A MISSIONAL EMBRACE: EMBRACIVE INITIATIVES AS A SOURCE FOR RELATIONAL ENGAGEMENTS IN CHRIST

by

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A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Theology of the Wycliffe College and the Department of Theology of the Toronto School of Theology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Theology awarded by Wycliffe College and the University of Toronto

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the metaphor of embrace and the challenges to seek out renewed relational engagements in social contexts of chronic violence. The argument is based on Volf’s embracive concept in which God’s reception of a hostile humanity into a welcoming communion, sets a model for a respectful and constructive relational instance between the other and I. This thesis assess the metaphor of embrace while exploring both its theological foundations and how this relational engagement, as a result of a Christian action, might look like in a violent social context.

The approach is as follows. First, an analysis of Volf’s embracive model using three streams of interpretation: the cruciform shape of God’s embrace, its non-violent character, and its cultivation of a grace-driven perspective. The goal is to explore the limits and the character of God’s embracive model in Christ as a theological foundation for embrace and why it should taken as a work of love in Christian living and character.

Also, it is argued in this paper that this practical work of love must be rooted in two essential declarations of the Christian faith: the presence of the Spirit and the promise of resurrection.

Finally, I present and discuss a case study that could be described as missionaly embracive. The goal is to observe and analyzed the work of Casa de Maria e Marta, a
Christian ministry that promotes evangelism, reconciliation, and social justice to children of the dangerous community called the “Slum of Marta’s Hill” in the city of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.
DEDICATION

To my beautiful wife Fabrícia
For all your support, patience, and love.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Professor Walsh, thank you for your inspiring teaching and support as my thesis advisor, I really enjoyed your classes. Your biblical insights inspired me to become a better follower of Jesus Christ in a post-modern world. This work is a product of the theological challenges I encountered as we talked about the implications of being a follower of the Crucified in a world where hostility abounds. The fact is: Violence won’t have the final word!

Professor Reynolds, thank you for accepting to co-direct my thesis. Your insights helped me to focus on what was important to say. I am really grateful for your guidance and comments; they made my thoughts sharper and clearer. Your presence was a tremendous help for someone who has a tendency to explain too much.

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INTRODUCTION

In our fast changing world, ideas about how to engage the other, how to promote justice, or even how to break walls of exclusion, have gained renewed attention in several social contexts around the globe. In principle, these questions express our desire for answers that could transform or positively influence distressful realities we experience in life.

Generally, as we search for answers, we realize that most solutions appear as part of a work of respect and love intentionally exercised among us. However, I am convinced that this work of respect and love cannot be sustained if its foundation lies in an exclusive confidence in the human capacity to promote it. As a Christian, I believe that such work must be grounded in the reality of Jesus Christ in us and therefore be translated in actions that reach out in love through faith.

Since first reading Miroslav Volf’s book, *Exclusion and Embrace*¹, I have felt challenged by Volf’s embracive theological insight. For him, the significance of God’s embrace in Christ is a model for human embrace. Volf affirms that in God we find an embracive model that, through Christ, demonstrates an unshakable will to bring back a hostile humanity to himself. Volf asserts confidently to us that: “God’s reception of hostile humanity into divine communion is a model for how human beings should relate to the other.”²

Reading Volf we observe that, in the midst of different forms of exclusion in the human context, embrace as a model in Christ appears as a challenging exercise that calls us to engage the other with courage, kindness and hope. I believe that as a relational exercise, embrace touches key dimensions of our human experience, such as the need for love, forgiveness, belonging and friendship. The aforementioned are essential elements not only to our human heart but also essential for embracive thinking and for embracive action.

The strength of Volf’s argument calls us to visualize the beauty and the drama embedded in the concept of embrace, as well as to realize how important is to offer it as a work of love. An embrace that, rooted in God and imprinted in us, becomes translated as

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² Ibid., 100.
a work of love that promotes life and reconciliation. A question I ponder is: How do Christians exercise God’s embrace as a positive and redeeming relational encounter in places where violence and exclusion abound? Because if God’s embrace in Christ is a model for the way we should relate to each other, then the model must be understood and empowered in those who follow this embracive God. Consequently, this relational exercise can be affirmed as a work of love in action in the name of Christ.

Hence, in this theological work, my goal is to engage the metaphor of embrace while exploring both its theological foundations and how this relational engagement might look like in a violent social context.

As I build my argument, I am aware that the use embrace as a theological metaphor must be done with careful consideration. Embrace, as any other suitable concept, should not be used as a generic remedy for the relational ills of the world. Sunquist, for instance, suggests that it is proper and wise not to forget that: “...we don’t ask the word to do more than it was meant to. Embrace, must have limits and not be expected to be a panacea either for the world’s ill, or for what Christian mission means.”

However, even though I agree that embrace does not define Christian mission, I believe that the embracive model presented by Volf offers a stimulus for relational actions that sounds beautifully missional. This is the path I am taking, not defining Christian mission by it, but affirming an embracive model that challenges us to express to others what we have received; God’s embrace in Christ.

My thesis stands: When God’s people affirm that God’s embrace in Christ models the embrace we offer others, it demonstrates two things: God’s work of love present in our lives, and a missional understanding that challenges us to act accordingly towards the other in hope and love.

My approach is the following: First, I will present Volf’s embracive model using three streams of interpretation: the cruciform shape of God’s embrace, its non-violent character, and its cultivation of a grace-driven perspective. The goal is to explore the limits and the character of God’s embracive model in Christ as a theological foundation for a Christian embracive act. Second, I will present two themes I think fundamental to affirm why embrace should appear as a work of love in Christian living and character. These themes are: the presence of the Spirit and the promise of resurrection. Finally, I

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will offer a case study that I would describe as missionally embracive. The case study is found at the ministry of Casa de Maria e Marta; a ministry that promotes community reconciliation and works for social justice in the dangerous “Slum of Marta’s Hill” in the city of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

Thus, this work offers a theological reading on Volf’s relational metaphor of embrace, two perspectives that empowers God’s embrace as a reality in Christian living and a case study of embracive action observed in the Brazilian church today.
CHAPTER 1
EMBRACE AS A THEOLOGICAL METAPHOR

According to the Oxford Canadian Dictionary⁴, embrace means “to hold closely in the arms; to include; to hold each other closely.” The first impression of embrace tells us that it demonstrates a close encounter and it pictures a relational engagement. Embrace can be visualized or described in different ways – “from finger holding finger, palm holding palm, hand holding arm, to hands over shoulder while walking, sitting, or lying side by side”⁵. The beauty of embrace, as well as its challenge, lies in the relational engagement it requires. The physicality of it can be expressed in different ways but the essence cannot be other than a dynamic relationship between the other and I.

In an article called “A Wide Embrace”⁶ Scott Sunquist tells us that as a relational metaphor, “…to embrace another is to unconditionally receive, include and comfort. An embrace is a coming home for the soul.”⁷ Following Sunquist’s definition it may be said that in an embracive encounter, when respect and care are present, we observe a dynamic and caring act that brings in and holds the other up close with candid protection; like children being embraced by their parents and parents by their children, like the welcoming comfort of a safe home, like a father’s assuring embrace offered to a prodigal son. Contemplated from this perspective, embrace appears as a positive demonstration of acceptance and welcome in a relational form.

With Volf we learn that there are four essential structural elements in the movement of embrace. First and foremost, the opening of the arms as a sign of invitation to embrace; second, waiting as a time-space moment meant to give the other time and space to come and to assess possible delimitations in order to cross the embracive line into each others arms; third, the closing of the arms as we enter the space of each other demonstrating a reciprocity that gives and receives through a concrete and intimate enlace; forth and finally, the letting go of the other by opening the arms again and as a sign of reciprocal understanding of our distinctive identities.

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⁵ Miroslav Volf, Exclusion and Embrace, 141.
⁷ Ibid., 2.
In order to see embrace happening, Volf affirms, “...all four must be there and they must follow one another on an unbroken timeline.”

Embrace as a dynamic relational process must be delineated by these moments. If one of these moments are skipped, or not observed, embrace is lost. In this process we are reminded that if there is no action beyond the first two steps, embrace is aborted; if embrace is not concluded by the last two, it becomes perverted. A failure in the dynamics of embrace may transform it “...from an act of love to an act of oppression.” Hence, a fine tuned embrace symbolizes and demonstrates a dynamic relationship where respect, care, justice, and charity are present and at work as positive watermarks of action towards the other.

Sunquist also reminds us that embrace can be a place of vulnerability too. Because, even as a positive relational act, embrace does not cancel the possibility of betrayal or even rejection as we relate to others. An invitation to embrace can also become an open door for the possibility of betrayal, especially when we honestly realize that generally we tend to embrace those we trust most and those who seem to accept us as we are. But for those who hurt us, the other and the strange, our tendency is to hold embrace or to offer it with conditions that generally demonstrate self preservation. Indeed our natural tendency is to embrace and to be embraced within a familiar context, and if possible, within a safe place. The fact is, says Sunquist, “...there is the embrace of God and the embrace of Judas.”

This fact points us to the sad reality that there is a dramatic contrast between Jesus’ fully open arms and Judas’ response with a betraying kiss. In Judas’ embrace, there is a kiss that betrays; in Judas, embrace produces death as “…an octopus is designed to embrace to death.”

I am convinced that embrace is a challenging matter. Vulnerability is indeed a reality around any embracive encounter and we cannot ignore it in detriment of the concept’s attractiveness. To embrace the other is a risky business and this risk, Volf reminds us, “...follows both from nonsymmetricicity and systematic underdetermination. I open my arms, make a movement of the self toward the other, the enemy, and do not know whether I will be misunderstood, despised, even violated or whether my action will be appreciated, supported, and reciprocated. I can become a saviour or a victim-

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8 Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 141.
9 Ibid., 141.
10 Ibid., 2.
both.” 12 However, even with its risks and as a place of vulnerability, we cannot deny that offered as an appropriate relational action, embrace is crucial for our human experience.

Yet, as the embracive movement starts to happen, we are faced with the question of conditionality. Curiously it appears as a distinctive factor of the process. Volf calls our attention to this fact saying that in the “drama of embrace,” where conditions of friendship gave way to a reality of enmity, checking points become necessary before the other “enters in”. It means that in the dynamics of the embracive encounter, we find two distinctive elements working in combination. The first is the fact that the invitation to embrace is not conditional; the invitation is free and unconditional; arms must be open as a positive sign that shows our desire to engage the other in a positive and constructive way. Nevertheless, the second is the statement that calls our attention to the necessity to leave hidden agendas behind in order to proceed. Before stepping into the embracive space of closure, some conditions apply. This conditionality is meant to inform the other that in order to take our arms around each other, we must be ready to engage in a transparent and truthful relational encounter being aware that mutual respect and constructive dialogue must transcend the ever present tendency of self centrality.

As we walk towards the other embracively, an applicable adjustment will suffice. It emerges as a sign stating that in order to proceed into the personal space of the other, we will be challenged to leave hidden agendas behind as a commitment to truthfulness. Moreover, although it seems strange to speak of conditionality within the context of embrace, in realities where conditions of enmity exists, such conditionality applies as an element of positive trust between the two parties. The demands for a truthful embrace tell us that “dirty shoes must stay outside”13. It means that when lack of trust, violence, or oppression are conditions that set us apart, our invitation to embrace requires more than saying a mere ok to the other to come in and receive a warm hug. In order to fully engage in a transformative embrace, we must be open to listen, to dialogue, to forgive, and to offer forgiveness. It signalizes that, as we relate to each other, we will not discard truth, justice, or hide behind masks. It assures that as we relate to others embracively we will not conceal or minimize the possibility of pain that may appear during the process.

12 Ibid., 147.
13 Miroslav Volf, Exclusion and Embrace, 142.
Quite simply, to leave the “dirty shoes behind” is a call to shed light into the dark corners of our self-centered selves in order to make sure that our embracive invitation is not only real but also truthful as we keep moving closer towards each other. This is the condition that must be present before each other prior to enlacing our arms around one another. This is a requirement for truthful and respectful embrace.

For instance, Volf tells us that, “...open arms are more than just a gesture of invitation for the other to come in. They are also a soft knock on the other’s door. The desire to enter the space of the other has been signaled by the very same act by which the self has opened itself up for the other to come in.”14 To enter the space of the other means that in a dynamic embracive engagement there is no place for imposition of my will upon the other. We cannot force our entrance, we cannot push our way in.

Also, as part of this relational dynamic, yet another moment takes place. Volf tells us that as we get closer to each other, there is a waiting instant. We must wait as a sign of respect, we wait because there is the possibility of a negative response from the other. This waiting is an element that demonstrates that we value the uniqueness of each other. “After creating space in itself and coming out of itself, the self has ‘postponed’ desire and halted at the boundaries of the other. Before it can proceed, it must wait for the desire to arise in the other and the arms of the other to open.”15 Consequently, continues Volf: “Using Hegels’ understanding of work as “desire held in check (Hegel 1977, 118), we can describe waiting as the work of the desiring self on itself for the sake of the integrity of the other – the other, who may not want to be embraced but left alone (Suchocki 1995, 146f.), because of the painful memory that once what started as an embrace ended in a rape (as with those women who were liberated at the end of World War Two just to be raped by their liberators).”16

There is an important lesson here as we explore the metaphor of embrace. The lesson is that, even with a positive sign demonstrating the will to embrace, we must be aware that a transformative relational encounter must be free of coercion or manipulation. In order to proceed, we must leave behind mechanisms that promote exclusion, violence, or actions that re-enforce enmity. Such things must be left behind as has been stated. One

14 Ibid., 142.
15 Ibid., 142.
16 Ibid., 142.
must wait in respect. The time-frame moment of each other is essential in order to have all arms open and ready to proceed into a respectful enlace meant to involve us.

Evidently, God’s embracive act springs this positive effort to promote a welcoming reconciliation. In addition, as we investigate it, we cannot forget that God’s embrace towards us cannot be framed within a relational engagement between equals as Sunquist reminded us. It is towards a sinful humanity, who left in rebellious enmity, that God’s rescuing love was imparted in order to make real the reality of redemption, forgiveness, and justice. This is why Volf visualizes the work of Christ as the foundational element for the reality of God’s embrace towards us. God’s embrace is not only welcoming but also truly transformational in essence. Indeed, God’s graceful rescuing act is the essence by which a truthful embrace should be celebrated among us. It produces a new relational consciousness by demonstrating that even in face of our rebellious enmity, in Christ, former enemies can become sons and daughters of the Most High by the power of love.

God’s embrace is a powerful demonstration that announces the promotion of life as a paradigm. It is in this reality that the work of the Son is fundamental to leads us to grasp embrace in this fashion and thus appear as a guiding model for humankind. Essentially, this is what Volf indicates when he presents four ways by which the work of the cross appears as the crucial foundation for the dynamics of God’s embrace. First, the cross shapes an embrace that breaks the circle of violence; second, it lays bare the mechanism of scapegoating; third, it delineates Jesus’ struggle for God’s truth and justice; and fourth, it embodies how the divine embrace reaches the deceitful and the unjust. In Christ and through the cross, God’s embrace has these watermarks. Jesus Christ is not only the guarantor of this embrace but also the promoter of a new promise which affirms that He himself came so that we may have abundant life (John 10:10). Consequently, a positive embrace embedded in the divine model generally breaks barriers and appears as a positive foundation to further a constructive relational encounter; it comes forth as a possible way to promote inter-personal healing and social reconciliation. This is why such embrace promotes life.

