by the moral and spiritual pandemic, and that only by returning to the truth of life with heartfelt awareness will we be able to be reconciled with God.



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Dear brethren of the Christian tradition: Have we ever wondered why the younger generation has left the Church, living according to its own purposes, according to the purposes of the world? Have we realized, that this is the pure result of our care for the treasure of faith. If there were a deep conviction of how much our faith is for us the immeasurable treasure, it would not have been so, and probably the situation of our marriages, the situation of our human life would be very different.

All of us, firstborn and adopted brothers and sisters, need to understand the love of the Father, who is waiting for us in His House. Let us read carefully this verse from the parable of the Prodigal Son: “But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him” (Lk 15:20). God can be nothing but compassionate. God moves toward every one of us with infinite love and He will throw himself around your neck, brother, sister. Accept or do not accept!

You ask, how can my return be? Is it possible? Do I have an open heart to this call, by which the Lord makes himself present? Yes, surely it is easier to remain what I am, and as I am. But in fact, every journey begins with a first step.

Reconciliation with God according to the Scriptures¹

Every Christian has a deep need for reconciliation, because human life is not the life of perfect people who have already reached heaven, but it is the life on earth, marked by difficulties, human frailties and limitations.

Reconciliation is closely related to conversion (cf. Mt 3:2; Mk 1:15), and already in the Old Testament the subject of reconciliation is Yahweh; instead, the rites of atonement were only 'means' of reconciliation. The desire for reconciliation is expressed in some Psalms and the Prophets, but if the Old Testament presents us only the Hebrew People's desire for reconciliation with God, the New Testament extends reconciliation to all human beings. Reconciliation is the establishment of an authentic relationship with God, illustrated by two parables that speak of the discovery of a priceless treasure: “The treasure hidden in the field” and “The merchant who sought pearls” (cf. Mt 13:44-46). Reconciliation is a divine initiative, which God brought to completion in the atoning death of His Son on the cross (cf. 2 Cor. 5:18). From the example of two Old Testament stories, we can understand the fact that no interpersonal relationship takes place without divine knowledge or providence: these are the relationship between Abel and Cain (cf. Gen. 4:10) and between Joseph and his brothers (cf. Gen. 44:16). God knows man's sin and God alone has the final say. It is He who guides the course of all human history. And God's final act is forgiveness, which also leads to reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers.

Joseph, who has tasted the grace of his salvation from the wilderness well, is able to forgive his brothers (cf. Gen 45:5, 7). “The reason Joseph forgives his brothers is not because of the brothers, nor because the brothers are changed, but because of God's providence, which turns evil into good. Joseph forgives not because the brothers are worthy, but because God deserves it. In other words, God's forgiveness is the source, the cause, of Joseph's forgiveness of the brothers.” (M. Holc)

¹ My Franciscan confrere, professor of the Bible Fr. Milan Holc OFMConv., inspired me with the words that follow, which refer to his lecture in the Jubilee year 2000, entitled: Reconciliation in the Bible.



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Speaking of God's forgiveness, Holy Scripture firstly mentions two ways to remedy the injustice committed. The first is judgment and punishment, as in the legal system of an ethnic, national or religious group; Judaism knew the so-called "Talion Principle" – the same punishment is inflicted for the harm caused by the offense: "Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot"(Ex 21:24-25). Justice cannot be abandoned to vengeance.

Punishment, whatever it may be, cannot and does not solve the root of the problem; it does not solve the problem of justice. It is true that punishment must be educational, but punishment leaves the problem unsolved. If I am guilty, I remain guilty, and all that can happen from now on is that I am prevented from doing bad things in the future. The question of justice remains open.

Scripture proposes another solution, which is called by the Hebrew word: "rīb". The principle of rīb presupposes that "the aggrieved party goes nowhere, not to the judge, but directly to the one who caused the injustice and accuses him. He tells him plainly that what he is doing or has done is wrong"; examples are given by the prophet Hosea (2:4) and in the passage from Matthew "leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (5:24).

