

**Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C
(Oct. 31, 2004)**

Reconciliation

A number of years ago a photograph appeared in most of the world's news media. It even made the cover of *Time* magazine. What you saw in the picture was a prison cell in which two men were sitting. One was clad in a dark blue prisoner's uniform, the other in a long white robe. The prisoner was Mohamet Ali Agha and the man in the white robe was Pope John Paul II whom Agha had tried to kill. They are clasping each other's hands and their heads are close together. As the Pope came out of the prison cell journalists from all over the world were there asking him what they had talked about. The only thing the Pope would say was, "He is my brother. I forgive him." It's an extraordinary scene of reconciliation.

The story of the encounter between Zacchaeus and Jesus is a story of reconciliation. Zacchaeus is a tax collector – almost by definition, a crook – forced to live on the margins of society, alienated from his fellow Jews not just because he steals from them but also because he collaborates with the hated Roman conquerors and occupiers of the country.

So, Zacchaeus is in need of reconciliation and this incident, as Luke recounts it, is a perfect model for the whole process of reconciliation. Consider what happens.

The first step in the process, as in everything else, is the grace of God. In this case: Jesus is passing by. Second step: response to the grace. Zacchaeus wants to see Jesus, but he is a little man and can't see over the heads of the crowds, so he climbs a tree. Now there may be just a touch of humor here. After all Luke tells us he is the chief tax-collector so in spite of the fact that is not liked he is a prominent person in the town. And to see him shinnying up a tree probably caused many of the townsfolk to raise an eye-brow or even to burst out laughing, and you can imagine how delighted the children must have been to see a grown-up climbing a tree the way they probably liked to do. What's interesting to me as I read the story is that he is not embarrassed by his situation or, if he is, he is so anxious to see Jesus that it doesn't make any difference to him what people think or how they

react.

And then, wonder of wonders, a further grace: Jesus looks up, sees him in the tree and says, “Zacchaeus, come down. I mean to stay at your house today.” What is happening here? Jesus invites Zacchaeus out of his alienation, out of his separation, out of his solitude, perhaps, into community, into communion with himself and the disciples. He invites him to reconciliation.

What is Zacchaeus’s response? Joy, exuberance, he welcomes Jesus into his house. But first he admits his sinfulness. This is a necessary step in the process of reconciliation: “If I have defrauded anyone, I give it back four-fold” – far more than he had to. “I give half my wealth to the poor.”

Do you see what can happen when we let Jesus into our lives? Zacchaeus’s reaction might seem disproportionate, and yet. And yet! It was Jesus who was touching him, Jesus whose touch could open the eyes of the blind, could unstop the ears of the deaf, could make paralyzed legs jump up and run and dance for joy, could even give life to the dead. No wonder Zacchaeus’s response was so extravagant.

Then what does he do? And this is another step in the process of reconciliation. He throws a party. He resembles the characters Jesus talks about in his parables of reconciliation: the woman who finds a lost coin, the shepherd who finds a lost sheep, the father who finds a lost son. They all feel the need to celebrate. They call in their neighbors and friends to rejoice with them. And so those reconciliations become a community celebration.

So, too, with Zacchaeus. This reconciliation is not just between him and Jesus. His friends and neighbors and the disciples of Jesus are part of it as well. Even those grumblers who complain that Jesus has gone to eat with sinners are invited in as Jesus explains to them that this is why he has come: to search and to seek the lost sheep and restore them to the flock.

We live in a world that is desperately in need of reconciliation. There is appalling division in our church, in our nation and in our world. Both *Time* magazine and *U.S. News and World Report* have recently had cover stories about the great divide that exists in our country and how difficult it will be for whichever candidate is elected president to deal with that division and try to put us back together again.

We, who come here week after week, know that Jesus came into our world to heal the wounds of sin and division, and we also know that as Christians, as Catholics, as people who profess to follow Christ, we have an obligation to join in that mission of healing and reconciling. It must begin with each of us individually. What are the things that tear us apart, that separate us from one another, from neighbors or even from family members. The more we can deal with these divisions in our own lives, the better will a wider sense of healing and reconciliation happen in our world. We even have a special sacrament for it. As we look on the sacrament of reconciliation today, we should think of it not so much as a negative thing, a burdensome exercise in getting rid of sin and guilt but, rather, first a place of encounter with God, as all the sacraments are, a graced occasion, and then a celebration, a celebration of forgiveness and reconciliation, much like the celebrations that we hear about in Scripture, including today's story of Zacchaeus. It's only then that we can begin to understand and experience for ourselves what John Paul II said about Mohamet Ali Agha. "He is my brother. I forgive him." All people are our brothers and sisters. We must be willing to forgive them when that is called for and to accept forgiveness from them—which is perhaps even harder to do.