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17 Ibid., see Volf’s argument regarding the cross, pg. 294-5.
18 John 10:10: “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”
Embrace in this fashion and as a theological metaphor, demonstrates that it is towards the lost, the sinful, the hostile, and the otherness it represents that God’s embrace is enacted. It is a rescuing action in which the reality of Jesus Christ, as the Emmanuel, delineates a new relational possibility. It is embrace in which the reality of the Emmanuel is declared. The apostle John inspired by the Spirit asserted that: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14). He, who is here with us, not only pitched His tent among us, but also invited the other ‘us’ to come, see, and take shelter in Himself as a declaration of God’s embracive welcome. God broke boundaries and indicated that the divine welcoming was not based in acceptance between equal parties standing in a familiar ground. God took the risky road in His embracive action. God’s embrace accepts, transforms, and beautifully empowers the embraced to embrace as they are embraced. Through Christ, God demonstrated solidarity and compassion for the restless.

Volf’s affirmation that “God’s reception of hostile humanity into divine communion is a model for how human beings should relate to the other”\textsuperscript{19} demonstrates in my perspective an indication of resonance. For me it indicates that to incorporate God’s embrace as our embracive model is to acknowledge that God’s reception of a hostile humanity into His divine communion appears as the reason why the horizontal perspective of action, translated as the embracive dimension between myself and the other, must be anchored in the vertical dimension of God’s redemptive embrace. To be anchored in this vertical dimension demonstrates that, as a Christian, I am challenged by the radical nature of God’s will to embrace with a non-violent love and assured that love and justice will prevail. In a relational perspective, this embracive model appears as a vertical God to human and a horizontal human to human relation that, as part of a redemptive and reconciliatory spiritual reality, is transformational and redemptive. It means that God rescues, redefines and patiently welcomes in, while at the same time, works to mould our identities in order to make us not only recipients of His embrace but also agents of this embrace. Therefore, as we are embraced, we realize that this embracive welcome offered to us appears intrinsically sacrificial as we understand how costly it was to God. Sunquist offers a fine comment in saying that

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{19} Miroslav Volf, \textit{Exclusion and Embrace}, 100.
\end{flushright}
“As I talk about embrace today, however, I am not talking about something that we do on our own, but something that God has done unilaterally. God has been rejected by His creation and has turned back to that creation and, in spite of humanity’s rejection and deception, God moves toward and embraces His own. We are embraced. From the Father’s side it has meant a movement of reconciliation and warmth which has become the painfully and costly embrace of the cross; arms wide open to receive the other. ‘The other’ responds to this embrace with nails and thorns.”

In a nutshell, this is the reality of God’s embrace towards us. A relational engagement that as a work of love overcomes the separation between a holy God and a sinful humanity. It is in the rescuing process that God lays bare the reality of human hostility and violence by offering forgiveness and promoting reconciliation through the Son. All of it without forgetting to demonstrate how precious and costly was the embrace of the cross.

Now, I turn the attention to the three related dimensions that I believe are quintessential to affirm God’s embracive model in Christ as a theological foundation for an embracive reality. They are: its cruciform shape; non-violent character; and its cultivation of a grace-driven attitude towards the other. These dimensions enlighten us in the following manner.

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1. The Cruciform Shape of God’s Embrace

There is a cruciform imprint in God’s embrace. This imprint appears as part of God’s embracive action towards humanity in which the presence of the cross demonstrates the significance of forgiveness as a foundational expression of God’s embrace. Without forgiveness, there is no possibility of embrace. “Forgiveness sums up much of the significance of the cross”, Volf reminds us.

For Christians, the cross is “...the ultimate symbol at the same time of the destructiveness of human sin and of the greatness of God’s love.”\textsuperscript{21} Forgiveness “…is the boundary between exclusion and embrace. It heals the wounds that the power-acts of exclusion have inflicted and breaks down the dividing wall of hostility. Yet it leaves a distance between people, an empty space of neutrality that allows them either to go their separate ways in what is sometimes called “peace” or to fall into each other’s arms and restore broken communion.”\textsuperscript{22}

The cross reminds us that if there is a real intent for a relational interaction, forgiveness and reconciliation must be present as driving forces. This is why, Volf declares: “At the heart of the cross is Christ’s instance of not letting the other remains an enemy and of creating space in Himself for the offender to come in.”\textsuperscript{23} The cross is for this matter, a declaration of God’s unshakable desire to bring the sinful humanity back to himself. The cruciform imprint in God’s embrace demonstrates the implications of a rescuing work, a work that in love promoted reconciliation in order to restore a broken communion.

Looking at Moltmann’s theology of the cross we learn that the implications around the cross for the life of the world must be observed from the perspective of God’s solidarity. The suffering of Christ on the cross are not just His sufferings; they are “...the sufferings of the poor and weak, which Jesus shares in his own body and in his own soul, in solidarity with them.”\textsuperscript{24} For Moltmann, the cross demonstrates that Christ’s passion brings to “…the passion of history of this world the eternal fellowship of God and divine

\textsuperscript{21} Miroslav Volf, Exclusion and Embrace, 125.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 125.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 126.
\textsuperscript{24} Miroslav Volf, Exclusion and Embrace, 22.
justice and righteousness that creates life.”

Volf’s perspective follows Moltmann’s but does not stop there. It follows in the sense that the cross demonstrates God’s divine “…atonement for sin, for justice and violence on earth.” However, Volf adds a new groove, for him the cross also demonstrates the reality of self-giving, not just solidarity. Consequently, in Volf, the cross demonstrates that God’s embrace is sacrificially cruciform because the divine self-donation is also demonstrated towards the enemy. The cross declares that the doors of reception into God’s eternal communion are opened to them in Christ. According to Volf, when God sets out to embrace the enemy, the result is the cross. “On the cross the dancing circle of self-giving and mutually indwelling divine persons opens up for the enemy; in the agony of the passion the movement stops for a brief moment and a fissure appears so that sinful humanity can join in.”

The cross delineates the divine embrace thus demonstrating God’s desire to break the barrier of the human enmity. When God set out to embrace, the divine invitation in Christ guarantees that strangers are welcomed into God’s household. The apostle Paul affirms: “But now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. For He himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both then to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility (Ephesians 2:13-18).” In Jesus, the significance of the cross appears not only as a powerful symbol that resonates forgiveness but also reconciliation. The cross of Christ shines before us as a “passage leading to embrace.” For the sake of the rebellious enemy, the Son, at the center of the cross, demonstrates once and for all that hostility was also put to death. The paradox of the cross demonstrates two distinctive things, how costly was the price required by the sinful reality of humanity and how powerful it emerged as Christ’s victory for us. Within the divine act of embrace, Volf asserts: “Forgiveness is therefore not the culmination of

26 Miroslav Volf, Exclusion and Embrace, 23.
27 Ibid., 129.
28 Ibid., 126.
Christ’s relation to the offending other; it is a passage leading to embrace. The arms of the crucified are open-wide as a sign of a space in God’s self and an invitation for the enemy to come in.\textsuperscript{29}

Consequently, the cross appears in God’s embrace as a symbol of scandal and as an assurance of hope. This imprint is the direct result of two interrelated realities: first, it shows the price paid for reconciliatory redemption; and second, it demonstrates God’s unshakable will to embrace the enemy by opening His arms and giving Himself entirely in order to accomplish this reconciliatory act. Thus, when our embrace assumes this cruciform perspective, the cross becomes eminently, as Volf proposes, a counter cultural symbol that lies at the heart of the Christian faith and becomes a scandal. This marks a scandal that shapes our embrace by challenging us to give ourselves to the other as a self-donation that strives to produce positive fruits.

Extravagantly, the cross functions as a statement of God’s new reality towards the hostile one. Christ, at the centre of the cross, abolished the wall of separation and declared a whole new dimension of the meaning of being welcomed back. A testimony that reminds us how God’s embrace, molded by the reality of the cross, sets a new paradigm for embracive acts. This is why an embrace modeled after God’s embrace compels a relational encounter that seeks reconciliation in justice and promotion of life. In reality, if I affirm an embrace that has the cross of Christ as a foundational element, then my relational approach towards the other assumes a new dimension as a testimony that reminds me of my own reconciled reality with God.

Volf expands on the image of the cross saying also that: “The cross was not a tragic result of the kind of a self-denial that underwrites violence, but a predictable end to a life of struggle for God’s peace in a world of violence.”\textsuperscript{30} The crucified Messiah hanging on the cross is also the divine accusation to the reality of enmity and violence so real in our human condition. For Volf, the cross represents a new covenant that in order to restore a broken relationship requires “… not simply a relationship of mutual utility, but of moral commitment.”\textsuperscript{31} Such covenant requires deep commitment; in fact, it entails self-giving Volf reminds us. “On the cross the new covenant was made ‘in blood’ (Luke

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[29]{Ibid., 126.}
\footnotetext[30]{Miroslav Volf, \textit{Exclusion and Embrace}, 291.}
\footnotetext[31]{Miroslav Volf, \textit{Exclusion and Embrace}, 154.}
\end{footnotes}
It is through the blood, not of an animal but of the Son, that God’s self-giving and self-sacrifice are made in actions determined to rescue. In addition the cross marks this covenant demonstrating that: “The one party has broken the covenant, and the other suffers the breach because it will not let the covenant undone.”

At the same time the cross passionately declares that God’s new covenant is eternal. For Volf, “…God’s self-giving on the cross is a consequence of the ‘eternality’ of the covenant.” God did not abandon those who have broken away from Him. God’s embrace of the sinful humanity demonstrates not only the reality of the cross but also a proclamation of an eternal new future in peace.

Finally, the cruciform shape of God’s embrace summarizes a rescuing love. It demonstrates how God’s reconciliatory act and welcome towards the enemy is driven by love. That it is the cross as the supreme manifestation of divine love offered in sacrifice in order to rescue the forever lost. “This is the love of the cross, born of the cross, which turns in the direction where it does not find good which it may enjoy, but where it may confer good upon that bad and needy person” says Volf. The narrative of the cross emphasizes God’s love as the driving force that leads to action towards the other. Thus when we realize that the story of the cross is a remarkable demonstration of God’s willingness to rescue the “…all too human covenant partner who broke the covenant”, our response cannot be other than to be humbled and amazed by such charity bestowed upon us. Even as a monument of a painful tragedy, the cross paradoxically is an integrant part of a work that driven by love demonstrates atonement with a nuance of divine hospitality.

The paradox of the cross delineates a rescuing love that redeems and proclaims that God’s embrace is absolute. At the cross, says Boersma, “…perhaps more than anywhere else, that we see the face of the divine host: the true love of God.”

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32 Ibid., 154.
33 Ibid., 155.
34 Ibid., 155.
Pertinently this is why I believe that this cruciform shape embedded in God’s embrace is foundational for the exercise of embrace in Christian living. The reality of the cross demonstrates an embrace in which the rebellious and lost one is not only welcome back into the arms of God but also demonstrates how powerful is the imprint of the work of the Son for the reality of embrace. The cross is an active blessing towards us and a positive challenge among us.
2. The Non-Violent Character of God’s Embrace.

The second dimension of God’s embrace is demonstrated by its non-violent character. In Christ, God demonstrates a true non-violent embrace; an embrace that denounces violence by the triumph of forgiveness. “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing,” Jesus exclaimed.

In its essence, God’s embrace denounces violence by being non-violent towards the other. Although paradoxically, Christ as the paradigm of this embrace, suffers violence as a way of denouncing the destructive power of the never-ending violent character of the beloved in need of embrace. It is within this reality that we are challenged by the non-violent character of God’s embrace. The non-violent dimension of God’s embrace demonstrates the necessity of peace as a crucial element for a renewed relational reality. For instance, non-violence appears as a treasure that must be kept in check between the other and I.

However, a question stands before us: How does the non-violent character of God’s embrace break the power of violence without being perceived as an arrogant hug that forces the other into this intended relational restoration? The path to answer this question leads us once again to look at the cross and focus our eyes on Jesus. Furthermore as we do that, we will see that as a demonstration of God’s will to break the cycle of violence, Christ at the centre of the cross “…provided the ultimate example of his command to replace the principle of retaliation…with the principle of non-resistance.” The Son of God refused to be sucked into the never ending cycle of revenge. In this sense, the cross also becomes God’s powerful declaration that demonstrates Jesus’ critique that rejects violence and proclaims that evil must be overcome by the power of good. The crucified Son hanging on the rugged cross represents this statement from heaven. He suffered violence as an innocent victim because Christ refused to play the never ending game of revenge and hatred. Volf tells us for instance that:

“He (Jesus) refused to be sucked into the automatism of revenge, but sought to overcome evil by doing good even at the cost of his life. Jesus’ kind of option for

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39 Luke 23:34
non-violence had nothing to do with the self-abnegation in which I completely place myself at the disposal of others to do with me as they please; it had to do much to do with the kind of self-assertion in which I refuse to be ensnared in the dumb redoubling of my enemies’ violence gestures and be reshaped into their mirror image.”

In this sense, non-violence is a powerful statement of how God’s embrace brings forth profound implications when we act embracively towards the other. Jesus models a paradigm shift as God’s peace champion; Jesus denounces and condemns systems of violence and terror. Hence by surrendering to God’s will, Jesus confirms an embrace that rejects violence as a pay-back response. His presence at the cross embodies a critique that denounces the violent system in which the rebellious other abides. The result, says Volf, is: “Far from enthroning violence, the sacralization of him as victim subverts violence.”

The non-violent character of God’s embrace shows God’s commitment to expose evil and pay the price to promote reconciliation. As a non-violent offer, it becomes a symbol and a demonstration of the victory of non-violent love upon evil through the work of Christ on the cross. An embrace that according to Volf demonstrates, “God’s desire to break the power of human enmity without violence and receive human beings into divine communion”

However, in order to expose evil and promote reconciliation, God’s new paradigm in Christ must demask the hidden mechanism of violence. This is what Volf proposes by calling our attention to René Girard’s scapegoating theory. In this theory, Girard proposes that when an arbitrarily chosen victim suffers unjustly as a result of the persecutors assurance in their cause, the accepted truth of those with the upper hand, or the truth that corroborates their cause becomes an expression of hate due to the threatening innocence of the victim. Consequently, as the innocent victim is slain, by the oppressors and their cause, guilt is conveniently diverted. The victim becomes guilty by the pretext of keeping what is convenient, what is properly accepted and what is correct to maintain the status quo. This is why Volf calls our attention to the fact that Jesus’ innocence and truthfulness in a world of violence were enough to draw hate. Jesus was

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41 Ibid., 292.
42 Ibid., 292.
43 Miroslav Volf, Exclusion and Embrace, 126.
44 Volf draws from René Girard foundational elements of the Scapegoating Theory. Girard affirms that one of the functions of the Gospel is to demask the mechanism of scapegoating.
not an arbitrarily chosen victim however, Jesus was made a scapegoat because as the Christ of God to us, Jesus’ victimization put the system upside down. This is exactly what we find at the cross. At the cross, the Messiah demasked the mechanisms of scapegoating by being put to death unjustly and violently. It was with this injustice ultimately exposed that brought the persecutors’ belief in “the excellence of their cause”\(^{45}\) in condemnation

As we look to Jesus from this perspective, we realize that his presence at the centre of the cross sends a clear message in a world where hidden agendas often function as cover up for realities of deception and oppression. The crucified Son demonstrates how fierce is the response of human hostility when interest and power are at stake. How senseless is the cause that in the name of status quo condemns, violates, and kills.

