

Internacional Forum on interfaith and transcultural peacebuilding
Daring reconciliation?!
September 19-20, 2024

**How is Reconciliation Possible after the Trauma of Apartheid?
or may I reframe it as: CAN WOUNDED HUMANITY HEAL?
Father Michael Lapsley ORIGINAL**

Dear Friends

May I begin by thanking Mission 21 for the privilege of speaking to you today. Congratulations to Mission 21 for all the beautiful work you do to make God's world gentler, kinder and more just. I also wish to appreciate the contribution of each of you here today, individually and as organisations and churches. I bring you greetings from the Institute for healing of memories in South Africa and our global network.

It is also relevant to say that I am what is known as The Canon for Healing and Reconciliation at St Georges Cathedral in Cape Town and All Saints Cathedral in Edmonton in Canada. As an Institute, we seek to contribute to the healing journey of individuals, communities and nations. We like to frame all our work in the relationship between [healing and justice](#). By justice, I mean restorative and transformative justice. We are seized with the question of [how do we heal the wounds of history?](#)

I have been asked to speak on How is Reconciliation Possible after the Trauma of Apartheid? or may I reframe it as: [Can Wounded Humanity Heal?](#)

I have resisted the temptation to say, "It is not possible!" and to sit down. I cannot help wondering how many of you are conversant with the South African story. Among those of you who are politically conscious and over 50, the chances are that the struggle against apartheid was part of your own awakening and even part of your own identity. For those of you who are younger, some of what I say maybe more like listening to a foreign language.

Legalised and constitutionalised apartheid begins in South Africa in 1948 but the roots of it stretch back through the centuries including colonialism and slavery. Hundreds of laws were passed, oppressing and dispossessing people of colour in their millions. African people fought brave wars of resistance but were subjugated by superior fire power. The modern map of South Africa dates to the Act of Union in 1910 which explicitly excluded the African majority from the right to vote. In 1912 the African National Congress was formed which eventually became the first legitimate and democratically elected government in 1994. The ANC spent nearly fifty years struggling non-violently against an increasingly oppressive and violent government. After the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960, when 69 unarmed protestors were shot dead, the ANC formed a military wing and began an armed struggle as did the breakaway Pan Africanist Congress of Azania.

I arrived in South Africa in 1973. I often say that the day I arrived in South Africa I stopped being a human being and became a white man. For me joining the liberation struggle was about seeking to recover my own humanity in solidarity with black people fighting for their basic human rights. Apartheid was never simply a justice issue or a human rights issue but was also a faith issue. The apartheid state claimed to be Christian, even writing in the last white constitution, "guided by God from generation to generation".

The truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ was at stake in South Africa.

Increasingly people of faith and people of good will across the globe realized that that was true and that it was time for a resounding blow against racism.

Whilst apartheid was still at its height there were some faith organisations calling for national reconciliation but were silent about the crime of apartheid. They were happy to sing "black and white together" while leaving the evil system intact. It was a kind of cheap or fake reconciliation. It did not break down the dividing wall of partition that separated us that the Letter to the Ephesians speaks about in Chapter 2 verses 14 to 16.

One of the lenses to view South Africa's history was the attempt to [divide and rule](#). The other lense was [the struggle to unite](#) to achieve national liberation.

I would like to suggest that for much of the 20th Century, the ANC played a major reconciling role bringing together the oppressed people and white democrats.

Similarly, the worldwide anti-apartheid movement sought to unite humanity to defeat apartheid. Voting day on April 27, 1994, was the first time in South Africa's history that we had done something together as one nation.

How would we heal the wounds of history? How would we deal with the trauma of apartheid with its roots stretching back through the centuries?

Those who were the beneficiaries of apartheid were inclined to say "let's just forgive and forget and move on and only focus on the future".

Some of us felt that actually we needed "to remember and to heal".

Yes, it was of fundamental importance to deal with the social political and economic nature of society [to build a new nation but at the same time we needed to attend to the psychological emotional and spiritual wounds](#) caused by our past.

Taking the cue from Latin America, especially Chile and Argentina, we opted for [a Truth and Reconciliation Commission as a key mechanism](#) to "Promote National Unity and Reconciliation" as the 1995 Act was called.

Many books and doctoral theses have been written about our TRC. It would be naive to think that the wounds of 300 years could heal in 5 years. Perhaps the greatest contribution of the TRC was the degree to which we put on the table what we had done to each other, in the same generation. Many countries, with varying success have sought to follow our example to navigate away from an oppressive characterised by crimes against humanity.

During our TRC, 23000 people came forward to tell their story. More than 18000 sought amnesties of whom about 10% gained it.

For some, having their stories, listened to, believed and acknowledged as having been wronged brought relief and some healing.

Some people became reconciled with themselves.

It sounds clichéish, but it is probably fair to say that the TRC did much more [to establish truth](#) rather than to bring about reconciliation. However, the TRC did lay a foundation of truth to provide the foundation of the long journey of reconciliation.

The TRC report recommended that 300 cases of perpetrators who did not ask for amnesty or who were refused amnesty should be prosecuted. Till today that has not happened. There have long been allegations of political interference. This failure has led to frustration and bitterness in the families of victims of apartheid crimes.

3 months after Nelson Mandela was released from prison, I received a letter bomb hidden inside the pages of two religious magazines. The blast left me with no hands and one eye and shattered eardrums among other injuries. Nevertheless, I felt God was with me.

For the previous 14 years, I had lived in Lesotho and Zimbabwe but travelled the world. My mission was seeking to mobilise faith communities worldwide to oppose apartheid and support individuals.