"The purpose that the rīb seeks to achieve is to help the wrongdoer. The wrongdoer must be aware that the evil he has done to someone else he has practically done to himself." (M. Holc) This means that this principle has as its goal repentance, salvation and reconciliation.

In the Gospel we find an example of putting the rīb principle into practice in the story of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:9), that is, Zacchaeus experiences conversion in his encounter with Jesus. "The effect is different from that of a normal trial, in which the wrongdoer is simply prevented or hindered beforehand. The effect of the rīb is justice, which consists not in the punishment that the unjust person deserves, but in a new and different way of living." (M. Holc) Only when the rīb principle does not work, when reconciliation does not take place, does the Bible provide a judge (Lk 12:58).

God constantly offers us the possibility of repentance: "God will judge man only when he has rejected the possibility of rīb; at the end of time. In the eschatological time, when there will no longer be any possibility of repentance or reconciliation: there God will be the judge. But as long as we are still in history, as long as we are still alive, the principle of rīb is an opportunity for reconciliation." (M. Holc)

The words of God's mercy, of God's willingness to forgive us, are the foundation of Christian hope; God has forgiven us in advance (cf. Rom. 5:8-10); God's forgiveness is already here. "Man is born in God's forgiveness and his whole life is marked by forgiveness. God's forgiveness precedes man's guilt. However, once sin is committed, forgiveness is realized in a process we have called rīb. Here, we can say, the forgiveness receives its body." (M. Holc) God constantly invites us, as Christians and faithful, to be ready to accept the "rīb" proposal, which means the offer of reconciliation with God and to respond to it with conversion. A person who commits a serious crime cannot be saved from guilt by punishment alone; he is in urgent need of redemption and only God can give it to him.



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Jesus, as the Son of God, warned people of their sinfulness, he called them to repentance and offered sinners the chance to be reconciled with God - in a sense, we can think of his call to repent as the “rīb” principle.

Christ was judged by a tribunal and sentenced to death. The judges and false witnesses were us, the people: those who did it concretely in the historical moment and all other human beings, because we participate in sin. According to Deuteronomy, if the witness turns out to be a lying witness who has laid false witness against his neighbor, he will suffer the same punishment (cf. 19:16-19). If Christ had revealed the truth about his divinity, the punishment would have fallen on us, because we are false accusers, or perjured witnesses. “Christ kept silent. If he had spoken, he would have condemned us. The opposite would have happened: there would no longer have been a rīb accusation, but simply an 'accusation' with a resulting punishment.” (M. Holc)

Jesus died on the cross, condemned in a trial, as an innocent man. “By this act, however, Jesus did not renounce to the rīb. His own death is rīb at that moment, and consequently forgiveness and reconciliation. Christ's death reveals our sin when Jesus forgives us by saying, “Father, forgive them”; in other words, he also says, “Behold, you are guilty. You are guilty because you asked for the death of an innocent person. But 'because they do not know what they are doing,' they need forgiveness for their guilt.” (M. Holc)

Let us be reconciled with God

The biblical roots of atonement are essential for understanding salvation, and thus also for the constant awareness that we are given the opportunity to be reconciled with God. Reconciliation means hope and a future for every one of us. But reconciliation with God, through which we receive forgiveness, also involves a difficult commitment to reconciliation with our neighbors, with those with whom we live in a family setting or Christian community. Jesus' message to sinners in the Gospel is a message of forgiveness, which Jesus also accomplishes, but at the same time it is a reminder of the awareness of God's infinite mercy, which can be a source of great hope for every interpersonal relationship.

I can only conclude this Lenten message with an appeal: Be reconciled with God through the Sacrament of confession. The Sacrament of confession realizes our salvation and introduces us into the peace which is the gift of the immense goodness of God, our Father, Christ our Brother. Let the light of the Holy Spirit enlighten our hearts. Confession means letting the light of divine mercy penetrate the truth of our lives, letting God free our inner space, filling us with His presence and love.

Only the heart that opens to the divine Light can be filled with the light of Easter. Let us pray to the Lord, that our graves would not remain closed and that the life of the Risen One may fill our souls.

May the Lord bless you and give you, his peace!

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Martin Kmetec o.f.m. conv.

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