Nevertheless, as Jesus works to dismantle the mechanisms of violence two important questions appears; Volf asks: “Are the strategies of “absorbing” and “demasking” the only ways Jesus fought violence?”\(^{46}\) The answer is no. And, is the suffering of violence, paradoxically, the only cure against it? Certainly not, says Volf. The reality of Christ at centre of the cross is an integrant “…part of Jesus’ struggle for God’s truth and justice. Jesus’ mission certainly did not consist merely in passively receiving violence”\(^{47}\) If that was the case, the cross that led the Son into the terrible road of execution and produced Jesus’ anguished cry out to the Father, would have been just one more unfortunate demonstration of the powerful reality of violence. Jesus would have been just another fatality; just as many other innocent victims before him. Except that, the presence of Jesus on the cross demonstrates that the Crucified is also God’s servant who obeys and actively pursues God’s will. Subsequently, Jesus becomes God’s champion towards God’s new reality of non-violence. The Crucified is now the victorious servant whose righteousness annihilates all reverberations towards violence or revenge. God’s non-violent embrace refuses to comply to this kind of currency. Jesus at the centre of the cross suffered in order to declare that God’s Kingdom abide by a new relational perspective in which peace is the ultimate goal.

Accordingly, if non-violence is an essential element for God’s embrace and a model for how humans should relate to each other, then what does this tells us?

\(^{45}\) Ibid., 292.
\(^{46}\) Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 293.
\(^{47}\) Ibid., 293.
Essentially, it calls us to see how Jesus, as the Christ of God, actively opposes deception and oppression. The Son of God declares, in the name of the Father, that terror and violence will not have any part in God’s new kingdom. This is what Volf tells us when he writes:

“Jesus active opposition to the kingdom of Satan, the kingdom of deception and oppression, is therefore inseparable from the proclamation of the kingdom of God. It is this opposition that brought Jesus Christ to the cross; and it is this opposition that gave meaning to his non-violence. It takes struggle against deception and oppression to transform nonviolence from barren negativity into a creative possibility, from quicksand into foundation of a new world.”

Thus, as an essential dimension in God’s embrace, non-violence reflects both God’s character and the prerogative of God’s new future.

Conversely, another question arises here. Because if violence is a present fact in our human dimension and Jesus’ presence at the centre of the cross exposed the mechanisms of violence, then how does God deal with guilt and justice in order to confirm the divine new paradigm of non-violence? In essence, God breaks the power of the violent other by exposing their violence in Christ in order to rescue them. In other words, enmity becomes broken by Christ’s atoning work. At the cross, the reality and the violence of sin is exposed, and upon the same cross, Christ accomplishes the impossible for the violent guilty: to satisfy God’s justice and consequently be justified before a God who is Holy.

As a result, the non-violent character of God’s embrace confirms that Christ’s atonement overcame the destructive violent power of sin by the significance of Christ as God’s lamb who takes away the violent sin of the world. Consequently, as an act that engages the other, a non-violent embrace reflects God’s pardon upon the guilty by the significance of the Lamb and by the fulfillment of God’s justice exercised upon Christ as he became guilty on our behalf.

In view of that, what does the non-violent character of God’s embrace mean to us as we are challenged to embrace the other in this fashion? At the outset, it presses for an acknowledgement that the reality of injustice and guilt is a product of a destructive sin in us and among us. Secondly, it calls us to fix our eyes on the example of the cross which

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48 Ibid., 293.
demonstrates that violence and its destructive power will not have the final word.

Consequently, in a world threatened by hostile talks and violent actions, the non-violent character in God’s embrace appears as a challenging and urgent need. For those who affirm God’s embrace as their embracive model, it lays a foundation that rejects violence as an option of action. As a challenge to our present postmodern sensibilities Volf writes: “…to engage in the quest for truth is covertly to sanction violence; for the sake of freedom we shy away from the pursuit of truth. Yet this pursuit may be less of a culprit than we think. It could be that we feel compelled to abandon talk about the truth because we are afraid to renounce violence.”

Curiously, as we are assured of the non-violent character of God’s embrace, Volf also investigates the image of Jesus as the Rider of the white horse in the book of Revelation. What does Volf want to tells us? In the book of Revelation, the Crucified Son, the Lamb of God, appears also as the Rider who on a white horse formulates war with justice. The crucified and resurrected Christ appears as the Rider who on a white horse makes war against violence with a strong hand. The biblical text tells us:

“I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. “He will rule them with an iron scepter.” He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has the name written. (Revelation 19: 11-15)”

The question remaining is: How can this be possible? How can the slain Messiah who embodies the ultimate critique against the violent system of the sinful humanity and Satan’s violent and destructive work appear in such image? Reading Revelation 19: 11-21 we see clearly that the Rider comes to win and he will be victorious. Nonetheless, to understand this paradox, Volf asks: “Who are those who suffer violence in the hands of the Rider?”49 According to Volf, the answer points to a prophetic reality that God’s action is against a system or systems that allures, oppresses, and bestializes people. Thus,

49 Ibid., 296.
those who will suffer are those “…drunk whit the blood of the innocent…who make war against the Lamb… and those who adorned themselves with righteous deeds.” Volf’s general response is indeed grounded solid in his deep rooted principles of non-violence. Violence for instance, exists as a condition of a hostile humanity and Christ has the authority and the power to fight against this terrible and slaving reality. Consequently, the presence and action of the Rider, as Volf tells us, does not erode at all the solid ground of the non-violent embrace of God. Why? Because the violence of the Rider is a reflection of his righteous judgment to remove the “de facto” violence which is found in our human reality that, as a system, maintains itself by exploitation and tyranny. Taken as a rough example, the Rider could be visualized as the divine doctor fighting against the violence of a cancer in a moribund patient. The only way to save the person from the deadly disease is to fight against it with instruments, procedures, and medicine that paradoxically from the sick body’s perspective, appears as a violence against its own existence.

Hence, the image and the work of the white horse Rider is for instance another active critique and action against systems of terror. God’s non-violent reality is the way into and of the Kingdom of God. Volf tells us that: “Without such judgment there can be no world of peace, of truth, and of justice; terror (the “beast” that devours and propaganda (the “false prophet” that deceives) must the overcome, evil must be separated from good, and darkness from the light. These are the causes of violence, and they must be removed if a world of peace is to be established.” The Rider on the white horse is a powerful and “…symbolic portrayal of the final exclusion of everything that refuses to be redeemed by God’s suffering love. For the sake of peace of God’s good creation, we can and must affirm this divine anger and this divine violence, while at the same time holding on to the hope that in the end, even the flag bearer will desert the army that desires to make war against the Lamb.”

Indeed the non-violent character of God’s embrace calls us to renounce violence and act in a non-violent manner towards the other. Why? Because, “The Lamb’s rule is legitimized not by the ‘sword’ but by its ‘wounds’; the goal of its rule is not to subject but

50 Ibid., 296.
51 Miroslav Volf, Exclusion and Embrace, 296.
52 Ibid., 299. Volf present an Eschatological ideal here following Moltmann’s position. My objective is not to discuss such position, but emphasizes that for the reality of violence, God answers not just with words but with active grace, a costly grace through the work of Christ. The Son who at the cross became a living critique to the reality of violence.
to make people ‘reign for ever and ever’ (Revelation 22:5). With the Lamb at the center of
the throne, the distance between the ‘throne’ and the ‘subjects’ has collapsed in the
embrace of the triune God.”53

This is why the non-violent character of God’s embrace demonstrates that the
challenge to foster a renewed relationship among us must be affirmed by the reality of
peace. An embrace that testifies about God’s willingness to receive, forgive, and give
fully. A non-violent embrace that expresses the significance of peace as an essential
dimension for a healthy relational engagement that is so needed among us.

53 Ibid., 301.
3. The Grace-Driven Cultivation of God’s Embrace.

The third dimension of God’s embrace demonstrates how grace is essential to cultivate kindness and good will in the pursuing of renewed relationships. When our embrace is modeled after the divine embrace, we observe that a gracious approach is fundamental for a relational encounter in search for reconciliation. If God’s embrace models the way we should relate to the other, then grace is a perspective that cannot be forgotten.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the young German theologian and pastor who opposed nazism in his homeland, years ago voiced in his book, ‘The Cost of Discipleship’, the importance to observe grace not as a cheap assurance of God’s good favour but as an essential dimension for Christian existence. For Bonhoeffer, grace is a divine reality that once bestowed upon us must also galvanize us into the actuality of discipleship. Grace demonstrates the veracity of God’s welcoming towards the rebellious other in light of a new relational existence. However, grace for Bonhoeffer confers more than a new reality for the repentant sinner, grace also calls for a conscious following of the crucified in discipleship.

For instance, according to Bonhoeffer, grace is a recognized confession of God’s work in Christ for a new reality translated in daily living. Grace is transformational in the sense that it does not only bestow redemption and forgiveness though faith, grace also opens space for the redeemed to enter into a new relationship with God and consequently towards others as God’s beacons of hope pointing to the actuality of Christ in us. Therefore, this grace was never meant to be self-bestowed or self-contained. God’s grace is redemptive and dynamic; it implies discipleship.

Even though my focus in this work is not to explore discipleship, the fact is: to visualize the implications of grace for embracive engagements is essential. For instance, I believe that to speak of a divine embrace with a grace-driven perspective is also to face the implications of such grace upon me as I follow Christ and visualize God’s embrace as a relational model between the other and I. This is the foundation by which I believe that grace drives me into a relational fruition in a world of barren gracelessness. Because, when my embrace resonates God’s embrace in Christ it appears as a positive reflection of a grace that promotes life between the other and I. To explore why and how
grace is essential to embrace inevitably leads us to consider two realities: first, the truth of our human inability towards graciousness; second, the realization that embrace as a work of grace between the other and I is challenging in a world of injustice.

Earlier I said that in order to enter into the embracive space of the other, where arms enlace in respectful individuality and love, we ought to take our dirty shoes off and leave them behind. It means that in this undertaken process, we realize that in order to cross into the mutual embracive space, the dirt of violence and hatred must be left behind. Thus, to observe the reality of grace as a driven perspective, we have to remember that Volf deals with this challenge in saying that there is an asymmetrical dialectic between the “grace” of self-donation and the “demand” for truth and justice. He points out that “…even if the will to embrace is indiscriminate, the embrace itself is conditional.”54 It is conditional because it engages the other with a kindness that refuses to respond with the same violent coin. It also leads me to acknowledge that my embrace is more than mine, my embrace is also God’s own. The rugged cross is a symbol of God’s grace towards us the rebellious and sinful humanity. The cross, “…is a divine embrace of the deceitful and the unjust.”55 Volf reminds us.

To speak of grace-driven perspective is also to visualize the cross once again. The cross is a sign that Jesus dealt with our otherness. He became sin on our behalf. Furthermore as we revisit the event of the cross we observe that the crucified Son cried out loud: “It is accomplished”56. Jesus at the centre of the cross exclaims the ultimate declaration of victory that stamps out the symbolic veil of separation; the reality of the veil is no more. The irrevocable separation between a Holy God and a sinful humanity is no more because of the work and worth of the Crucified Son. In Jesus, God demonstrates a new relational chapter, in Christ the reality of grace is inaugurated.

In Christ, God stamps grace as the ‘de facto’ new standard that demonstrates God’s unshakable will and love to rescue the world; in Christ justification and forgiveness are manifested as God’s salvation as a work of love meant to bring us back into His arms. Jesus’ redemptive work bridges the gap and makes possible for rebellious men and women to come and dwell by faith in the presence of God in an eternal communion. Consequently, the reality of grace as a driven perspective to our embrace

54 Ibid., 30.
55 Miroslav Volf, Exclusion and Embrace, 294.
56 John 19:30.
lies in this divine grace that with justice set the parameters for a reconciliatory welcoming. If we insist, along with Volf, in human non-violence while “granting”, as he writes, God’s prerogative to exercise justice, or “violence”, against “…false prophets and beasts” that “refuse to be redeemed by the wounds they inflicted on the Crucified”\textsuperscript{57}, then we should be humbly perplexed by the possibility to stand before a Holy God and be embraced by Him. God has all the prerogative and power to exercise justice because God is a God of justice. Nonetheless, as justice is accomplished by the worth and through the work of the Son, the invitation to be embraced is proclaimed as a graceful reality that truly guarantees my welcoming back into the family and arms of the Heavenly Father. A grace that through faith brings us back and inspires us to love the other as we were loved.

Therefore, using Bonhoeffer terminology, the reality of this costly grace appears as a spiritual truth that, demonstrated in Christ, brings into fruition a confession of faith meant to be a transformative reality to us, among us, and between us and God. Embedded in this reality, embrace towards the other with a grace-driven perspective demonstrates a relational exercise in which this confession can be affirmed in light of embracive engagements we experience in life. In this confession, we visualize God’s embrace as a transformative relational engagement among us because: “In becoming incarnate and reconciling sinful humanity to himself God has established an ontological connexion with all humanity through Jesus Christ.”\textsuperscript{58}

It is with this fundament in mind that Rosato tells us: “This insight is the germ of Barth’s ecclesiology whose main purpose is to show how the objective reconciliation of all men in Jesus Christ takes on concrete form when Christians recognize and proclaim the real union between their existence and that of their Lord.”\textsuperscript{59} In essence, Barth is affirming God’s gracious redemption upon the sinful, reminding us that our connection with the Father not only affirms our new reconciled position before Him in grace but also our relational concreteness with Him as His people and towards the other as a challenge presented by this grace. The Son, who is my justification and my truth before God is also God’s unique gift that, bestowed upon me, made my unity with God possible.

Nonetheless the question is: How does this extravagant grace apply to my relational encounters as I am challenged to relate to others in an embracive fashion? As a

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 30.
\textsuperscript{58} Thompson, \textit{Holy Spirit in the theology of Karl Barth}, p. 89.
\textsuperscript{59} Rosato, \textit{The Spirit as Lord}, p.123.
dimension of the divine embrace, grace reminds us that no sin is strong enough to uphold the truth of grace towards the other. The existence of the cross condemns sin but at the same time demonstrates God’s unmovable love manifested towards the enemy. Grace as a driven perspective, results in an infusion of two unavoidable truths around my embrace: one, that the existence of the cross expose the reality of sin, its deadly violence and the challenge to face this reality through an opportunity to embrace; two, that Christ’s exclamation of victory at the center of that cross inaugurates a new relational condition where the stance of hope is always present. Embrace in this sense ushers my action towards the other in a positive hope that visualizes with joy the possibility of a restored relationship.

Additionally, one must also be attentive to the fact that grace, as a driven perspective towards the other, does not imply inconsequent embracive encounters amongst us. It is an error to think of grace as a predictable and shallow conversation to appease someone’s anger or to tame the demands of a truthful and transformative embrace. If this is the case, then the principle of grace has been misunderstood. My answer to this error is to point to the fact that the reality of grace does not discard the required dynamics of embrace, as well as not give us room as an excuse not to embrace. In fact, the reality of grace gives substance to the transformational embracive process that seeks the restoration and celebration of life among us. We must be attentive not to transform the perspective of grace into a diluted apology that shy us away from a concrete embrace as we relate to others. Grace as a driven perspective infused in my embrace opens a new dimension for me and for the other, especially as we deal with the demands of justice and forgiveness.

