

# **Consecrated Life as a Reconciling Presence in the World**

**Robert Schreiter, C.P.P.S.  
Catholic Theological Union**

*Archdiocesan Celebration of Consecrated Life Day  
Chicago, IL  
February 19, 2011*

## **Introduction**

The theme of consecrated life as a reconciling presence in the world is certainly an appropriate one for this annual celebration of consecrated life. Over the past two decades, there has been a growing interest worldwide in the theme of reconciliation, coming from a variety of quarters. The upsurge of conflicts within nations in the 1990s focused leaders on the need to heal deep divisions in their societies. Native peoples in the Americas, Australia, and New Zealand found their voice to witness to centuries of suffering at the hands of colonial masters and seek pathways of renewal and reconstruction of their societies. In our own Church the revelation of sexual abuse of young people has occasioned much soul-searching and has led to adopting new measures to counteract the recurrence of such actions in the future. At the same time, we are looking forward to an Apostolic Exhortation on the theme of reconciliation from the Holy Father later this year.

We witness also so much fragmentation and division in our Church as well as in the larger society, both here and abroad. The shootings in Tucson last month have prompted much discussion about the lack of civility and the unwillingness to listen to one another and to work together in the political sphere.

So what may be our role as people living the consecrated life in bringing about a greater reconciliation in the world? For us it is not just a matter of contributing to the

general well being of the Church and the larger society, important as that is.

Reconciliation is a central theme of our faith, of God's sending Christ into a sinful world to redeem and heal it so that it might be reconciled to God, its Creator. Our understanding of reconciliation in all its different forms is always grounded in God's work of reconciliation—bringing about the healing and return of all people and indeed all of creation to Himself through Jesus Christ. In the familiar words of St. Paul: "All of this is from God, who has reconciled us to God through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself." (2 Cor 5:18) We are participants in God's great work. The ministry of reconciliation has been entrusted to the Church in a special way to be both a sign and an instrument of God's reconciliation. As people consecrated in a special way to Christ and to His Church, it is all the more incumbent upon us to take up the work of reconciliation.

So just what is God's message of reconciliation and the ministry of it entrusted to us? And especially, what does it mean for people who live this special way of consecration? I would like to explore this with you in today. I will begin with some remarks about the biblical and theological foundations of how Christians understand reconciliation, and how these foundations, in a general way, point to two general practices of reconciliation. Then will come the heart of the presentation: the unfolding of that theology in five movements that show the distinctive characteristics of reconciliation as Christians understand it. Each of these theological movements will then be linked to concrete practices of witness through which people of consecrated life live out in their lives together and in their ministries. By proceeding in this manner, it is hoped that the

connections between the meaning of reconciliation and the ministry of reconciliation will be made clearer.

### **Theological and Practical Foundations of Reconciliation**

The word “reconciliation” in any of its forms does not appear in the Hebrew Scriptures. But that does not mean that reconciliation is foreign to Israel. On the contrary: think of the great stories we have in the Book of Genesis of Esau and Jacob, and of Joseph and his brothers. These are both powerful narratives of reconciliation.

The term “reconciliation” does occur in the New Testament, but only fourteen times. All but two of those occurrences are in the writings of St. Paul. Because of the importance of this theme to Paul, his message has been referred to at times as “the gospel of reconciliation.” Exegetes suggest that reconciliation was important to Paul because of his own experience. Having persecuted the followers of Jesus, he experiences a conversion in which he is reconciled to God through Christ—not out of his own efforts, but through the love of God.

In the theology of reconciliation, a distinction is made between vertical and horizontal reconciliation. Vertical reconciliation is being reconciled to God—God reaching out to a sinful, fallen world and bringing us back into communion with God’s very self through the action of Christ in the world. This action of Christ—especially in his suffering, death and resurrection—is definitive, even if not yet complete. It will only be complete when all things have been reconciled in Christ at the end of time, when “God will be all in all.” (1 Cor 15:28)

This story of God's reconciling work on our behalf is the vertical axis of reconciliation. It finds its clearest expression in Paul's Letter to the Romans, chapter 5, verses 1 through

11. Let me recall some of the highlights what Romans presents us there:

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we now stand, and we boast in the hope of sharing the glory of God....For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly....God proved his love for us in that while we still were sinners, Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were still enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Mediating this vertical reconciliation is at the heart of the Church's activity, especially in the sacraments of Baptism, the Eucharist, and the sacrament of Reconciliation itself. This vertical reconciliation is also the continuing source and guiding power that makes the other axis of reconciliation possible: the horizontal one.

