The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was an organism created by the transitional government (after the fall of President Alberto Fujimori, 2000-2001) for the purpose of examining the process of violence which the country lived through between 1980 and 2000 in the context of the fight against terrorism. The Commission also includes in its study the effects and consequences of the violence. The TRC’s mandate included the task of assigning political responsibility to those who were negligent in fulfilling their public functions in the process of pacification and even pointing out cases of human rights violations which could be subject to a judicial and criminal process. The TRC was requested to present an Integral Plan of Reparations and to propose institutional reforms which would contribute to a project for national reconciliation. The TRC made its Final Report public at the end of August, 2003. The document provoked an intense and bitter debate in many public forums and among political leaders. In large measure the debate came down to the question of whether it was pertinent or convenient to remember the violence that wrecked havoc in Peru’s recent history.

This essay will examine the participation of Catholics in this debate, or rather, the reference to Catholicism to justify the arguments presented in the debate over the public recuperation of the country’s memory and the ethical and political ramifications involved in the concept of reconciliation. Since this debate is still ongoing, our approach will be rather exploratory. Recourse will be made to the conceptual tools which contemporary political philosophy (especially liberalism, neo-hegelian thought and hermeneutics) and some reflections on the suffering of the innocent (in particular, Johann Baptist Metz and Gustavo Gutiérrez). As our aim is to analyze a public debate, and not merely academic discussions, our work will consist partially in unveiling the philosophical and theological categories implicit in the different positions in dispute.

Our first section will be devoted to the theme of critical remembering. We will examine the ties between the project of the public recuperation of collective memory and the idea of transitional justice. Following Ricoeur and Todorov, we will describe the exercise of remembering as a selective process, which consists in discerning what is worthy of remembering and those experiences which deserve to be forgotten. The opposite of remembering is not forgetting, rather controlling memory and the construction of an “official history,” designed to serve the interests and desires of an elite or a power group. This is a “history” without victims or crimes, and without situations of oppression. The work of the different truth commissions in the world have all aimed to salvage the testimony of the victims and contrast their testimony with that of other actors, and incorporate critically these perspectives into a wider history which in turn will call for taking measures to guarantee that that history not be repeated. For this to happen the recuperation of memory must be public.
In the context of the writing and publication of the Final Report of the TRC the press became the center of a debate over the moral and political relevance of remembering the past which involved quite a few reflections based on Catholic thought, or at times what was presumed to be Catholic thought. Progressives like Gustavo Gutiérrez had recourse to the Gospel and its prophetic tradition to point out the necessity to uncover the truth. The memory of the cross—and the suffering of the innocent—invites us to act in favor of the victims. But on the other hand, conservatives like Rafael Rey (a minister of State) and the author Federico Prieto Celi have argued that remembering the past would only “reopen wounds.” Consider the following declaration of Federico Prieto Celi:

“It would have been better if Peru had not suffered the drama of terrorism in those years, but once it happened, it would have been better if nobody were to confront the actors beyond a questioning of the absolute fulfillment of police and judicial functions. Every important event in national history calls for a follow-up and for it to be written down. The protagonists, the facts, the historical analysis are all important. The historians should write down all things which are important in the life of a society and the church. A conspiratorial silence is not acceptable if it attempts to hide objective truth. But given the sorrow of the people, the truth should be spoken at the right time, because it is also acceptable to accompany the truth by practicing silence in respect for those who suffer, a silence done in charity and motivated by the search for clarity. But we should not condone the exhibitionism of the manipulators. As the poet Pablo Neruda said: “I like it when you are silent because it’s as though you are absent/ distant and painful as though you had died./ A word then and a smile will be sufficient.” This is a silence which has a special meaning for a Christian because it is the natural atmosphere of divine contemplation which with time will purify the hearts of men.”

We will argue that these calls for silence are not compatible with Christianity. Silence in the face of one who suffers is at the very opposite pole of the Gospel which teaches us with clarity that we will not be judged by the “doctrinal purity” of our mind, rather by the love with which we give ourselves over to others: visiting the sick, the prisoners, feeding the hungry, etc. In other words, we will be judged by our actions (Matt. 25). The Catholic Church recognizes the importance of remembering suffering on many occasions and in many documents, such as the intense exhortation of John Paul II in Reconcilatio et paenitentia, and in the study carried out by the International Theological Commission, memoria y reconciliación (Memory and Reconciliation). In each Mass the suffering of an innocent victim is remembered and relived. In this sense, the theme of remembering suffering is very present in different ways in Christianity, in its spirituality and ethics. To take away that theme is to compromise the very essence of Christianity.

The German theologian, Johann Baptist Metz, holds that the Judaic-Christian tradition contributes a new way of reading history to critical thought. Whereas European thought generally gives a privileged place to the victors and their heroic deeds (Carlyle) and points

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1 Federico Prieto Celi, El trigo y la cizaña (Lima, S/ editorial, 2007), p. 81. The italics are mine.
to political conflicts (Hegel) or economic crises (Marx) to explain the meaning of history, the Judaic-Christian tradition reserves a special place for the perspective of the “insignificant”: the poor, the defeated, the victim. Metz describes this perspective as *anti-historical*. It should be evident that this line of thought converges with that of the truth commissions which carry out their task based upon the premise that the public recuperation of memory presupposes in the first place (although not exclusively) hearing the stories of the victims.

In the second section or chapter we will examine the debate over the idea of reconciliation as part of the future horizon of Peru. To begin with, defining reconciliation is a problem. When President Alejandro Toledo (2001-2005) added the phrase “and Reconciliation” to the Truth Commission (2001) many Catholic conservatives who belong to Peru’s political class and the church’s hierarchy approved the measure in the belief that the category “reconciliation” could adequately satisfy the demands of truth and justice by including the possibility of forgetting the past and offering a “pardon” to those members of the army or police who committed crimes. Nevertheless, the TRC soon clarified that confusion when it described reconciliation as a reconstruction of the ties between society and the State and within the communities affected by the violence. In this sense, reconciliation presupposed remembering what happened and bringing about justice as basic conditions. For the Commission and others reconciliation implies a long process which involves all the citizens and social institutions.

We will examine the arguments which Catholic conservatives and progressives have used with respect to the concept of reconciliation. We will have recourse to articles and works by Augusto Castro (a philosopher at the Catholic University of Peru), Hubert Lanssiers (a Sacred Heart priest who was named by the government to examine the cases of prisoners accused of being terrorists), members of the Bartolomé de las Casas Institute (founded by Father Gustavo Gutiérrez), as well as the works of Prieto Celi (a conservative) and Rafael Rey (a prominent critic of the TRC). We hope to show that the idea of social reconciliation which underlies the idea of transitional justice is very close to the Christian concept of reconciliation. The Catholic doctrine of reconciliation holds that memory and justice constitute fundamental elements in the process of restoring human ties and union with God: *examination of conscience, sorrow for sins committed, a firm resolve to make amendments, to make restitution, a sincere confession and doing penance* are the steps to follow. The conservatives argue that reconciliation is a spiritual experience that involves the believer and God. However, we will argue that for Christians there is no such thing as a spiritual reconciliation which turns its back on the call to practice justice and build community, especially if it means including those who suffer exclusion or who have been victims of violence. The construction of the “Kingdom of God” implies a radical commitment to foster human reconciliation.