In our horizontal human context, as we think about the largesse of this grace, we realize how challenging is to deal with the ugliness of violence and injustice so prevalent amongst us. In our human experience, it seems unfair to speak about grace when hurting is a present factor for millions suffering constant transgression. It seems that the ugly face of violence and injustice is not only present but also holds the winning ticket in its pocket. Conversely, the cultivation of embracive grace-driven perspective does not discard justice and does not take truth lightly. In fact, justice and truth are two related and crucial prerogatives in order to achieve a truthful and welcoming embrace. This is what Volf affirms by saying that: “…the struggle against deception, injustice, and violence is
indispensable if we stress the priority of the “will to embrace.”\textsuperscript{60} In this sense, complete and transformational reconciliation cannot be achieved until “…the truth has been said and justice done.”\textsuperscript{61} Consequently if the horrors of injustice and violence are hidden, embrace becomes an uneasy and lenient experience that does not reflect God’s action in Christ. This is why when we affirm grace as a reality of embrace, it does not mean we are falling into an utopian perspective. This grace is not ours, this is a grace that anchors on the throne of God. A grace that in bringing me near to God drives me near to the other as well. This is why we cannot take a grace-driven perspective lightly. Because, if our embracive action cultivates a grace-driven perspective then the argument that Jesus demonstrates a non-violent persuasion becomes crucial to our embracive action as we imitate Jesus’ “nonviolence as we strive for public justice.”\textsuperscript{62}

Furthermore when we realize that we, as God’s creation, have all inflicted wounds on the Crucified and nor power or a possibility to overcome this enmity could be accomplished by ourselves, the idea of redemption as a reality to us appears as an extraordinary gift meant to be celebrated with joy and with a hopeful heart. Consequently, when our embracive actions take place towards the other, we are reflecting a divine embrace driven by the reality of a powerful love.

Volf’s asymmetrical perspective also demonstrates an unconditional/conditional approach for the exercise of embrace. Unconditionally, we ought to affirm that God’s embrace is indiscriminate as a resonance of the redemptive victory of Christ, since all have sinned, as Apostle Paul argues in Romans 3:23-24, “…the story of the cross is about God who desires to embrace precisely the “sons and daughters of hell.”\textsuperscript{63} On the other hand, in its conditionality, we affirm the necessity to bring justice and truth to the table in the name of the Crucified in order for respect, healing, and welcoming to happen. Case in point, to talk and to offer embrace in a social context where violence is the order of the day, justice and truth are imperative.

As a result, in social contexts where violence has carved its way as a contextual presence, I believe that, as God’s people, we become situated as agents of hope whose prerogative lies in a new relational approach towards the other driven by a unshakable

\textsuperscript{60} Miroslav Volf, \textit{Exclusion and Embrace}, 29.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 29.
\textsuperscript{63} Miroslav Volf, \textit{Exclusion and Embrace}, 88.
grace. This is where embrace as a relational engagement demonstrates that it is possible to create spaces of peace in order to promote renewed inter-personal and social relations.

In this fashion, I believe that embrace as a relational exercise creates new realities of peace and joy in the name of a gracious God. When our embrace demonstrates such courage and dynamism, hope starts to appear. Acts of embrace when driven by the exercise of grace in love, has the power to heal old rivalries and produces positive transformation in the community. This is why embrace in this capacity calls us to cultivate a grace-driven attitude towards the other in hope that it might produce fruits of justice and peace.

Finally, I believe that the reality of God’s grace drives us into actions of reconciliation. Moreover, when embodied in the way we relate to others, embrace driven by grace has the power to clear spaces dominated by violence and enmity. The grace-driven perspective of God’s embrace is another dimension of the divine model meant to promote the possibility of a renewed relational experience in our human condition.
To visualize the theological implications of God’s embrace and to claim this embrace as a model for the way we should relate to each other is both challenging and inspiring. Having said this, I am convinced that in order to act in this embracive fashion we must be aware that pure acknowledgment of it, will not necessarily lead us into experiencing embrace as a living practice.

In order to become a reality in our human dimension, I believe that embrace has to become a relational exercise in which faith also plays an essential role as I face the challenge and the opportunity to relate to others in such fashion. It means that embrace in me and through me demonstrates the actuality of God’s work of love translated into a new perception of living.

My affirmation derives from a simple observation: In our human experience, positive and persistent relational efforts are never sustained by socio-political will or intellectual discourse; human history denies us this possibility. Politics, socio-economical agendas, and intellectual enthusiasm are not only volatile but also susceptible to personal interest; thus unable to sustain embrace of such high caliber. I am not discarding the benefits of social, economical, political initiatives, or intellectual engagement in the arena of ideas for the welfare of our human experience. These activities play, in general, an important role to empower and equip us to do better as humans living in our society. Still, embrace after God’s embrace entails a new element, it entails a spiritual dimension that calls us to look at the cross and to the significance of Christ as the Lord of a new reality.

What’s more, to further my assertion, I think that the profound theological implications embedded in God’s embrace does not allow us to take embrace just as a mimetic recipe for relational matters. The theological dimension around embrace, as we observed, demonstrates how solid are the parameters in which the divine embrace is anchored. In our human dimension, to embrace in this fashion is also to realize that, as I embrace horizontally, the Spirit is the vertical link that connects and assures my action with the reconciliatory watermark of the divine embrace. This recognition reminds me that my embrace, as a work of love towards the other, is built upon the foundation of
God’s work of love towards a hostile humanity. For instance, in this embracive reality, I am challenged to engage others with hopeful expectations.

Therefore, I believe that when we affirm God’s embrace as a model to our reality, we cannot take it as a mimetic picture of the divine model in order to mend wrongdoing amongst us. God’s embrace has profound theological implications and to claim it as a model among us is to also face these implications that are truly transformational. The reality of the cross, the non-violent approach, and the exercise of grace are all theological dimensions that indeed promote a new overview for living. These truths are essential dimensions of the divine embrace and indeed truly transformational.

The spiritual implications embedded in the dynamics of embrace demonstrate that we cannot fulfill its parameters by our own abilities. The reality is: we are not inclined to embrace naturally; embrace as we comprehend it is dangerous business and we tend to avoid it. Though by the operative work of God’s Spirit, in me and through me, embrace as a relational process is translated into a tangible possibility.

Nevertheless, a question I ponder is: What does my embrace need to entail in order to endure and be fruitful? To me the answer lies in two major truths of the Christian faith: First, the presence of the Spirit as a reality in me and among us. Second, the fundament of hope as a promise of a new creation because the Son who was slain is the Christ who has risen. The Spirit empowers my embrace as a tool that promotes recreation of broken relationships. Embrace in this fashion is sustained by the presence of the Holy Spirit in the process. By the agency of the Spirit my embrace becomes fruitful and endures as a new relational stance between the other and I. The Holy Spirit is the key by which my embrace is grounded in the uniqueness of the divine embrace of God. This is the reason, I believe that the validity of the divine embrace demonstrates this spiritual reality. Embrace that seeks others in this fashion has the stamp of God’s Spirit as a presence that makes one act in hope and in faith towards the other in order to seek reconciliation and peace.

When enmity threatens our existence or when violence is bitter around us, embrace becomes an act of love that in midst of uncertainty appears as a missional action that acts in hope. This is how I grasp the dynamics of embrace as a real possibility in our midst; the Spirit is the agent that empowers and encourages my embrace as a relational stand that towards the other promotes life in a situation that otherwise would be of
perpetual hostility and death. An action that in resonance with God’s embrace, reminds us of the concreteness of God’s new future. Embrace in this sense is stamped as a declaration that violence will not have the final word.

In a world thirsty for love, we are reminded that the ugly face of violence will not be framed in the final picture. The coin of violence is meant to lose its value because there is a new currency towards the other. The Spirit’s presence makes me aware that when I engage the other in this embracive fashion, I must do it through a persevering faith that visualizes a new future already inaugurated by the resurrected Lord.

For me, this reality entails a form of action that can be described as missional. That is why, in speaking about the power of embrace as a reconciliatory reality, Volf writes; “…if God’s reconciling self-giving for the ungodly stands at the center of our faith, then nothing stands in the way of opting for grace, with its pain and delight, of forgiving and ultimately releasing the memory of suffered wrongs.”64 This is how I see Volf describing forgiveness, suffering and healing as part of an embracive experience exercised with faith.

Therefore, I am convinced that a positive embracive perspective not only demonstrates the implications of the cross, of non-violence, and grace as theological foundations but also asserts that as a living reality, two essential elements must be present in order to make embrace an enduring and a hopeful relational reality. Foremost, is the indispensable empowering presence of the Holy Spirit; subsequent, is the powerful living hope in the resurrection promised by Jesus himself. Let me explain these two dimensions further and in more detail.

64 Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory*, 209.
1. **The Presence of the Spirit.**

1.1. **New Individuals in Christ.** Essentially, the Spirit empowers us to live as God’s people; as individuals in Christ and in community as God’s church. As individuals, the Spirit leads us from an exclusionary perspective into an embracive personality whose identity has a new center and a new Lord. As God’s community, the Spirit teaches us to express our new identity in Christ by constantly working in our relationships towards the other. In other words, the Spirit reminds us that we are always embracing and being embraced. The tragic reality in which we left the Father’s presence as His enemies, only to be trapped by the insatiable demands of our own self, demonstrates the importance of this imperative. The Spirit’s presence is essential for a new perspective that frees us from this trap and challenges us to engage the other in respect and in love. If truth and justice, as we know, are essential to a truthful embrace, then it denotes that meaningful embracive action needs a new prerogative that does not rely on the demands of the self. Thus, if the self is trapped in its own demands, it cannot reflect the grace-given reality that permeates God’s embrace. Without the presence of the Spirit, embrace is doomed by the insatiable demands of our competing self.

In the New Testament we are reminded that:

“The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First he says: ‘This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds.’ Then he adds: ‘Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more.’ And where these have been forgiven, there is no longer any sacrifice for sin. Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds” (Hebrews 10: 15-24).

There are two organic elements in this biblical text. Primarily, the Spirit testifies about a new covenant. In it, forgiveness and welcome demonstrates God’s work towards a new relational reality between him and us. The Spirit testifies that the transformative reality of embrace is connected to a new law embedded in God’s rescuing welcoming. It
means that the Spirit announces that God’s embrace cannot be fully grasped if used only as a mimetic relational model or a relational compromise to mend human hostility. The Spirit is testifying that there is a new law, the law of grace in Christ, meant to be written in the human heart. In this new parameter, the promotion of a new conscience among sinful men is declared through the cross. Secondary to this, we observe that to embrace after God’s embrace appears as an imprint of this transformative experience, it springs forth from this new conscience. Additionally the significance of this spiritual reality can be observed as we are challenged to act in resonance with God’s work of love in grace. The text says: ‘Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds’. It implies that if God’s embrace is the model by which we should relate to each other, then its applicability must be nurtured in us by God’s Spirit; it is the Spirit who empowers this new relational paradigm in us and through us.

In the New Testament the work of the Spirit is evident in this process. The ‘Counselor’ (Parakletos) in the early church appears nurturing and challenges the disciples to be immersed in God’s new relational reality. The hostile humanity will be blessed by God’s good news in Jesus Christ, salvation is at hand.

In the early church, the Spirit’s presence also demonstrates a focus on a Christ-like living experience. A new life that, sprung from inside, proclaimed God’s love for the world. In this sense we can assert that the fruition of these “laws written in our hearts” are nurtured by God’s Spirit in us; the Spirit is the guarantor that keeps the challenge of embracive focus on Christ. Consequently, in the name of the Crucified our relational engagements seek others with positive expectations and constructive brotherhood. Embrace in this fashion demonstrates a living exercise whose goal is to foster life; the Spirit of God is the one who breathes life into my embrace and makes it relevant.

Jurgen Moltmann in his book ‘The Source of Life’ reminds us that “God’s mission is nothing less than the sending of the Holy Spirit from the father through the son into this world, so that this world should not perish but live.”65 Thus, the Spirit’s presence in the world is missional, it springs forth life into the world. The connection Moltmann wants to remind us is that, God’s mission (‘missio Dei’) is a mission of life in which we are called to partake by the power of the Spirit. But what does that mean? Moltmann

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responds affirming that: “It is only when our Christian mission follows the Divine sending and corresponds to it that it is a mission with confidence in God and an assured faith. It is only when we as people follow God’s mission to other people and put ourselves in line with that mission that we show respect for the dignity of others, as people created by God and made in his image; and it is only then that we shall resist the temptation to try to dominate them religiously.”\textsuperscript{66} For those who follow Christ, the mission is the mission of life. It is a mission of life because the Spirit who empowers us brings nothing else than life. Moltmann insightfully also comments:

“The sending of the Holy Spirit is the revelation of God’s indestructible affirmation of life and his marvelous joy in life. Where Jesus is, there is life that is what the Synoptics Gospels tell us. Where Jesus is, sick people are healed, sad people are comforted, marginalized people are accepted, and the demons of death are driven out. Where the Holy Spirit is present there is life. That is what the Acts of the Apostles and the apostolic letters tell us; for where the Spirit is, there is joy at the victory of life over death, and there the powers and energies of eternal life are experienced.”\textsuperscript{67}

Embrace as a relational experience that seeks the promotion of life demonstrates this missional authenticity. This is what we observe in the life and active ministry of the apostles, notably the apostle Paul. The story of Paul of Tarsus is the story of a man transformed by the impact of embrace. First from God towards him, second between him and God’s church, and third as a missional challenge towards the gentiles. God’s transformative embrace that reached Paul in love, forever imprinted in his life the profound reality of God’s grace for the sinful humanity.

The first image we have of Paul is not a pretty one; this man is a curious figure whose name is Saul. Saul is religious, committed to a cause, assured of himself and faithful to his traditions. A young and faithful religious figure totally committed to his inherited values and customs. A person ready to ensure that disruptors of his worldview would not prevail; silenced even by violent means if necessary. Saul is a dangerous enemy of the first believers. He embodies the violence of those, like the religious leaders of Israel, who should have know better. Saul represents the danger of exclusion for those who dared to follow Jesus of Nazareth. His mission put to an end the spreading of “news”

\textsuperscript{66} Jurgen Moltmann, \textit{The Source of Life}, 19.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 19-20.
that claimed Jesus, as Son of God. Saul’s efforts diligently demonstrated an exclusionary and violent approach towards the other in detriment of the cause and preservation of the established socio-religious and religious status quo (Acts 9:1-2).

In this image, there is nothing embracive in Saul’s action. His relational approach towards the ‘nazarenes’ did not include the possibility of mutual respect or dialogue. For him, the followers of the Crucified had to be silenced. Saul’s mission was carried on by a deadly clasp of oppression and violent intimidation. He is a man whose mission produces violence and death; exclusion was the deadly result.

This is the first representation we have of Saul of Tarsus, a young single-minded man that, although he possessed a refined education and spotless religious practices, was immersed in a self-centered way of life keen to use whatever means necessary to preserve it. However, the breather of violence is caught by surprise by the living Christ; Jesus encountered him as he neared Damascus (Acts 9:3-18) and he would never be the same. Saul would never carry out another violent mission.

The second illustration of Saul’s life shows a profound experience of self-bareness; his world turned upside down. The result is the birth of a new consciousness by the power of the Crucified. The question stands: What does this transformational encounter imprint in Saul and how does it become external towards others? First, we observe that Christ becomes the paradigm of his life. Saul is forever transformed by God’s gracious love. Second, Saul’s transformational experience did not stop at the miraculous encounter on the road to Damascus. For the reason that, if embrace is a process, for Saul this was just the transformational point where the divine embrace found him vertically. The next challenge was to implement this embracive reality in his life within the horizontal human dimension. Although however conscious since the first encounter that upon him a divine missional call was set towards the gentiles (Galatians 1:11-23), we observe that Saul is not exempt from the healing process between him and the community that he once persecuted; and it took Barnabas’ diligent effort to initiate this process.