Horizontal reconciliation is the reconciliation that takes place within God's creation—between persons, between groups, and even with the earth itself. It is only possible, we believe, because of the vertical reconciliation of God. Elsewhere in the Pauline writings there are two passages that speak especially to horizontal reconciliation. Let me quote the first of them, found in 2 Corinthians 17-20:

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything is made new! All of this is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us: be reconciled to God!

Here Paul reminds us of the basic truth of reconciliation: this is the work of God. Paul notes that our experience of reconciliation is one of becoming a new creation. And now this message and ministry of reconciliation has been entrusted to us. We are ambassadors on Christ's behalf.

The other principal passage on horizontal reconciliation is in Ephesians 2:12-20, where Paul speaks of Christ reconciling Jew and Gentile, breaking down the wall of separation and making them all fellow citizens in the household of God.

There are, thus, solid biblical foundations for the Christian understanding of reconciliation, both as a concept as well as distinctive dimensions within it, as we shall see shortly.

In the wider world of how horizontal reconciliation is being practiced today, two elements have emerged that reveal themselves as foundations for this important but difficult work. These help us direct the biblical message into our current settings. They are these: at its very basis, reconciliation entails creating new social spaces and building relationships.

By social spaces, I mean groups of people who, working and acting together, are able to create a forum that is different from their surrounding, everyday world. In this forum, not only can things be shared that otherwise remained locked away, but also very basic values and commitments can be presented that will make for a different reality—a “new creation” to put it in Pauline terms—within which reconciliation might happen.

One of the characteristics of a situation of conflict or polarity is that the contending parties tend to get “stuck.” In the case of conflict, one party's view of the other gets so set that change seems nearly impossible. In the case of polarity, people cling to their own

positions and expect the other party to change and come around to their way of thinking. New social spaces make a different way of thinking and acting possible.

These new social spaces have two characteristics. First of all they are *safe*. They are safe because people can show their wounds, their innermost thoughts, and their tentative efforts to make meaning out of the chaos of their lives without fear of being ridiculed or rejected. The breaches in our lives that cry out for reconciliation often result from the breakdown of fundamental trust. That breakdown may well be justified—we *have* been betrayed or harmed. The new social spaces have to be trustworthy ones, made and sustained by trustworthy people. These spaces must be stable and consistent so that they can be worthy of our trust.

Second, new social spaces must be *welcoming*. In these social spaces, people are not just assured that no further harm will be done to them or that they will be tolerated. Those in the new social spaces try to engage victims and urge them to share their wounds and their seeking healing. Welcoming is intended to be trust in action: a way of reweaving isolated and fragmented lives into a social fabric of truth, justice, and well being.

This reweaving of the social fabric highlights the second foundational principle of reconciliation. It is about building relationships. If the new social spaces make trust possible, the building of relationships makes a common life together happen. These new or rebuilt relationships help make concrete what trust offers to us: the rich and variegated pattern in the social fabric that can embrace goodness and righteousness as well as offer space for shortcomings and failures. I have often encountered situations of conflict where one party wants to engage the good, well-meaning people on the other side of the conflict

but gets no response. It is hard to establish trust in the very midst of trust being broken, or call on the good will of others whom we hardly know. Relationships that have been built over time constitute the only fabric strong enough and resilient enough to keep its strands together under severe stress. One thread will simply not do it.

In an important way, the whole work of horizontal reconciliation is about creating new spaces and building relationships. But to understand this, and how creating spaces and building relationships relates to the Christian message of reconciliation, we need to turn now to the main part of this presentation, what the message of reconciliation looks like within the framework of consecrated life.

### **The Theology of Christian Reconciliation and the Practices of Consecrated Life**

Experience with the work of reconciliation through the years has led me to elaborate five basic principles that try to spell out the dimensions of how Christians understand reconciliation, especially horizontal reconciliation.

