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My Journey of Reconciliation in South Africa— From Freedom Fighter to Healer

In April 1990 the apartheid regime sent me a letter bomb to my home in Zimbabwe. I survived with the loss of both hands and an eye. Today I'm the chaplain to a Trauma Centre for Victims of Violence and Torture in the South African city of Cape Town. We work with a range of people who have suffered as a result of political and organized violence. This includes people who were imprisoned, detained, and tortured; people who were exiled from South Africa, people who have suffered as a result of urban and rural violence. We also work with asylum seekers and political refugees from other countries in Africa.

Common to many of our clients is the search for the healing of memories. Together with all of South Africa's people, we are seeking to come to terms with the past. How do we free ourselves from what we have done and what has been done to us as well as what we have failed to do? Our ability to create a just and humane society today and tomorrow is profoundly related to our response to the apartheid years.

People in South Africa are beginning to come forward to tell their stories. So I would like to tell you my story. My own story is intertwined with the story of the South African nation.

I was born and brought up in New Zealand. During adolescence I read Fr. Trevor Huddleston's *Naught for your Comfort*. Fr Huddleston shocked the world with his chilling description of apartheid, including heart-rending accounts of forced removals. It made an indelible impression on me. I knew apartheid was evil and the opposite of the Christian Gospel. Little did I know that South Africa would eventually become home and change my life forever.

I became a member of a religious order called the Society of the Sacred Mission in Australia. I was ordained to the priesthood in 1973. In the same year, I was transferred to South Africa to become a university student and subsequently a university chaplain. In my naïvete, I had thought that South Africa would be composed of oppressed people and oppressors but that I would belong to a third category called the human community. The all-embracing system of apartheid decreed that my color would make me a member of the oppressor group.

As a Christian I believed that we are called to love God and our neighbor. But I was unable to fulfil God's command to love my neighbor as I loved myself. Apartheid prevented me from being a neighbor to any person of color. I felt that apartheid had changed me from a human being into a white man. My value and every aspect of my life was defined by my pigmentation not because I was a child of God made in God's image and likeness. It had robbed me of my humanity. Only if apartheid was completely destroyed would I be able to love my neighbor as myself and so fulfil the commandment of God.

I joined the struggle to liberate South Africa, not as a favor to people of color. I needed to recover my own humanity. I needed to fulfil the command of God. I sought to act in solidarity with the majority of South Africa's people as they sought to free themselves from the yoke of apartheid.

It was less than four years after arriving in South Africa that I was expelled from the country. It would take sixteen years before I was able to return. When I left South Africa in 1976, there were no marks on my body. At the same time, South Africa tore me apart as a human being. Was I crazy or was the society crazy? Apartheid had not damaged my body; it had severely attacked my soul. The Bible tells us not to worry about those who kill the body but rather those who kill the soul.

When I first left South Africa, I went to Lesotho, which is completely surrounded by South Africa. I continued my studies at the National University of Lesotho. They told me that I was the first white student to transfer from a South African university. There was one other white student. I found myself accepted and related to as an individual human being and not as a category. The raw wounds to my soul began to heal. Perhaps the Book of Genesis was right after all: Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness" (Gen 1:26).

In Lesotho I lived as part of the community of exiles. At the end of 1982, the South African army killed thirty of us in a midnight attack and twelve local Lesotho citizens. Some of those killed were school children. I was away from the country. I vowed that my life would be dedicated to ending apartheid and building a society where little

children can sleep without the fear of violence. My Church believed that I was one of the targets and forced me to leave Lesotho.

From 1983 to 1992, I lived in Zimbabwe. For about three years I lived with armed police guards because the Zimbabwean authorities had information that I was on a South African government hit list. As my work was pastoral and theological and not military, why was I considered to be a threat? Perhaps it was my theology and my words which were a problem. I tried in my own small way to be a voice of hope within the exiled community.

Often I was asked to speak at the funerals of our people. My message was simple. Our cause is just. God is with us. One day we will return. One day we will live in peace. One day we will build a land of sisterhood and brotherhood for all our people.

Of course, we were not the first people to live in exile. I was often reminded of the words of the prophet Jeremiah. "This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: 'Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper'" (Jer 29:4-8).

At the same time, I remembered the words of the Psalmist: "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps . . . How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget [its skill]. May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy" (Ps 137).

Over the years there were many religious voices calling for national reconciliation. Religious people wanted to be friends without slaying the monster which stopped us from becoming friends. To those of us who had joined the struggle for liberation, reconciliation had become their word. They spoke of reconciliation whilst we spoke of justice. I came to the conclusion that apartheid is an option for death carried out in the name of the gospel of life. Therefore it was an issue of faith to oppose apartheid and support the struggle for liberation. The problem was a faith problem, a theological problem. The bad faith took a political form in the denial of the vote to the majority. The solution had also to take a political form.

Finally the day of salvation began to dawn. The pressure became too great. On February 2, 1990, the announcement came. Nelson Man-

dela was to be released and negotiations would begin. We were the survivors. Soon we would return home. The De Klerk government began to talk of apartheid as a mistake, but there were no words of repentance or acknowledgement of evil.