Barnabas reached Saul in love by demonstrating the importance of reconciliation and truth for a constructive relationship in our human to human reality. The persecuted community and Saul established a renewed and reconciled relationship through the work of a man filled by God’s Spirit, a man called Barnabas.
What we see here is the Spirit at work. In a reciprocal embracive action, the Spirit also provides for God’s community the opportunity to reach Saul in a brotherly manner. Curiously in this process Barnabas enters the scene to demonstrate, through a diligent and faithful missional approach the authenticity of an embrace that welcomes and promotes reconciliation. The Scriptures tells us that Barnabas is a man filled by the Holy Spirit. He is a man committed to reconciliation and aware of the importance of faith as a living exercise that reaches others in love. Barnabas is one of the finest biblical examples of someone who understood the affirmative power of God’s embrace as a model for the horizontal human to human relational engagement meant to produce reconciliation.

Barnabas, the ‘Son of Encouragement’ (Acts 4:36), is a key figure to Saul’s acceptance within the group he once persecuted. It took Barnabas open arms, courageous testimony and diligent effort to find Saul in Tarsus after they first met, and even with Saul’s clear understanding of his divine call and his clear commitment to please God and not men (Galatians 1:10), we cannot forget the positive influence Barnabas had in Saul’s life.

Barnabas acted systematically towards the full insertion of Saul within the church community. Saul’s presence in the community as a reconciled person demonstrated the reconciliatory authenticity of God’s good news of reconciliation (Acts 9: 20-30; 10:22-30). Led by the Spirit, Barnabas’ embracive actions demonstrated openness and courage to act in resonance with God’s embracive model.

This example demonstrates how imperative the presence of the Spirit is for the challenge of embrace. Consequently, to affirm God’s embrace as our own is to act accordingly with the work of the Spirit. We acknowledge Christ as our new paradigm in life and as a result the once well guarded life-space controlled by the self becomes redefined by a new self whose Lord is the crucified One. In this transformative process, we realize that we exclude because we want to be at the center and be there alone single-handedly controlling “the land”. We exclude, says Volf, because “…we add conquest and possessions to possessions; we colonize the life-space of others and drive them out; we penetrate in order to exclude, and we exclude in order to control - if possible everything, alone.” 68 That is why embrace must be empowered in us as an exercise of faith through the work of the Spirit. The Spirit confronts us with the ugliness of exclusion and imprints in us a new paradigm where there is no need to control the life space of the other.

68 Miroslav Volf, Exclusion and Embrace, 79.
The Spirit, as God’s “parakletos”, points the embraced to a new fundament in which he or she must anchor, Jesus Christ. The Spirit is the divine presence that leads me to walk in the truth of Christ and thus, redefines my embrace. Why? Simply because generally our demanding and judgmental self paves the way to shut and shun the other out.

In our postmodern discourse for instance, we find a new clothing for the old demanding self. The general assumption of an empowered self in our context is based on the idea where self empowerment is a prerogative in midst of a social, cultural, and diverse religious ambiance. The idea is to affirm a free self, a self capable of making his or her own decisions in order to pursue benefits or betterment. In principle, the premise seems positive and aligned with the socio-cultural demands of our competitive today. However as we investigate it in light of God’s embracive model, we find it in want. Think for a moment in the realm of right and wrong. The contemporary ideal depicts human beings constructing their own selves by building new relationships, by creating their private self-images, and reweaving “their webs of believing and desire.” The purpose is to affirm a self able to say what is right and what is wrong by his or her own acquired enlightenment within the streams of available metanarratives. Volf understands that the argument for a self judging and centered self is persuasive. He tells us that: “It would be tempting to argue for ‘judgment’ and against ‘irony’ by insisting that there is a centre to the self and that therefore there are right and wrong beliefs and desires, not only antecedent and subsequent beliefs and desires, and that there are right and wrong ways of weaving beliefs and desires, and not only different ways of weaving beliefs and desires.” 69 The question however for Volf is not the quest for the centre of the self, but which kind of centre it ought to have. Paul’s theology presumes that there is a centered self, “…more precisely a wrongly centered self that needs to be de-centered by being nailed to the cross….the self is never without a center; it is always engaged in the production of its own center.”70 A truthful embrace cannot happen between enlarged personalities whose goal lies in their own centres. It becomes a lie, almost like a politically correct discourse, it looks good but smells bad.

69 Ibid., 69.
70 Miroslav Volf, Exclusion and Embrace, 69.
The postmodern ideal lacks, above all, the essence of accountability so necessary for a truthful embrace. A self trapped by its own demands and yet taught to enlarge itself, cannot visualize the implications of embracing in the name of the crucified. Embrace after God’s embrace is a pedagogic exercise where justice, forgiveness, acceptance, and humbleness are intertwined. In this relational process between the other and I, the Spirit works as the preceptor of a new conscience, a new paradigm where in relation to the other my position is not to enlarge my field of influence or to become more socio-cultural aligned by mutually weaving beliefs and desires. Embrace as we are observing does not allow individualism in detriment of others but wisely encourages for instance, the preservation of individuality, a necessity for a healthy embracive encounter. For a positive human to human relational interaction, mutual respect and accountability are essential, and this is how we ought to engage the other; in our unique individuality and our common humanity. The result is a positive relational exercise; first as a constructive engagement between individuals in need of reconciliation and second as an affirmative encounter of hope to foster human brotherhood.

Hence, to act with an embracive approach, reminds us that there is no place for self-centeredness as we horizontally relate to the other. Why? Because by the agency of the Spirit, I am reminded that otherness is a destructive reality we face, and towards the other, I realize that I am not in total control. In this sense, the Spirit confronts me with the truth of Christ and the reality of otherness among us; and by His power a new self is imprinted, a self whose centre being redefined in Christ demonstrates an embracive character and an openness to reach and to be reached in order to promote a healthy relationship.

Led by the Spirit, we demonstrate this new character; an embracive character that resonates truthfulness because it abides in the truth of Christ. The self, Volf says, “…must become truthful before it can know and accept the truth.”

To God’s people the presence of the Spirit is “metanoia” in living. The Spirit fosters a new living that challenges God’s people, among other things, to act in an embracive manner. “The person is a new self because she lives in Christ and Christ lives in her,” asserts Volf. As Christians, and having the Spirit of God dwelling in us, we are somehow called to depart

71 Ibid., 270.
72 Miroslav Volf, Free of Charge, 148.
from our cultural perspective, as Volf proposes, or as I would say to assume a new worldview from the perspective of the gospel, and pledge our “ultimate allegiance to God and God’s promised future.” Consequently, for an embracive reality, the Spirit starts to work in us calling our attention to observe, as Volf proposes, two things. Foremost, the Spirit creates space in us to receive the other by reminding us that we must become a catholic/universal personality. “The Spirit unlatches the doors of my heart saying: ‘You are not only you; others belong to you too.’” Next, the Spirit calls us to depart. There is a new allegiance in Christ which we must walk. Also, forged by the Spirit, this distancing “…entails a judgment against evil in every culture.” The goal is to be and act as a person who is, according to Volf, an “evangelical personality”. A personality “…brought to repentance and shaped by the gospel and engaged in the transformation of the world.”

For this reason the Spirit is central for an embracive living perspective because the Spirit creates spaces of welcoming as we become God’s new and very own territory. To Volf: “The Spirit enters the citadel of the self, and frees its will so it can resist the power of exclusion in the power of the Spirit of embrace.” This is why, empowered to embrace by the Spirit, we affirm God’s embrace in Christ as our own. The new self, born in Christ, and strengthened by the Spirit is empowered to be an active participant in what God has started in Christ.

Wonderfully, by God’s example in Christ and by the empowerment of the Spirit, we are invited to bestow cheerful and hopeful welcoming onto others. Then as we embrace, by the power of the Spirit of life, our embrace becomes missional towards the other. Henri Nouwen tells us: “This giving of the self is a discipline because it is something that does not come spontaneously. As Children of the darkness that rules through fear, self-interest, greed, and power, our great motivators are survival and self-preservation. But as children of the light who know that perfect love cast out all fear, it becomes possible to give away what we have for others.”

74 Ibid., 51.
75 Ibid., 51.
76 Ibid., 52.
1.2. Members of God’s Embracive Community. John Thompson, in his book, “The Holy Spirit in the Theology of Karl Barth”, tells us that Barth’s pneumatology affirms that reconciliation of the world and the nature of the Church are closely interrelated. For Barth, this interrelation starts with a clear understanding that: “The history of Jesus Christ is the history of the reconciliation of the world with God”. 79

In Christ, the economy of reconciliation between a Holy God and the sinful men is accomplished by the work of the cross; reconciliation that positions Christ’s followers as a visible affirmation of this reality, both individually and communally. This is what I perceive Barth telling us as he affirms that Christians recognize and proclaim a new reconciled existence with the Father through the Son and consequently as God’s church. Thompson continues by saying that:

“Christ as Reconciler of the world, is both head and King of the race and at the same time Head and King of the Church; thus his rule is wider than the sphere of the Church. Yet the Church is the provisional form of what in reality has already happened to and for the world; it is the provisional form of reconciliation. It as its basis in Christ who is the Reconciler of all and Head of all but who is acknowledged only in the Church; hence there is implicit in this outreach to all in mission and service to the Lord of all and for all.”80

To explore the idea of the importance of the Spirit for the embracive exercise we must also observe the importance of the Christian church as a community that fosters embrace. In this sense, Barth’s ecclesiological appears very compelling. In it, he affirms that God’s people co-operate as subjects in God’s redemptive work. Once more Thompson brings us clarification when he states:

“In entering this area we are not leaving behind the creedal or christological basis but maintaining it. Here we are dealing with the ‘active participation of man in the divine act of reconciliation’. It is the subjective side of one act of reconciliation which, on the basis of the objective, comes again to the fore at this point. Here is the place where it happens that, by the Holy Spirit, humanity shares in the work of Christ and a Church, a community of faith is created. Here Barth can speak in a way reminiscent of Roman Catholic theology of our participation in God’s reconciliation. The meaning is, however, significantly different in that, for Barth, humanity does not co-operate with grace but becomes a subject by God’s act alone.”81

80 Ibid., 89.
I agree with Thompson when he says that Barth’s affirmation of the Church as the “totus Christus” should not be understood as a theological inclination to see the Church as an extension of the incarnation. This is not Barth’s position, in fact the idea is that the “…Church by the Spirit does not extend Christ’s being and work but is united with him and commissioned to serve and witness to him in the whole of life.”

A reconciled reality with the Father as a living experience, brings us not only to the son Jesus but also into God’s church. In this sense, Barth’s ecclesiology provides insightful directions for my investigation, because if I affirm that the positive fruits of embrace produces a positive relational cultivation, then the reality of the church as an embracive community should demonstrate this concrete dimension as a relational exercise to foster communion and also as a missional possibility towards the other.

At a starting point, Barth’s thought corroborates the essentiality of the presence of the Spirit as the One who redefines me in the truth of Christ. Moreover, he positively confirms the fact that the Holy Spirit is the guarantor that provides God’s community with the gracious privilege to impart its service, worship, and witnessing as a dynamic mission that glorifies God. I believe that the presence of the Holy Spirit in us and in God’s community sustains a tangible reality where reconciliation, forgiveness, accountable recognition of wrongdoings and respectful dialogue, are aspects of our embracive initiatives. Thompson says that: “In the sphere of the Church we are in the sphere of the work of the Holy Spirit”. The Spirit not only strengthens but also equips God’s church; the divine “dynamos” energises each member as they gather and learn to live as God’s community. The Church is this “…divine society called into being by God the Holy Spirit…. Fundamentally the Holy Spirit is in this sense the subjective reality of reconciliation or atonement. It is the power of Jesus Christ in which Christ becomes ours and we become his in a living community of faith. It is God and humanity together in this way as community that is the Church and this is due to the power of the Holy Spirit awakening dead sinners to living faith and obedience.”

The essentiality of the Holy Spirit to foster an embracive personality is to say that the Spirit promotes the development of a nurturing ambiance where God’s people are

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83 Ibid., 92.
84 John Thompson, *The Holy Spirit in the Theology of Barth*, 93
challenged to experience and promote embrace as a way to relate to others by faith and obedience. The Holy Spirit is this agent that through his power “...Christ is attested effectively, creating in man response and obedience.”\textsuperscript{85} In obedience, we are stimulated to foster an embracive ambiance within God’s household as well as towards others in an external expression of this missional embrace.

Hence the presence of the Holy Spirit is essential to impart embrace as a missional reality to God’s community. Thus we can call it missional because as a positive relational exercise that fosters reconciliation, forgiveness and peace, it resonates God’s new future. Accordingly when God’s people celebrates its reconciliatory reality with God, the community co-operates as Christ’s subjects in God’s reconciliatory mission to the world. It is a dynamic and affirmative connection that imparts the church of Christ in a singular nature: a visible expression of a divine work of love translated into a communal reality among mankind. The community existence testifies the actuality of God’s embracive work.

Barth tells us that the church is built up as God’s temple by the Spirit. The church learns and exercises faith as it gathers to worship; it is the church “oikodome”, a term used by Paul that affirms the exercise of faith when God’s people gather to worship, worship in this sense is acknowledgement of who God is. It is a celebration of bestowed forgiveness and peace upon sinners, it is celebration that boast in humbleness the exercise of a grace that makes enemies into daughters and sons of God.

As we have observed, God’s embrace expose us to the reality of the cross, grace, and the challenge of non-violence in order to promote reconciliation. However, one must admit that the church does not always relate to others with such embrace. In black and white reality, themes of racism, social inequality, and attitudes of animosity sadly make their way into God’s community and thus become a way of shutting and shunning others out. However, while the church is imperfect, and “…will always remains imperfect, weak, and vulnerable...” we cannot forget that the truth of God’s embrace in Christ towards the sinner cannot be undone. The Holy Spirit is the divine Counselor who calls God’s church to walk on the infallible truth of Christ; even when the church is tempted by secularism, self-glorification, and materialism. In face of these powers that influence the world of men, the Spirit is always pointing to Christ as God’s paradigm to us. To compromise with

\textsuperscript{85} Barth., \textit{C.D., IV/2}, 638.
the world, says Johnson, is to “...relax its relationship to the Holy Spirit and his gifts, to glorify one’s own self means, its own common spirit replaces the Holy Spirit and its own work the work of God. But to be upheld by the Spirit means that despite our failures and weaknesses we can avoid these dangers and, if we are enabled do do so, the paradox will again be seen, ‘The destructible cannot in fact be destroyed.’”\footnote{John Thompson, \textit{The Holy Spirit in the Theology of Barth}, 98.}

However, even when realities of exclusion threatens the uniqueness of the church as God’s embracive community, I believe that there must be affirmation of the truth of God Church as a community called to reflect and cultivate God’s work, love and service for a needy and broken world. As a community that serves in this fashion, we find Johnson telling us that:

“The community in which Christ, dwells yet over which he is Lord, which is one with him, built up into him, is also his instrument in and for the world. A new and fresh understanding of the world is given to the Church by the Holy Spirit. It sees the world as one addressed by the free grace of God in Jesus Christ and it sees Jesus Christ as the one who in himself and of himself is radical alteration of the world. Reconciliation is God’s revolution, his change of the world to a right reconciliation with himself. Since this is so, the community has this realistic knowledge of the world in the light of grace. Since Jesus Christ identified himself with us in our need and sinfulness the Church will know a total solidarity with the world, and since he took its concerns to himself, his community will live in active responsibility in and for the world.”\footnote{John Thompson, \textit{The Holy Spirit in the Theology of Barth}, 100. (Barth, C.D., IV/3, 2, pp. 763ff.)}

Therefore, embrace empowered by the Spirit demonstrates both solidarity with a world loved by God and the instrumentality of God’s community in cultivating in embrace as a visible expression of God’s new relational reality. The Spirit infuses hope in our embrace because we are part of a community of hope. “It is in the community that the Spirit molds our character, we display a life of virtue because we live in a community that values and fosters virtue.”\footnote{Miroslav Volf, \textit{Free of Charge}, 119.} Thus, the very nature of God’s church is “...a missionary one, based on the triune God, on Christ’s reconciliation and its revelation as truth and light and on the power of the Spirit bringing it in enabling efficacy to humanity.”\footnote{John Thompson, \textit{The Holy Spirit in the Theology of Barth}, 100.}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{johnthompson1} John Thompson, \textit{The Holy Spirit in the Theology of Barth}, 98.
\bibitem{johnthompson2} John Thompson, The Holy Spirit in the Theology of Barth, 100. (Barth, C.D., IV/3, 2, pp. 763ff.)
\bibitem{volf} Miroslav Volf, \textit{Free of Charge}, 119.
\bibitem{johnthompson3} John Thompson, \textit{The Holy Spirit in the Theology of Barth}, 100.
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2. The Promise of Resurrection

I come to the second major point: the living hope in the resurrection. If embrace is our goal, if our embrace visualizes how profound and transformative are the implications of God’s embrace in Christ and it is empowered by the Spirit, then the empty tomb ought to speak loud and clear as a core dimension of our embrace. “For the God who resurreets, nothing is the end,” says Volf.