#### ***God is the Author of Reconciliation***

The first principle is this: *God is the author of reconciliation and we are called upon to participate in God's work.* "All of this is from God" we hear Paul saying in Second Corinthians. And in Paul's Letter to the Romans we heard of God's initiating work. Thus, the first principle of horizontal reconciliation reminds us how firmly it is grounded in vertical reconciliation. But alongside this theological affirmation is also something that arises from our own experience. The tentacles of wrongdoing are sometimes so entangling and far-reaching that it is well nigh impossible to encompass what needs to be healed. Only God has the breadth and the depth to comprehend and act upon the reality

that needs to be healed. So if any measure of reconciliation happens, it is because God is at work.

But we do not stand by passively and wait for God to act. St. Paul tells us that the message and ministry of reconciliation have been entrusted to us. We are now ambassadors of this message. Such an affirmation is a call for us to engage actively in the work of reconciliation, embracing God's work and being instruments of God's healing grace. How are we able to do this?

The obvious answer is that we need to be in deep communion with God, the One who is the origin and end of reconciliation. Only by being attuned to what God is doing can we be effective ambassadors and instruments of this reconciliation. For that reason, I have said that reconciliation is more a spirituality than a strategy. By that is meant that reconciliation is something that grows out of our union with God. The strategies are learnable and very important. But without the underlying spirituality they are likely not to be entirely effective. For example, we can learn good skills in conflict mediation. But if the results of this work stop the physical conflict (of course, a very good and important thing) but do not change the hearts of those involved in the conflict, there will likely not be much life together. Strategies have to be informed by a spirituality.

Such a spirituality is another way of talking about the most important part of being a reconciling presence—the theme of today's celebration. What does this insight—that God is the author of reconciliation—mean for how we live the consecrated life? Let me name just two things flowing from this affirmation.

First of all, our communion with God must be deep and ongoing. Here we can talk about the quality of our prayer life and our dedication to the charism of our respective

communities. I have said elsewhere that contemplative prayer is particularly suited to the spirituality of reconciliation because it trains us to wait on God, to listen to God. It is a bit of a paradox that the most important part of our action for justice, peace and reconciliation is the one that is most non-active on our part. In learning this non-action we discover an important part of what being a “presence” is all about. Contemplative prayer and some of its near neighbors—such as recollection and centering prayer—are essential to being a reconciling presence.

Another important part of our life of prayer, of communion with God, is participation in the sacraments, especially the sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist. The sacrament of Reconciliation focuses upon the healing of wrongdoing. When we confess our own wrongdoing, we learn to be truthful about ourselves as instruments of God’s grace. We are “earthen vessels” and ourselves in need of God’s reconciling work. We also can learn from examining of our own conscience, from experiencing sorrow for what we have done, from our verbally confessing our sins, and from our undertaking of expiation what it will take for us to be people who accompany the healing of wrongdoers—an important part of the work of reconciliation.

The sacrament of the Eucharist allows us to re-enter the saving work of Christ and to experience some glimpse of that future in which reconciliation will truly come to its full fruition. The Eucharist immerses us in what Christ has done and continues to do for the world through word and sacrament.

Besides our communion with God through prayer, the other practice for consecrated life that flows from this principle is tied up with what it means to be a vowed person and a vowed community. In living out the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and

obedience we profess a whole-heartedness and a single-mindedness in our following of Christ. This total commitment becomes the framework in which we prepare and sustain ourselves to be instruments of reconciliation. Poverty is a way of keeping clear of idolatry, of following the wrong kind of god (and therefore seductive but wrong pathways to genuine reconciliation). Chastity can help us in the building of relationships, at once disinterested (so as not to use others for our purposes) but in full solidarity at the same time. Obedience makes more robust our capacity to genuinely hear what God is saying to us (from the very Latin root of the word: “audire” which means to hear). This is meant for us as individuals but also for our responding as a community in true “evangelical” fashion from these three vows.

These two practices of prayer and living out the vows are already part of our lives as consecrated persons. What I hope looking at them through the lens of reconciliation does is reveal what we as consecrated people can contribute to the larger work of reconciliation.

### ***God Begins Reconciliation with the Healing of the Victim***

The second principle of horizontal reconciliation is that *God begins the healing process with the healing of the victim*. This may seem to go against the grain. We think of reconciliation happening when the wrongdoer repents, apologizes to the victim and asks for forgiveness. If the victim is able to forgive, then there is reconciliation. That is indeed the paradigm of reconciliation. But there is a hitch: so often the wrongdoer does not repent. Where does that leave the victim?