When I was bombed there was an avalanche of [support from across the world](#), from Christians, Moslems, Jews, Hindus and Buddhists, from atheists and communists. My story was [acknowledged, revered, recognised, and given a moral content](#). The [prayers and love](#) were what enabled me to make my bombing redemptive, to bring life out of death, good out of evil.

I travelled [a journey from being a victim, to being a survivor, to being a victor](#), taking back agency, to help create the world of my dreams. Even more importantly to seek to participate in God's dream.

When I returned to South Africa after 16 years away, I discovered a damaged nation, damaged in our humanity, damaged by what we had done, by what had been done to us and what we failed to do... and all of us [with a story to tell](#).

Unlike me, for millions of South Africans, there stories had not been acknowledged, revered and recognised in the ways mine had been.

With other friends this led me to develop an experiential process called "[The Healing of Memories](#)". In 1998 the Institute for Healing of Memories was born but its pregnancy had been longer than an elephant. Healing of memories is about the journey of acknowledging and beginning to let go of the things in the past which can destroy us and taking from the past that which is lifegiving. It is a [process of detoxification](#).

There is a dimension of healing that can only take place in [a collective process](#). When I tell my story within a small group of 5, 6 or 7 people, where I am listened to, believed and not judged and when I listen to the others' stories, we become the healers of one another.

We have discovered that pain is transcendent. When "the other" is present there can also be reconciliation. The "[other](#)" begins to disappear and there is only "[us](#)".

One of the areas we work in today is with military veterans including those who were on opposite sides, shooting each other. They may not agree ideologically, but they are all South Africans who were damaged by war.

In its final report, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission recommended the work of healing of memories as an example of work continuing reconciling processes beyond the life of the Commission itself.

While a very small organisation, today, healing of memories processes are taking place in 18 African countries, in North America particularly the US and Canada, in Europe, especially Luxembourg and Germany and in Asia specifically Myanmar and Sri Lanka.

When we speak of reconciliation, we need to see it [holistically](#) with regard to the political, social and economic as well as the emotional psychological and spiritual.

Long term reconciliation is not possible without [historic grievances](#) being addressed.

Constitutionalised racism had become an affront to the human family. Apartheid was always about [political](#) oppression and [economic](#) exploitation. In 1994 we had slayed one monster and left the other intact.

All adults have the vote in South Africa, but we are the most unequal society on earth. That does not spell reconciliation. I live in Cape Town, one of the most beautiful cities in the world where obscene wealth is side by side with obscene poverty.

In a world of growing [inequality](#), some would say that South Africa is a microcosm of the world.

As a response to our experience of multidimensional oppression, we wrote and adopted an aspirational constitution. Discrimination was outlawed in the constitution not just on racial lines, but also on the grounds of [gender, religion, disability and sexual orientation](#). We were the first country in the world to put in the constitution the prohibition of discrimination based on sexual orientation. This was even more noteworthy considering the pervasiveness of homophobia across the continent, albeit a colonial import fanned by the religious right from the US.

Despite the constitution and the law, gender-based violence is of gargantuan proportions in South Africa. I would suggest that patriarchy reflects the oldest wound in the human family. True reconciliation between women and men and people of all gender expressions based on real equality will bring liberation to all people.

So, I am suggesting that our conversation about and commitment to reconciliation needs to extend beyond race and racism to include ethnicity, class, religion, gender, sexual orientation and disability.

30 years into democracy it is increasingly apparent that writing the constitution was the easy part. [Implementation is another story.](#)

There is a kind of reconciliation that takes place where people join together to fight injustice. While there were significant ideological differences organisations like the United Democratic Front mobilised millions of people to fight apartheid and strive for liberation. Healthy relations existed across the religions in South Africa, forged not in the seminar room but in the trenches which continues till today with the exception of the Zionist lobby.

There was remarkable unity in the worldwide anti-apartheid movement, north, south, east and west. What was noteworthy was that the peoples of the world opposed apartheid whilst western governments, multinational companies, intelligence agencies, arms manufacturers, and the State of Israel supported apartheid. Western governments were forced to change by their people. As a people deeply wounded by Apartheid, it is not surprising that we have recognised Israel as an apartheid state and appealed to the International Court of Justice to stop the genocide in Gaza and now on the West Bank.

There is a reconciliation in Israel between Palestinians and Israelis through organisations like the Parents Circle. Combatants for Peace and Jewish Voices for Peace. What is happening today with Israeli Apartheid is a rerun of what happened with South African Apartheid.

The peoples of the world have demonstrated in their millions their demand for an end to the genocide. Western governments say they want ceasefire while continuing to arm the Zionist state. Zionism in Apartheid Israel and constitutionalised racism in Apartheid South Africa were and are irreconcilable with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Some ideologies can never be reconciled.

However true reconciliation is always possible between human beings. As Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela taught and showed us, enemies can become friends. On the day Nelson Mandela became President, there was one man on the top platform whom none of us knew. It was Mandela's prison guard.

The deepest reconciliation happens when people from opposite sides join together in a common struggle for justice.

If there was ceasefire in Gaza and the West Bank tomorrow, the journey of healing and reconciliation based on truth would take generations. So, it is with South Africa....There is intergenerational trauma but the more society is transformed so the more healing and reconciliation takes place.

The Institute for healing of memories, and in my own small way, my own life, bears witness to the possibility of healing and reconciliation.

I thank you.
Father Michael Lapsley SSM
President
Healing of Memories Global Network