The question is: Why? And further, what implications the truth of Christ’s resurrection imparts on our embracive experiences? Fundamentally, the promise of resurrection connects us with God’s solid assurance that reconciliation will be achieved and all things will be made anew. Because in Christ hostility was broken by the power of a reconciling love offered in grace. The supremacy of God’s new relational reality that reaches in hope by faith, also demonstrates the reality of the resurrection of the crucified Son as a core dimension of this new reality. Consequently, the promise of resurrection becomes a living hope for those who abide in God’s assurance that the powers of death – violence, alienation, hostility, only to name a few – will not prevail. Death will not have the final word and will not be the final end.

As followers of the resurrected One, we declare in faith that the living Christ died and rose from the dead in order to proclaim victory of a redeeming love. This hope becomes part of whom we are. Consequently, for God’s people, “…to give up the hope for the final reconciliation – for a reconciliation that can neither be surpassed nor undone – would mean to give up itself.” The Apostle Paul in I Cor 15.14 reminded the Corinth church and the present church that: “If Christ is not risen, then our preaching is vain and your faith is vain.” To us, Christ’s resurrection imparts a whole new dimension to the ideals of welcoming and reconciliation so prominent within the reality of embrace. “If one calls the cross of Jesus the ‘nuclear fact’ of Christian faith, one must call his resurrection the primal datum of that faith,” Moltmann reminds us. Therefore, as an empowering dimension of an embracive character, a hope that contemplates a risen Christ is essential. It is essential mainly because Jesus’ resurrection proclaims that “…the

90 Miroslav Volf, Exclusion and Embrace, 30.
91 Miroslav Volf, Exclusion and Embrace, 110.
new world of life has already gained power over this unredeemed world of death and has condemned it to become a world that passes away.”

For this reason, to embrace is to act in accordance with a future that has already begun. Meaning that we are aligned with ‘an eschatological reality foretasted in embrace,’ says Tom Reynolds. Jesus’ resurrection “…makes possible the impossible, namely reconciliation in the midst of strife, the law of grace in the midst of judgment, and creative love in the midst of legalism.” This living hope empowers our embrace because the Lamb who died is also the Lion who lives and rules with power and justice. For Volf, “…the Lamb’s rule is legitimized not by the “sword” but by its “wounds”; the goal of its rule is not to subject but to make people “reign for ever and ever.” We embrace because the world to come is ruled by the Lion, who as a Lamb, took the violence upon himself at the cross in order to overcome hostility by welcoming and embracing the adversary other. Thus, with Jesus Christ, as the Lamb and Lion at the center of the throne, Volf reminds us; “…the distance between the “throne” and the “subjects” has collapsed.”

In this truth, we can affirm that the empty tomb is central to the Christian faith and for the missional dimension of the experience of embrace within a sinful and not uncommonly hostile humanity. Without the truth of the resurrection, the proclamation of God’s new future collapses. The resurrection proclaims the significance of life as the most valuable treasure given to us by the power of the Almighty. The empty tomb is the reason by which a living hope can be affirmed in our living and actions in the name of the Resurrected One. Professor Jurgen Moltmann affirms the following:

“The person who is assured of this inheritance in God’s future already lives in ‘a living hope’ here and now. There is a hope that makes us living people, and a hope that can no longer be disappointed or crushed. The experience of the Holy Spirit makes Christ’s resurrection present, and moves us into the resurrection world of eternal life. The remembrance of Christ’s resurrection wakens a living hope for

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94 This is a comment made by Prof. Tom Reynolds in one of our private conversations while I was working on my thesis proposal regarding embrace and I used it with his permission.
96 Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 301.
97 Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 301.
God’s future, and in this consonance of remembered past and hope-for future we perceive eternity in time.”\textsuperscript{98}

For instance, embracive engagements that perceive eternity in time, demonstrates visualization that justice will prevail and peace will be everlasting. I believe that embrace driven by this living hope and carried on as a work of reconciliation demonstrates this hopeful expectation that in essence visualizes God’s new future.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that as a guiding dimension that foster a new perception in living, the reality of the resurrection has no parameters in our own human experience. Hence, the empty tomb imparts a supernatural dimension unlikely to anything we could claim in our human existence; it is a perspective in which the “...resurrection of Christ has no historical prototypes.\textsuperscript{99} Therefore, this hope that has no parallels in human experience, cannot be compared to intellectual positive thinking, neither to religious perspectives that either present rebirth as another chance to do better among men or conscious transcendence as part of a development of a spiritual-self betterment for after-life expectations. Biblically, we observe that this is a hope based on the reality of Jesus who, as the crucified and resurrected Christ of God, is the redeemer and the reconciler of all things to the glory of the Father. “It is the beginning of the new creation of everything. So the rebirth to a living hope which corresponds to Christ’s resurrection in our life. We really have to look ahead to the future of God in the power of hope if we want to understand the new character of this life.”\textsuperscript{100}

With this perspective in mind we answer our second question. What implications does the truth of Christ’s resurrection impart on our embracive experiences? Prior to detailing my considerations, I believe it to be necessary to visualize two theological realities interrelated to the truth of the resurrection as building blocks of hope: justification and regeneration as salvific providences that impart a new relational condition before God.

Moltmann infers an interesting point by calling the Reformation theology to explore and expand its viewpoint regarding these theological imperatives of the Christian faith. It is a call to explore these doctrines in light of an eschatological perspective where

\textsuperscript{98} Ibid., 30.
\textsuperscript{100} Ibid., 30.
the divine salvific providence in the righteousness of Christ is also the foundation for a new creation reality that includes all things. (Rom 8.8; Gal 4.5,6). The saving significance of Christ includes not only the cross but also the resurrection. Consequently, the essentiality of the presence of the Spirit, as we live and follow the resurrected Christ, also appears in our living as we affirm the resurrected Christ as our paradigm of hope with an eschatological dimension in mind. Because in order to follow the resurrected Christ, as a living experience by the power of the Spirit of life, we must affirm our faith in God’s new future in hope. I believe that if our embrace resonates the divine embrace as a demonstration of a new relational stance, it resonates God’s new future in a broken and world in need.

Barth for instance, interprets that the “...eschatological rebirth of the whole creation has already taken place in the universal, vicarious Christ event.” ¹⁰¹ It is on the Golgotha, that a new life as a rebirth, happens not only for humans but for all creation; it is there that it took place. Barth sees the work of the Holy Spirit pre-eminently in the perception and recognition of that which has already, objectively and “de jure”, been accomplished in Christ for all humankind, whereas regeneration surely means the personal beginning of a new life in hope for God’s future.¹⁰² For Barth, knowledge of Christ is fundamental because it leads to fellowship with Christ, and consequently, hope in and for God’s future comes unto being for the follower of the resurrected Lord. Thus, according to Barth, experience with Christ comes along with knowledge of Christ. However, it is sound to keep in our minds that knowledge of Christ in this sense does not signify intellectual learning in quantitative terms, but learning that becomes translated into a personhood measure and expressed in Christ. The connection between knowledge of Christ and fellowship with Christ is thus positively affirmed through a Christ-like personhood.

As we try to discern the implications of this living hope that empowers our embrace, we realize that the empty tomb relates to these core dimensions of justification and regeneration. It points to the salvific promise that, in Christ, lies a living hope for those who were justified and made anew by faith through the work of the Lamb. Reading Volf, we observe that he corroborates Moltmann’s argument in which the: “Salvific

¹⁰¹ Jurgen Moltmann, The Spirit of Life, 150.
¹⁰² Ibid., 150-151.
meaning of Christ’s death for men and women is undoubtedly, according to Paul and Luther, the forgiveness of injustice and the justification of those who know no justice. But if Christ ‘was raised again for our justification’ (Rom. 4.25), then the saving significance of his resurrection must be given its due weight too. The forgiveness of sins is a backward-looking act. The forwarding-looking act of justification is the new creation of life, the awakening of love, and the rebirth to a living hope.”¹⁰³ For instance, a living hope in the resurrection demonstrates a rebirth in Christ that imparts a new living which is lived through the power of the Spirit of God. A living hope where rebirth, in terms of regeneration into a new creation in Christ, appears as a promise brought into actuality by God justification in Christ towards the sinful men. A rebirth that reaches not only men but also the whole of God’s creation. For instance, Moltmann affirms:

“Believers are possessed by the Spirit of the resurrection, and through it are born again to a well-founded hope for eternal life. A coherent process issues from the rebirth of Christ from death through the Spirit, to the universal rebirth of mortal human beings through the Spirit, to the universal rebirth of the cosmos through the Spirit. In this process God the Father acts through the Spirit on Christ, and through Christ on the Spirit. The operations of his acts are the operations of the Spirit and are present in the Spirit. In the event in which believers are born again to become children of God and heirs of his kingdom, the efficacies of Christ and the efficacies of the Spirit interpenetrate. If we call this event justification we are describing it as the operation of Christ. If we call it regeneration, we are describing the operation of the Spirit. We need both viewpoints if we are to understand the event completely. If the discipleship of Jesus has also to be understood as life in the Spirit, then being-in-Christ and life-from-the-Spirit mean the same thing, but seen from different sides.”¹⁰⁴

Therefore, with this theological perspective as a background, I would like to present my considerations to the question I proposed earlier. My thought is: Firstly, I believe that the living hope embedded in the resurrection nurture in us courage and humility in order to experience embrace as a relational instance that pursues actions of reconciliation. It is courage and humility as a consciousness that rests its prerogatives in a spiritual reality that Christ is not only my paradigm but also the living Lord of reconciliation. It is a spiritual expectation that in Christ, as Moltmann says, is “…a surplus

¹⁰³ Ibid., 149.
of hope in which only the eternal life of the new, future world can fulfill.”105 Secondly, I believe that by being in Christ in this hopeful expectation here and now “...men and women do not merely experience love and pain, life and death in a different way. They have other experiences too, experiences in the discipleship of Christ.106 It means that our trust rests on this promise in which the presence of eternity is perceived within the scope of the whole of our lives here and now. Put simply, it means that if my embrace is modeled after the divine embrace then it also has a missional dimension as an engagement that promotes abundant life between the other and I. It is a work of love that empowered by a living hope, acts in resonance to God’s new future. Example being that, if we stand in this conviction of hope, then the risky business of embrace is undertaken with a new perspective in mind. A living hope that empowered by the Spirit visualizes embrace as a work of love amongst us; a work undertaken with courage, humility and commitment to the truth it requires. Interestingly and better still, are the consequences that this dynamic empowerment infuses in our living. As the Spirit nurtures God’s living hope in our living, we are invigorated by two truths essential for any human to human relational engagement. Such truths are joy and peace.

Joy, or rapturous joy as Moltmann describes it, appears as an understanding of the reality of the rebirth of life exemplified in Christ, the first one of many that shall be. It is the rapturous joy that visualizes the grandeur of God’s victorious power by the affirmation of the victory of life upon the reality of death. It is life that will have the final word, death will be no more. Moltmann describes this rapturous joy by saying that: “When the Spirit of the resurrection is experienced, a person breathes freely, and gets up, and lives with head held high, and walks upright....When life is reborn out of violence and guilt, wrongs committed and hurts endured, and finally out of the shadow of death, this means a tremendous affirmation of life.”107 It is this affirmation of life that becomes central as we relate to others in an embracive encounter, and it is in this expectant hope that my embrace, as a missional endeavor, visualizes the positive end with joy. In places where the social reality produces death instead of life, affirmation of life is essential to our relational task. Joy, as an affirmation of life, produces hopeful hearts for a reality not

105 Ibid., 152.
106 Ibid., 152.
yet seen. In theological language, it means that: “We begin to love life more with the love of God which we experience in his Spirit.”

Hence, joy as an affirmation of life that comes from the Spirit of life becomes a positive road that permits my heart to connect and to travel towards the other. It is joy that even in midst of despair makes the case for an authentic missional embrace experience as a work of love towards the other. It is joy that affirms life as God’s final word for a new earth and a new heaven. In our human experience, to engage others effectively in places where violence had made its impact, the living hope of the resurrected one empowers us in joy to pursue the road of positive relational engagements. Conversely, because of that, the space between the other and I, paved with sincere respect and with a joyful attitude, infuses celebration of life as a possible common treasure. This is what God’s community sings for instance: “Because He lives, I can take tomorrow”. This is the reason why we walk towards the other assured that life will be God’s final word among us.

Peace is another essential reality that springs from a living hope in the resurrected Christ and fostered by the Spirit of life. Peace is what makes our embrace meaningful at the end. This is what we observe in Volf and his strong commitment to peace. Our God is a God of peace, this is what we visualize through Volf’s work. “Peace is another experience of the Spirit in our restless hearts: peace with God in Christ, because the love of God is poured in our hearts through the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5. 1, 5).” In this sense Volf’s thinking resonates Moltmann’s perspective of hope in which the Spirit is active and working towards a new creation. The Spirit works positively here and now, a discipleship that must be lived out. Consequently, “...life in the Spirit is always discipleship of Jesus, and discipleship leads to conflict with the powers and powerful of ‘this world’, and to the bearing of the cross.” Thus, if peace is a reflection of this hope that cannot be extinguished because the ‘Lord is alive’, then our embrace reaches in solidarity those who are victims of the powers and compulsions of this violent and fallen world of ours. To relate to the other in this fashion, demonstrates that there is a better way in which we can walk together as human beings; peace that surpasses our understanding is peace experienced and enjoyed as a heavenly treasure.