What experience has taught is that healing does not necessarily only begin after the apology of the wrongdoer (although it is much easier when that happens). Victims can

come to some measure of healing and become free of the toxic quality of wrongdoing that can poison a victim's soul. "Healing" here is understood here as being freed from being a victim who has lost control over one's own life. It means a new capacity to act—to come free of some of those toxic qualities that the deed has wrought on the victim's innermost being and to begin to build a new life and a network of relationships that had been destroyed by the wrongdoing. As Christians, we should not be surprised that God does this. We hear time and time again from the great Hebrew prophets and witness time and time again in the ministry of Jesus that God looks out especially for the orphan and the widow, the foreigner and the prisoner. As Catholics, the option for the poor is embedded in our Catholic Social Teaching. This does not mean that God does not work for the healing of wrongdoers (nor should we eschew this). What it means is that the healing of the victim does not depend upon change in the wrongdoer.

What kind of practices of reconciling presence does this principle call us to in consecrated life? Let me name just three. First of all, it calls us to a solidarity with, and accompanying of, victims. This is hardly a new idea for consecrated life. So many of our religious communities were founded precisely with this idea in mind: to care for the poor, to educate those who had no access to education, to provide healthcare to those without it. When looked at through the lens of reconciliation, we see this as more than a work of mercy or even a fulfillment of the mandate of Matthew 25; we see it as part of God's reconciling plan for the world.

A second practice flows immediately from this: the pursuit of justice. Again, this is not a novel idea for communities of consecrated life. The Eighth Day Center here in Chicago is but one instance of that. This pursuit of justice involves both advocacy work and

concrete projects aimed at achieving greater justice in the world. We know that, without justice, many of the conflicts in our world continue to burn. Pope John Paul II said memorably in his 2002 Message for the World Day of Peace that the two pillars of true peace are justice and forgiveness.

Here I want to note just one kind of pursuit of justice that has come into focus more recently, namely, restorative justice. Restorative justice is similar to distributive justice, in that it involves taking steps to aright the wrongs of the past. What makes restorative justice distinctive is its efforts to restore relationships.

When many people in this country think about justice, they think of punishment of wrongdoers. “To bring someone to justice” usually means bringing the guilty to trial and then punishing them for their wrongdoing. Punishment is an action of the legitimately constituted state or community. Restorative justice has become an important concept in the work of reconciliation because it represents an effort to bring the effects of justice down to the ground and into the community by repairing the relationships torn apart by injustice, so that a lasting peace may be found.

There are now a wide variety of social justice efforts that have restorative justice as their focus. In restorative justice as it is being practiced here in the judicial system, it involves the use of peace circles or listening circles, that special for of social space that allows for lives to be affirmed, wounds to be addressed, and alternatives to be found that we have discussed above as one of the basic foundations of the work of reconciliation. To be a reconciling presence in the world requires the work of justice—both advocacy for social change and action to also achieve it. We often think of reconciliation only as the end goal; we must never forget that it is also a process, and the quest for justice is a

constituent part of it. In Pope Paul VI's often quoted words: "If you want peace, work for justice."

A third practice of a reconciling presence has to do with our engagement of power. Empowering victims, non-violent action in the face of violence, and addressing oppressive power all flow from the healing of victims as seen through the lens of reconciliation. Many of our religious congregations have justice as a strong component of their charism or their contemporary interpretation of it. Injustice often involves a misuse of power. The right use of power is important for consecrated life because it points to the coming Reign of God. The very fact that we speak of God's "Reign" implies an engagement of power.

God's healing work beginning with the victim has, therefore, many implications for the work of reconciliation and, therefore, what it means to be a reconciling presence in the world.

***In the Process of Reconciliation, We Are Made a New Creation***

This brings us to the third principle of the horizontal dimension of reconciliation: *in the process of reconciliation we become a "new creation."* "If anyone is in Christ," we heard St. Paul says, "there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; behold everything is made new." What does this mean?

Quite often people who have suffered harm or violation imagine to themselves that, if they could only go back to how they were before the terrible things happened, everything would be OK for them. This is a sentiment we can understand: getting rid of the horrible event would allow our lives to return to their normal state. But deep down we know that such can never be. If something has happened to us that has fundamentally changed our

lives through loss, violation, betrayal, or harm, then we are forever changed. Whether we like it or not, we are now different and the things around us are different. That event, as distasteful or repugnant as it may be, is now part of the story of our lives. Healing can never take us back to that earlier state; our only hope is moving forward in a way that the wounds we carry do not become our entire story but rather a significant episode within it. That going forward to a new place is the “new creation” of which St. Paul speaks.

The experience of this “new creation” is that we come into a place that we had not expected. We discover that what has healed us is not what we had imagined. There is this experience of surprise, even astonishment. It is not as though what had happened has disappeared; no, it is still very much there, but now seen from a new perspective or experienced in a different, less toxic way. In the midst of this experience people not only experience healing, but also discover in that healing a call, a vocation to do something to help in the healing of others. This helping others becomes a way of living out that “new creation” they have discovered.

The experience of surprise can be seen as an experience of the grace of God entering our lives. What heals us is not what we would have planned for ourselves; it is something that has come to us without our bidding. That is why the experience of healing and reconciliation can be one of the most profound experiences of encounter with God in our lives.

Can consecrated life have a place in this experience of someone’s coming to be a new creation? We cannot manufacture or program, as it were, these moments. They are the work of God. But we can create, with God’s help, the social spaces where such grace is more likely to manifest itself.

I said earlier that one of the fundamental practices of reconciliation is building new social spaces. Building such spaces lies at the very heart of consecrated life. Let me talk here briefly of two such practices of that.

A fundamental practice of consecrated life is community life. While the exact nature of that community life is understood and interpreted differently across the range of forms of consecrated life, it nonetheless has some common qualities. It is intended in some way intended to mirror or anticipate the fulfillment of the Reign of God. It is intended to be an indispensable part of the sanctification of the members of a religious institute or lay movement. It is in any event intended as a special place of God's grace. The community life that we create is intended to be that kind of new social space where God becomes manifest among us. How we live our community life is thus meant to be an epiphany of the reconciliation God intends for the world. Now anyone who has lived in community for any length of time knows that it is hardly the full manifestation of the Beatific Vision or the life of the world to come. But even in all its imperfections it nonetheless points to a different way of living, of a world and society in which life can be otherwise than it now is.

The other practice of consecrated life that opens up new social spaces is the work or ministry or apostolate of religious communities and lay movements. Many religious communities were founded to undertake certain works—care for the sick, education of the poor, renewal of Christian life—works that themselves are new social spaces in the world. Such works are meant to have a distinctive Christian character. We see that here in this country as religious communities have turned over hospitals and schools to lay or secular hands; an effort is made to maintain within those institutions their distinctive

character of the religious charism of their founding bodies. It is not that reconciliation always happens in the social spaces of those apostolates, nor that there is the only place that reconciliation manifests itself. But our ministries are always intended not to be merely the same as the work done by others, good as that is. Our ministries are intended to mirror and point to the coming of God's Reign.

I might add here a third kind of social space that consecrated life has been creating. This is where religious communities come together to be a more effective presence or to take on ministries that they individually could not do. I have already mentioned the Eighth Day Center here in Chicago as an example of the former. An example of the latter is the Solidarity with Southern Sudan Project, begun just four years ago. To this point, some sixty religious communities of men and women, at the level of their general governments in Rome or elsewhere, have come together to offer either personnel or funds or both to rebuild the medical, educational, and pastoral infrastructure of that war-ravaged country. They are literally creating new spaces in what will soon be the newest country in the world as of July of this year.

### ***Patterning Our Suffering on the Suffering, Death and Resurrection of Christ***

Any ministry of reconciliation has to deal with the reality of suffering. Coming through the experience of suffering can make us stronger (St. Paul often talks of that), but there is no guarantee that it will. We all know from our own experience people who did not become stronger through what they suffered. Rather they become embittered, withdrawn, or destructive of themselves or others. What is it that make the difference between suffering that strengthens and suffering that destroys?

Because suffering of its very nature tends to isolate and to fragment, overcoming suffering involves connecting our suffering to some larger source of meaning. Thus, many immigrant parents put themselves through great hardship in order that their children might have a better life. Soldiers may choose to put themselves in danger in a conflict in order to ensure the safety of their loved one and their country. The “denial of self” that Jesus calls us to in taking up our crosses is not intended to destroy us as persons but to help us to connect something greater than ourselves.