108 Ibid., 154.
Peace in this manner is essential for the exercise of embrace. Peace in the name of the resurrected Christ points us to the fact that in Christ: “The energy of God’s love penetrates us through and through, creating peace not only for our souls but physically too.” And the image of the “restless heart” means more than “our cognitive faculty of our understanding. It means all the deep levels of our inner life.”\textsuperscript{111} Also, it is important to visualize that peace in this sense resonates the biblical perspective in which peace is understood as a profound expectation and as a transformational exercise that permeates our actions. It is peace interpreted as God’s 	extit{Shalom}; in the Old Testament the idea of peace, or shalom, “…presupposes justice, and comprehends both salvation and well-being - in short, happiness of both body and soul.\textsuperscript{112}

Finally, I would like to conclude this second chapter asserting that the connection between the presence of the Spirit and the hope of resurrection are intertwined as two sides of a coin. A coin that gives value to our embrace towards the other, a coin that demonstrates that embrace without this currency is empty. Embrace without the empowerment of the Spirit and carried out in hope falls into another philosophical proposal for human interaction. Embrace empowered by the Spirit and sustained by a living hope modeled after God’s embrace becomes fantastic.

Those who relate to others resonating God’s embrace are those whose hearts have expanded by the presence of the Crucified in them. Our hearts expand because our goals transcend the confines of the old centralized self. The expectations of this living hope empowered by the Spirit in our lives, “…fuse with God’s promises for a new creation of all things.\textsuperscript{113}

This is what the Father demonstrated in Christ towards us, and this is the challenge and the blessing of an embrace that should model the way we relate to each other.

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 154.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 154
\textsuperscript{113} Jurgen Moltmann, The Spirit of Life, 155.
CHAPTER 3
A MISSIONAL EMBRACE: REACHING IN HOPE. ACTING TO RECONCILE

As I explore embrace as a metaphor and as a relational experience, my final question is: How is embrace as a relational reality announced and experienced in places where exclusion traps people in circles of violence and poverty? Perhaps a quick answer could be simply to affirm that as Christians we do co-participate in God’s mission. This mission, as Moltmann tells us: “In its original and eternal sense, mission is God’s mission. (missio dei). It is only when our Christian mission follows the divine sending and corresponds to it that it is a mission with confidence in God and an assured faith. It is only when we as people follow God’s mission to other people and put ourselves in line with that mission that we show respect for the dignity of others, as people created by God and made in his image; and it is only then that we shall resist the temptation to try to dominate them religiously.”114 But, even with this call and assured faith as principles for God’s people, embrace as a relational occurrence cannot be affirmed as a church mission. This understanding aligns with Sunquist’s assertion that we should not define embrace as a church mission.

I am inclined to agree that embrace does not define church mission, but I am also compelled to assert that embrace as a relational occurrence in our human dimension does bring a missional dimension unto Christian living and action; otherwise, this relational approach would never be experienced as a model that visualizes a divine embrace modeling a way we should relate to each other. Volf’s assertion in which God’s embrace should model the way we should relate to each other is an affirmation that leads us to face a learning process. It is in this learning process that we face the fact that in order to flourish, embrace cannot be anything other than a work of love in midst of a rebellious humanity. God’s embrace demonstrated an action that received the rebellious other, human beings, into a divine communion.

For instance, in contexts where enmity and violence are elements that keep us apart or within a safe distance, to embrace is a daunting challenge. When the prevalent social ambiance abides in an insecure reality, relating to others does imply actions that

deal with boundaries of hopelessness and volatile relationships. Precisely this is why actions that seek to promote reconciliation for existing conflicts in such human conditions somehow appear as open windows, offering escape from the powerful winds of a violent status quo that sucks and traps people into a cycle of hostility. Perhaps this is the imperative around the reality of embrace, it cannot stand just as a philosophical concept. If it does, it will lose its very purpose and power as a relational exercise, that anchored on God’s own embrace example towards us, promotes reconciliation and communion in the world of human beings. As a work of love, embrace cannot be sustained if its foundation lies in an exclusive confidence in the human capacity to promote it.

As a relational instance towards the other, we must never forget the powerful reality of God’s instance in not letting hostility and enmity have the final word. Moltmann affirms that:

“For the person who experiences the peace of God ‘in the heart’ begins to hope for peace on earth, and therefore begins to resist peacelessness, armaments and war in the world of human beings, and exploitation and devastation in the world of nature. People who experience the justification of those without rights under Christ’s cross begin to hope for the new creation of justice for everyone and everything, so they begin to resist the wrong that is done to the weak. In faith we experience the peace of God, in hope we look ahead to a peaceful world, and in resistance to violence we confess God’s peace. In faith we received the consolation of the Spirit in suffering, but in hope we look to the future of anew creation in which there will be no more mourning and no more pain and no more crying; and in the struggle against the unnecessary suffering of other creatures, we witness to life”  

In order to be experienced as a renewed relational reality, I believe that embrace can be described as an avenue that, as part of a confession of faith, is translated in a relational engagement that acts in hope towards a new relational possibility. Because, even in midst of strife, in its core, embrace seeks the possibility of a new relational parameter. Volf tells us that: “In a confession of faith, I affirm my own relation to Jesus Christ, a relation that makes me into a Christian, and yet in the same act I acknowledge this relation before others…. The universality of salvific grace is reflected in the social and public nature of the confession of faith.”

Thus, my assertion is that a missional embrace expresses a correlation between confession and identification; a confession that reflected in the social fabric of life demonstrates our visualization of the reality of the Crucified, the Redeemer and the paradigm for this new relational reality. Henry Nowen affirms that: “For a Christian, Jesus is the man in whom it has indeed manifest that revolution and conversion cannot be separated in man’s search for experiential transcendence. His appearance in our midst has made it undeniably clear that changing the human heart and changing human society are not separate tasks, but are as interconnected as the two beams of the cross.”¹¹⁷ Such is why embrace as a relational exercise demonstrates not only a profound non-conformity with the reality of enmity, so prevalent in our human condition, but also an understanding that the divine relational paradigm has Christ at its centre. Waldir Steuernagel, a Brazilian theologian writing about the challenge of the unjust structures of society asserts that:

“The Christian faith formats our understanding of life, gives us a perception of reality and a way to look at the world and into the future. As such, the Christian faith is not a theory but a life-sharing story that connects us to our life origins and purposes as well as to the other, and the community of others. The Christian faith must be lived out and shared; otherwise, it cannot be understood and embraced. It must be nurtured, or else it will not grow in to all the tissues of our lives and of our relations. It needs to show its reality and significance by being lived out in the community that is called to be no less than a sign of who God is and what he wants. A sign of God’s Kingdom.”¹¹⁸

In this challenge, an embrace modeled after the divine embrace, voices and enacts God’s love in action amidst the old and prevalent reality of injustice, violence and exclusion present in the human condition. In order to experience embrace in this fashion, we must realize that it will require courage, a servant’s attitude and commitment to live as God’s embraced people. This is why I believe embrace, in this sense, indeed brings a missional perspective in our relational move towards the other. We act in hope because “…we don’t live in the world as we see fit, but (we) are willing to be an act in the world as we see God being and acting. God provides the model, and we are ready to observe and imitate.”¹¹⁹ As such we do imitate God, Volf continues, “… not just by observing at a

distance. God is not only above us. Jesus Christ is not just a figure from the past. God is us. Christ lives through us. We imitate God as instruments of God: God gives and forgives, and we make God’s giving and God’s forgiving our own.”

Thus, an embedded embracive action emerges in this giving-grace boldly exemplified by the Almighty. As such we act in this fashion in order to see this giving-grace also benefiting the other, who like me, can only be pulled out of the sinkhole by God’s grace. In this foundation, our encounters become powerfully transformative when exercised in midst of actions that promote reconciliation, in light of words and deeds that proclaim forgiveness, and within parameters that remind us of God’s presence and love as a way to foster peace.

A missional embrace in this fashion can be described as this relational interaction intentionally designed to promote life. It is missional because it is a mission towards life, and it is embracive because it acts positively towards the other in a clear demonstration that we can relate to others without the ugliness of violence. Personally I believe that this missional dimension is key to lead individuals to step up to the challenge to open the gates of their own lives and welcome the stranger into that space in which talk and demonstrations of a new relational mode is carried out in the name of the One who embraced first. It is a risky relational business with a missional core.

Hence, as a way to continue to explore the challenges and the impact of embrace as a transformational work of love and as a missional understanding that challenges God’s people to act accordingly towards the other in hope, I present a Christian initiative that later became a ministry called: Casa de Maria e Marta in a “favela”, shantytown, of Rio de Janeiro known as Morro da Dona Marta. My approach to explore and present this example reads as follows: a brief overview of the social context of Dona Marta’s community, a summary of a Christian initiative driven to demonstrate and offer a new relational example, and an application of the missional embracive perspective as a concept to nurture dreams for new realiti

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120 Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge*, 165.
Casa de Maria e Marta: A Case for a Missional Embrace

What often surprises visitors to Rio de Janeiro is not the fact that the poverty of the “favelas” exists, but that it is so closely integrated with the middle and upper-class neighbourhoods of the city. In 1974, economist Edmar Bacha coined the term “Belindia”\(^\text{121}\) to describe the distribution of income in Brazil. Many, though not all, of Rio's “favelas”, particularly in the “Southern Zone”, are located on steep hillsides, places where the terrain is too rough and steep for the construction of apartment houses.\(^\text{122}\)

There is even a popular expression that symbolizes this symbiotic existence: ‘the asphalt and the hill’. The upper and middle classes living “on the asphalt” and the poor living on the “hills”, or “favelas”. Dona Marta houses approximately 10,000 residents and has around 2,500 dwellings, the correct number is difficult to have.\(^\text{123}\) The hill was already named for Dona Marta in the late 19th century when there were no roads on the northern (hill) side of São Clemente, and the neighborhood was filled with mansions of the elite, a few of which still exist amidst the more recent construction. The “favela” got its start in the 1940’s.\(^\text{124}\)

In addition to the many residents with gainful employment outside the favela, Dona Marta, like most “favelas”, has "bocas-de-fumo", places where drugs are sold. When people start returning after work there are a number of booths (the sort that can be dismantled and taken away at night) along the street supplying needs and goodies such as hot-dog stands, or a woman selling women's clothing among many other things. Most days, particularly at night, when there are children playing, the noise transmitted from the street are happy voices. Currently, there is a contrast between Dona Marta and other

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\(^{121}\) Belindia was a expression created by the Brazilian economist Edmar Bacha in the 70’s to describe how the (then) Brazilian military government was creating a unsustainable economical reality in which a small group of Brazilians had a European standard of living like Belgium, and an immensely larger group with a South American standard of living like India.


\(^{124}\) Professor Milton Teixeira in his article: *Morro Santa Marta: História do Bairro. (Santa Marta’s Hill: The History of the Neighbourhood)*, 1.
“favelas” like Rocinha and Vidigal which are regularly in the news for violence and drugs; Dona Marta has been relatively peaceful lately, but this was not always the case.

During the decades of the 1980’s and 1990’s, Dona Marta was as one of the most violent and dangerous communities of Rio’s southern zone. Caco Barcellos (Cláudio de Barcelo de Barcellos) a Brazilian journalist, wrote a book based on the reality of drug trafficking, the socio ethical implications between the “favela”and the “city” and the violent logic of the criminal corporations in the state of Rio de Janeiro. His book, “Abusado: O Dono do Morro Dona Marta, Record: Rio de Janeiro, 2003” (The Abuser: The Owner of Dona Marta’s Hill), tells the story of Juliano VP, a personage inspired by Márcio Amaro de Oliveira, known as Marcinho VP, a trafficker, born on the “favela” and a man who ascended in the ranks of the criminal organization called “Comando Vermelho”, the Red Command. The story has many similarities with the real Marcinho VP; Juliano VP had little care about money, liked literature, was concerned about the future of the “favelados” (shantytown dwellers) of Rio de Janeiro, and was someone who had links with Rio’s elite. Dona Marta also became news when in 1996 the pop star Michael Jackson and american film director Spike Lee made a video clip in which part of the “favela” appeared in the videoclip: ‘They don’t care about us’. Spoken by Márcio Amaro de Oliveira, the infamous Marcinho VP, got notoriety when he declared that he gave permission for Mr. Jackson and Mr. Lee to film in the community.125

In recent years, due to the positive transformation observed in the community, notably by the installation of an UPP, "Unidade de Polícia Pacificadora" (Pacifying Police Centre), the community has received illustrious visitors. In 2009, names such as Madonna, Dennis Hearne, General Consul of the the Unites States, Navanethem Pillay, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights126, and in January of 2011, US Republican Senators John McCain and John Barrasso127 were among those who set foot in Dona Marta. Indeed a very interesting twist for a poor community that once was under the command of Marcinho VP, one of the most wanted criminals in Rio during the 1990’s.

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125 Chico Alves e Liana Melo, Isto é Entrevista: Entre o Asfalto e o Morro (This is it Interview: Between the Asphalt the Hill) with Katia Lund, a film director who worked with Spike Lee and Michael Jackson in 1996. She also is co-director of the Brazilian film “City of God”.
Curiously, it was during those dangerous years that two women, Edméia Williams and Helena Souza, took the first steps to act upon a dream that had been flourishing in their hearts for a while. They dreamed to form a kids’ singing group just for the children of Dona Marta. The year was 1990, and the two women started reaching out to the kids who were running around close to their affluent church in Botafogo, a southern neighbourhood linked with Dona Marta’s hill.

After some time and due to personal circumstances, Mrs. Souza left the ministry in the hands of Mrs. Williams who persevered with passion. With faith in her heart, a guitar in her hands, a refreshing jug of passion fruit juice and some homemade sandwiches Mrs. Williams continued her work reaching those kids. They met in a public park in front of the shantytown community. It was there that for months Edméia Williams talked with them about life and God, played guitar and taught them songs. She worked believing that God somehow would open an opportunity for her to connect with those kids in a deeper way. An opportunity that somehow could foster a new reality, at least for some of the children of Dona Marta.

One day, one of the kids named Rodrigo did not come. Mrs. Edméia asked his siblings what had happened. She was informed that Rodrigo was very sick. So, she said to them: ‘can we go up there to see him?’ ‘Would you come’, they replied. ‘Of course’, she affirmed. Mrs. Williams walked up the hill, saw Rodrigo, met his family and saw their world. In an interview I had with Mrs. Williams in 2010 in Toronto, Canada, she said: “I never looked back, I just understood that God had just opened a door between us.” And then it was there, she said, “in the slum, that I started to meet the kids with the same intent. But something new happened, I got the attention and made a significant connection with many of their mothers. We started to talk about life and in many occasions I had the opportunity to offer a prayer. After a while, we started a prayer meeting.”

Edméia Williams is a curiously passionate person. Born in Santarém, in the Northern state of Pará, Brazil, she moved as a child with her family to Salvador, the capital city of Bahia where she grew up. Her educational background includes pedagogy,

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129 Ibid.
130 Ibid.
131 Ibid.
philosophy and music. She also studied leadership in the Haggai Institute in the Republic of Singapore and Mission at the Selly Oak College in Birmingham, England. Mrs. Williams is also a woman who experienced tragedy in her life. In 1990, while studying at the Haggai Institute in Singapore, her husband passed away in Brazil; two years later another loss, her beloved daughter died suddenly leaving Mrs. Williams broken hearted. Although in the midst of her tragedy, she persevered and discovered that the cruel reality involving those kids could not improve just with words wrapped in melody. What was necessary was a transformational engagement that could break the trap of violence and bring hope as a tangible experience. There are many elements involving the reality of those kids, economical and structural abandonment, social exclusion and stigma, poverty and exposure to violence from the trafficking and also from the police. Mrs. Williams also knew and observed that many mothers in the slums are single-mothers and the sole providers of their family. It is not uncommon to find kids with fathers in jail, with fathers lost to the drug-trafficking war against other gangs or the police. Also, as part of the life in the slum, mothers have to go down the hill to work or find work. Sometimes the so-called “creches”, childcare centres, provide support to the child until the age of five. After that many children face the challenge of being left alone for most of the day while mom is at work. For kids left alone for most of the day, exposure to all sorts of things in the slum was just a consequence.