A common practice in the history of Christian faith has been to place our own sufferings in the story of the passion, death and resurrection of Christ. In doing so, we become more deeply united with Christ, through whom God is bringing about the reconciliation of all things. As it is put in the Letter to the Philippians: “I wish to know Christ, and to be conformed into the pattern of his sufferings, so that somehow I may come to know the power of the resurrection.” (3:10-11) In this way our story becomes conformed into Christ’s story.

The practices of asceticism that have been part and parcel of religious life through much of its history were intended to do just that. For many religious it achieved that goal. For others, however, it became a source of pathology. In any instance discipline of self is a necessary part of any spiritual development. What I want to focus on here, however, is how consecrated persons and communities of consecrated life enter into solidarity with suffering communities today so as to accompany them into achieving some measure of redemption in their experiences of suffering. I think of those religious who are working among immigrants and for immigrant justice; of those who accompany the dying in hospices and homes; who reach out to those who are suffering from violence

in our neighborhoods and streets. Religious who trace out the stories of their own lives in the way of the Cross can help give shape and form to others in their own suffering even as they seek release from suffering in the full light of the resurrection. Mother Teresa's gathering in the dying who had been abandoned in the streets of Calcutta caught the entire world's imagination. Acts such as those of Mother Teresa with the outcasts stand in witness to how God is reconciling the world.

***Reconciliation Is Not Complete Until the End of Time***

The fifth and final principle of horizontal reconciliation is this: *reconciliation will not be complete until the end of time, when Christ comes again and gathers all things together so that God may be "all in all."* We have powerful images of this final reconciliation of all creation in Christ in the hymns at the beginning of the Letters to the Ephesians and the Colossians.

If we do indeed believe that God is the author of reconciliation, then it is God who will bring it to its fulfillment in God's own time. Certainly we know that even our best efforts at reconciliation reminds us that reconciliation—as we experience it here—is always incomplete, just as we never achieve the total justice that we seek. We can sometimes be overwhelmed by the realization of how little justice and how little reconciliation we are able to achieve at all.

What this means is that we need to find resources of hope to keep us going, especially when progress toward reconciliation seems so small. Even more do we need hope when we experience reversal. One of things that longer-term work toward reconciliation has taught us is that the movement toward reconciliation is rarely a straight-line, linear one;

rather there are reversals and detours, sometimes with two steps forward and three steps backward.

We need to find sources of hope. Now hope, biblically understood, is not the same as optimism. Optimism is our measure of what we think we can accomplish out of our own resources. Hope, however, is something that comes from God. We speak of it as a theological virtue, that is, a virtue that has its origin in God rather than in our own striving. Hope draws us, carries us into the future—much as we try to find and follow the way that God is reconciling the world.

Are there practices that help us discover a hope that can sustain us through reversals and disappointments? I learned of one practice many years ago from a woman religious in Brazil. I had been asked to come and accompany a group of foreign missionaries and local religious who had been working together in a region of the Amazon. One of their group, a religious brother from Europe, had been assassinated by hired guns of the drug lords for the group's speaking out against their using children as "mules" or carriers of drugs for delivery. This group of religious was trying to discern whether they should stay and continue their work there—not because it was physically dangerous for them; they accepted that. It was rather that they feared that their speaking for justice was actually making life more dangerous for a people already imperiled.

At the end of a week of prayer we had come to no conclusion of any significance. But in our closing time together, one of the sisters said: "In a place like this, you have to learn to celebrate the small victories, because there will probably never be any big ones." That revealed a profound witness to hope: to be able to discern the small victories, those

moments of grace sometimes barely perceptible to those, that remind us that God is still working and that we are not working here in vain.

Celebrating the small victories is a practice of hope that witnesses to God's reconciling work in the world. In our ministries, some of us work in places where seems to be little ground for hope. It is important for us, and for those with whom we work, that we are always attentive to those small victories of grace.

### **Conclusion**

By the very act of consecration that all of us have made—be it in what ever form that may be, as vowed religious, members of societies of apostolic life or of secular institutes, consecrated virgins, and as members of lay movements within the Church—we are called to be ministers of reconciliation, bearing the message of what God is doing in the world. There are practices that are part of the very nature of who we are and what we do that speak to this. I hope that the practices I have pointed to here remind us of that. Those practices, when viewed through the lens of reconciliation, can take on new significance in helping us address and engage a world that is so often broken, wounded, and fragmented. In our focusing our presence in the world, in our society, and in our Church through the light of God's reconciling grace, we can bring greater attention to the healing and the hope that have been entrusted to us.