This situation became an opportunity she felt God calling her to address. She raised money and bought a shack in the slum and started offering help to mothers and their children during the working hours. At the beginning it was simple but significative; a meal, time for singing, time for stories, dance, and help with school homework. The result was astonishing, the initiative became a ministry that flourished. Today, after 21 years, the House of Mary and Martha has an average of 190 kids, 8 full time workers paid by the ministry; they have never lost a kid to prostitution or to the gangs. Today there are music lessons, English as a second language, theater lessons, three meals a day and a place for Christian worship.

The reality of the slum changed significantly since the 1980’s. In 2004, the Slum of Dona Marta was taken off the list of one of the most dangerous places of Rio de Janeiro. In 2008 it was declared a model community in terms of peace and social drive in order to bring into reality a better quality of life for its residents. In 2009, a UPP was
established in Dona Marta. The ‘hill’, as many poor slum communities are known in Brazil, became a vitrine for the government propaganda; the UPP is a demonstration of Rio’s governmental authority in the slum. This is why illustrious figures are flocking to the community for a tour. Indeed, Dona Marta’s hill has come a long way since the days of Marcinho VP.

This brief social description is not intended to be an exhaustible account of Dona Marta, nor it is my intent to describe the ministry of Mrs. Willams extensively. The goal is to provide a background glimpse of an initiative that I believe helped to foster a new relational reality for Dona Marta’s community. Also, I am not claiming that because of Mrs. Willams’ work everything got exponentially better at Dona Marta; the slum still exists and most of its problems persist in terms of poverty, but for certain as part of many initiatives towards that community, the House of Mary and Martha has indeed contributed to demonstrate that a new relational exercise is possible and it can promote positive transformations. Notably, this is achieved with dialogues and actions that promote peace and service as part of a new relational dimension that does not rely on the power of guns.

Mrs. Willams’ missional initiative towards those kids fostered an experience in which a new relational interpretation was visualized. Generally, she says: “What we find in the slums is not simply a need for food, for clothing, or shelter. The misery is bigger! It is the poverty of spirit and the sickness of the soul.”

In this sickness and poverty, many kids also face the deadly influence of drug dealers. They prey upon children who are to their own devices. The grooming process would combine the fear of being alone, the craving for role models and the powerful image of someone with money. It is the deadly grasp of predators, and for kids looking for companionship, security and affirmation it proved effective and lethal. It is almost a natural path for many kids living in these circumstances. Consequently a cycle of violence and degradation is perpetuated under the shadows of the slum. For many, the result is a short and violent existence. A cursed road almost impossible to return from.

By the age of eight or nine, says Williams: “These kids are already doing small favours for the gangs, working as spying eyes to alert others of the presence of strangers in the area, especially the police, and are already stealing things. They become

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uncontrollable and their mothers keep quiet for the sake of safety, hers and her children. They do not go to school anymore. When the embrace of a gang takes hold, life becomes deeply linked with the reality of violence, danger, loss, and social stigma. This is the reality of many living in Brazilian slums where traffickers have influence and power. 

As a Christian initiative, this move towards the children became a positive social alternative that flourished in the community. It offered a place of protection and demonstrated a service that genuinely cares and produces new dreams. “After 21 years, violence dropped to a point where the locals now say that drug dealers do not grow in this area anymore; criminals were coming from other “favelas”. But since 2009, even that is not happening anymore.” Without any doubt, a positive relational perspective was taking hold within the fabrics of the cultural and social reality of Dona Marta’s hill.

I believe that because of her missional approach, Mrs. Williams became a witness of hope that helped foster a new relational model for many in the community. The initiative to minister to the children and their mothers proved essential to model new dreams. It offered a service and a relational engagement with a different kind of desire towards the other; not the violent hug of the status quo perpetuating death, but a welcoming expression of care, freedom and well being in midst of misery. The significance of Jesus Christ as God’s crucified Son, in order to promote and proclaim a new future was fundamental in this process.

The welcoming and celebrative initiative of Maria and Marta’s House resonated through and towards the community. Constructively, in the name of Jesus it confronted the evils of exclusion peacefully whilst powerfully, and demonstrates hope as part of a relational action that upholds human dignity and God’s love to the human being. Celebration was a crucial part in the welcoming process because it was offered as an invitation to joy. Nouwen says that: “Celebration belongs to God’s kingdom. God not only offers forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing, but wants to lift up these gifts as a source of joy for all who witness them.”

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133 Ibid.
135 Ibid.
This missional initiative demonstrated as “ekklesia” in action demonstrated a positive overlapping social alternative in a social territory where violence abounded and marginalization was, and still is, the crude reality of many Brazilian slums. As promoters of peace the goal was to participate in the social life of the community by engaging in acts that promote reconciliation and human dignity.

Consequently, this missional initiative gave rise to what I would affirm as a missional embracive perspective among many in the community. A new relational reality that acts in hope to transform a context of social violence, family disruption, and economic doom. This new perspective is key to foster a visualization of the implications of an embracive perspective between the other and I. Thus, I believe that embrace as a relational model, cannot be disconnected from our missionary journey. Embrace is not the mission but it becomes a resonance of this missional endeavour in which we are called to co-participate with God in His redeeming project of the world. Steuernagel for instance affirms:

“The main point is to affirm that in our journey we need to listen, especially to those who are crying, who are suffering, and who are lonely. We must respond to their cry an for to those places where God is already present. Places of the orphan, the widow, and stranger, in the prophetic language of the Old Testament, or the abused children, the single mothers, and the refugees. In the language of today. In such places the mission of the church needs to identify an embrace the path of liberation. In this path the powers of injustice are confronted and people walk in the experience of liberation, which is simultaneously an experience of God’s guidance and providence.” 137

“Hostilities are only overcome by the power of grace 138 says Mrs. Willams, and if our goal is to embrace, after the divine model, we will inevitably face realities of hostility in order to promote peace and renewed relationships. This is essential as we engage in an embracive encounter. Embrace, as a missional instance, makes its way into the lives of people as they become aware, challenged and empowered by the Spirit to relate to others through a new paradigm. This is why the reality of Jesus, as the Crucified Son, is foundational in our hope and in our actions towards the other; embrace as a missional

experience appears not only as a work of love but also as a declaration of God’s new future.

In order to reach in hope and act to reconcile, Mrs. Williams begun to be present and interact with the community in moments of pain and death. The reality is, when a drug-dealer is killed by the police, or by an enemy, or when someone is killed in the war that rages in and towards the community, it is not common to have someone from the outside participating in funerals or helping residents in their moment of grieving when feelings of revenge are burning in the heart. So, she said, “I begun to make funerals”. It was in those occasions I would ask the family permission to pray. I saw an open door in those moments. Brazilian’s do not refuse a prayer, specially in the “favelas”. In my prayer, I would ask God to relive the pain, to provide justice, to help us forgive our wrongdoers as well as to be forgiven because of our wrongdoings; my prayer was and is a combination of proclamation of God’s word, exhortation to make us visualize our own self, and a description of a new relational perspective and social possibility. All of this visualizing the reality of the Crucified.139

As a witness to grace in this sense, this is a mission that confronts barriers of exclusion in the name of a gracious God who knows no boundaries; the result is that people get together to talk about hope and the necessity to relate to each other with a new conscience. Children are taught and learn the importance of respect, dignity and self love; consequently, they learn to relate to each other in the same way. Personal conflicts and old rivalries are taken in the light of the reality of Jesus Christ. Perhaps this is why the presence of Christian communities have flourished in Dona Marta’s hill. In order to become a relational reality in places of social exclusion and violence, embrace as a relational model must engage the social fabric and the way people relate to each other in order to break watermarks of a violent existence engrained in a worldview. Embrace, as a relational model, must demonstrate our courage to confront evil by creatively celebrating God’s transformative welcoming that remolds old habits and breaks walls of hostile exclusion. In a social environment where violence and poverty defines the personhood, it seems that the justified answer is revenge as retribution for the ills and the hopelessness that surrounds the individual.

139 Ibid.
This is why I assert that for the reality of many Brazilians today, embrace cannot be disconnected from a missional action towards the other. The challenge to embrace is intrinsically linked to the the reality of following the footsteps of the Crucified. Additionally, even if embrace does not define what church mission means, I believe that it demonstrates a missional standing between the other and I. Volf tells us:

“This is what Jesus christ asks Christians to do. Assured of God’s justice and undergirded by God’s presence, they are to break the cycle of violence by refusing to be caught in the automatism of revenge. It cannot be denied that the prospects are good that that by trying to love their enemies they may end up hanging on a cross. Yet often enough, the costly acts of nonretaliation become a seed from which the fragile fruit of Pentecostal peace grows a peace between people from different cultural spaces gathered in one place who understand each other’s language and share in each other’s goods.”140

Finally, I conclude my argument affirming that when God’s people act in embrace in the name of the Lord who was at the centre of the cross, they express an unshakable assurance in God’s redeeming love exemplified in the reality of Christ. If embrace has a model, and this model is the embrace of God, then it must become incarnational in our midst. The result? In the slum of Dona Marta for instance, it started to model a new conscience for children. An understanding that a new relational instance towards the other is possible when we visualize and are immersed in the embrace of God. They learned that Christ did not forget them, in Jesus they are being challenged to relate to others in peace, grace and respect. It is in this foundation that they, as well as us, are challenged to forgive, to strive for justice, foster peace and hope for a better future.

Thus, I am convinced that the experience of embrace modeled after God’s embrace in Christ expresses outwardly a fundamental truth: That our inner assurance in God’s love toward the sinful and rebellious humanity is the reason why we strive to walk in a new instance towards the other. This is because once touched by God’s embrace, the restless heart has not only a message of welcome and peace, but also reason to embrace in a world where constant change, violence and despair are still abounding.

CONCLUSION

The idea of embrace as a welcoming and transformational model is a real challenge in our world. In our ever changing world, to engage the other, to promote justice, and to break walls of exclusion are real challenges to our faith. Furthermore as we have seen, the reality of Christ, as God’s crucified Son, has a profound significance not only as the paradigm of our faith but also as the Redeemer of all things. I believe that in Christ our desire for answers could become transformational actions that positively influence distressful realities we experience in life.

Also, as we have observed, most solutions appear as part of a work of respect and love intentionally exercised among us. In a violent context such as the slum of Dona Marta this work of love cannot be sustained if its foundation lies in an exclusive confidence in the human capacity to promote it. This is the reason we demonstrated that such work of love must be grounded in the reality of Jesus Christ. A work that can be translated in actions that reach out in love through faith. The reality of Jesus Christ, as the Crucified Son of God, is crucial for the experience of embrace as a missional reality in our midst. Our hostility must be overcome by the reality of Grace. Volf reminds us that:

“There is a wisdom about the nature of our world in the simple credo of the early church “that Christ died for our sins” (I Corinthians 15:3). At the core of of Christian faith lies the claim that God entered history and died on the cross in the person of Jesus Christ for an unjust and deceitful world. In taking upon himself the sin of the world, God told the truth about the deceitful world and enthroned justice in an unjust world. When God was made sin in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:21), the world of deceit and injustice was set aright. Sin were atoned for, The cry of the innocent blood was attended to. Since the new world has become reality in the crucified and resurrected Christ (e Corinthians 5:17) it is possible to live in a new world in the midst of the old in an act of gratuitous forgiveness without giving up the struggle for truth and justice. Once can embrace perpetrators in forgiveness because God has embraced them through atonement."

What we learn in light of this wisdom is that the presence and significance of Christ as God’s sacrifice towards humanity goes beyond the concept that the Lamb was presented to break apart a sacrificial view of the world, as James G. Williams points in his

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141 Miroslav Volf, Exclusion and Embrace, 295.
book, *The Bible, Violence, and the Sacred*.142 “I believe, instead, that the biblical text narrate how God has necessarily used the sacrificial mechanisms to remake the world into a place in which the need to sacrifice others could be eschewed a new world of self-giving grace, a world of embrace.”143, affirms Volf.

Perhaps our biggest challenge is to believe and act upon the fact that the cross of Christ teaches and points out that the “...only alternative to violence is a self-giving love, willingness to absorb violence in order to embrace the other in the knowledge that truth and justice have been, and will be upheld by God.”144

In a world where injustice, economical inequality and political corruption are intertwined with the reality of violence, we must be aware, as Volf states: “That the road of nonviolence in the world of violence often leads to suffering.”145 Often to dislodge a reality of violence, a high price is paid. Consequently, to embrace an enemy requires courage and commitment. In the struggle against violence, or realities of violence, the cross of Christ does not imply that we forget reason and discourse as weapons against violence. But, in its power and significance, the cross suggests that “...the responsibility of reason” can replace neither the “consciousness of sin” (Apel 1988, 17f.) nor the willingness to embrace the sinful other. Instead, reason and discourse themselves need to be redeemed to the extent that they are implicated in the agonistic and sinful relations of power. Only those who are willing to embrace the deceitful and unjust as Christ has done on the cross, will be able to employ reason and discourse as instruments of peace rather than violence.”146

Embrace as a reality, as a model to relate to others, appears as a challenge for Christian thinking and most of all for Christian action. Perhaps, the difficulty to translate the concept into a living act, spurs from the complexities of our own unwillingness to embrace. It seems that when deeply offended, hurt, violated or put in a situation of despair it is easier to abide in the desire to revenge. It is almost justifiable for our own sense of justice and fairness. This is why it is fundamental to have a self whose centre is redefined in Christ.

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142 Ibid., 295. Volf, quotes. Wilhams in this argument about sacrificial mechanisms and self-giving grace.
143 Ibid., 295.
144 Ibid., 295.
145 Ibid., 295.
146 Ibid., 295.
Consequently, it is my firm belief that when God’s people affirm that God’s embrace in Christ models the embrace we offer others, it demonstrates God’s work of love present in their lives, and a missional commitment that challenges them to act accordingly towards the other in hope and love. As a transformative reality, it stands in accordance with God’s embracive welcome into a communion whose road is paved with peace, grace, and with the reality of a cross that demonstrates a new truth between God and us: Welcoming.

As a model for renewed relational engagements, embrace can be truly transformational when we realize how essential is the presence of the Spirit in fostering a new personality that acts embracively. The Holy Spirit, as we have demonstrated, works in us in order to create an embracive personality. At the same time, the Spirit of God works in order to nurture an ambiance where God’s people are challenged to experience and promote embrace as a way to relate to others by faith and obedience. The Holy Spirit is this agent that through his power “...Christ is attested effectively, creating in man response and obedience.”147 In obedience, we are stimulated to foster an embracive ambiance within God’s household as well as towards others in an external expression of this missional embrace.

Therefore as a conclusive word, embrace, as a model for relational encounters in places where violence is part of the landscape, is a significant shift in thinking and action. This being because in social contexts where the idea of an embrace is the deadly hug of figures of power that prey upon the less fortunate, like the slum of Dona Marta, embrace as a work of love redefines the meaning of human relations in which respect and dignity are cherished. A welcoming communion exercised and experienced as a work of love and as a missional force towards the other that resonates our hope for a new relational reality for humanity in the name of Jesus Christ, the paradigm of God’s embrace towards a sinful humanity.

147 Barth., C.D., IV/2, 638.
Primary Sources:


Secondary Resources:


Murphy, N. *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism: How Modern and Postmodern Philosophy Set the Theological Agenda.* Valley Forge: Trinity, 1996.