On April 28, 1990, I opened a letter bomb hidden inside the pages of two religious magazines. It was sent from South Africa to my home in Zimbabwe. I did not lose consciousness and I did not go into shock, and the doctors did not understand why that was so. Personally, I am grateful that I can remember and that it's not a memory that haunts me either. It's a memory that I can live with. I felt the presence of God with me in that bombing, sharing in my crucifixion. In the midst of indescribable pain, I also felt that Mary the mother of Jesus who had watched her son being crucified somehow understood what it was that I was going through.

I was in darkness. All my senses were affected. I had lost both hands and one eye. Sight in one eye had gone, there was permanent damage to the other eye. No one was sure whether I would ever read again or see clearly. Having lost my hands, feel and touch had gone forever. Both ear drums were shattered and again, permanently damaged. I also lost the sense of smell temporarily. (Later they brought a very advanced specialist who explained to me that either my sense of smell would come back or it would not. I thought he was probably correct.) Taste had not gone, but no matter what drink I was given, all I could taste were the drugs that I was on.

I had no role model. I did not know a human being who had lost both hands. I had no basis of comparison to say that's how that person is living her or his life. For a little bit of the time I thought it would have been better to have died because would life be life in any meaningful sense. For the first three months after I was bombed, I was totally dependent on other human beings. There was nothing that I was able to do for myself.

While I was in hospital in Harare, I remembered a particular passage from Isaiah: "See, my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted. Just as there were many who were appalled at him—his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness—so will he sprinkle many nations, and kings will shut their mouths because of him. For what they were not told, they will see, and what they have not heard, they will understand" (Isa 52:13-15). What I also remembered was an image from Orthodoxy, the image of the Saviour on the cross with one leg shorter than the other. It is the opposite of western Christian imagery. Because in the western Christian tradition, Jesus is the perfect white male figure.

On reflection, I began to discover that disability is the norm of the human community. It is not the exception. Disability and incompleteness are the norms.

In my view, to receive a letter bomb is to become a specific focus of evil in the world. People from all over the world responded with a flood of messages assuring me of their prayers and love and support. I became a focus of all that is beautiful in the human community—the ability to be kind, generous, loving, and compassionate. This included people who are religious and those who are not. I realized that if I became filled with hatred, bitterness, self-pity, and desire for revenge, I would remain a victim for ever. It would consume me. It would eat me alive. God and people of faith and hope enabled me to make my bombing redemptive—to bring life out of death, good out of evil. I was enabled to grow in faith, in commitment to justice, in compassion.

Yes, I do grieve, and will always grieve, especially for my hands. At times I experience great frustration. It is not easy to cope with being stared at wherever you go. However, I am no longer a victim, nor even simply a survivor, I am a victor over evil, hatred, and death.

I suppose it was by being radically, physically wounded that I discovered just how important healing is. When I was in the hospital, I said to myself: For me now the struggle against apartheid is the struggle to get well, to return, to live my life as fully, as joyfully, as completely as possible. That is my victory. Today my commitment to the struggle for liberation is played out in a commitment to the process of healing the land and healing the people.

When I started working at the Trauma Centre, I felt that everything that had ever happened in my life was part of what has prepared me to do the work that I now do. I seek to work alongside others who are trying to heal their memories.

South Africa as a whole is beginning to build a new society based on justice, equality, and a respect for human rights. Our ability to create a just new society is directly related to our ability to come to terms with our past. All of us have memories of the past—memories of what we have done and what has been done to us. Happy memories and sad memories. Joyous memories and painful memories. Memories that give us strength and memories that may still be destroying us, memories that have healed and memories that have not. Memories that we tried to bury and memories which we failed to bury. We have individual memories and collective memories. In South Africa we have very divided memories.

How should we as Christian people deal with our nation's past? Now that we have a government of national unity in the driving seat

should we not just forgive and forget the past? After all, isn't forgiving and forgetting what Christianity is all about?

Within the country there was psychological and physical torture on a massive scale. The apartheid regime and all who supported it carry responsibility for the loss of millions of lives throughout the whole region of Southern Africa. Significant sections of the population were deaf and blind to what was happening and to their root causes, even when the whole world tried to tell them.

But should we not simply forgive and forget the past. Let's look first at the question of forgetting. For Christians, we need to remind ourselves that we belong to a remembering religion. Remember when you were slaves in Egypt is a constant refrain of the Old Testament, the words of Jesus, "Do this in memory of me," are said at every Eucharist.

The question is not one of forgetting but rather it is the problem of how do we heal our memories. How do we stop our memories from destroying us. Forgiveness yes—that is always the Christian calling—but no one should suggest that forgiveness is glib, cheap, or easy. What does it mean to forgive those who have not confessed, those who have not changed their lives, those who have no interest in making it up to the relatives of victims and the survivors of their crimes. If you forgive a murderer, does that mean there should be no justice.

How do we achieve reconciliation as a nation? Can we forgive each other for what we have done? There are many examples in history of nations who tried to bury rather than face the past. No nation has ever succeeded in that endeavor. If we try to ignore or bury the past, it will haunt us and may even destroy us. Perhaps the most important calling of communities of faith in South Africa today is to assist in healing the memories of the nation.

There are so many ways in which apartheid was the opposite of the Christian Gospel. Not surprisingly, the international Christian community came to the conclusion that apartheid was not only sinful but a heresy and a false doctrine. Apartheid not only divided South African society. It was built on betrayal and created hatred, war and enmity among people. Meanwhile God was in Christ reconciling us to himself. We read in 2 Corinthians: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who

had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 17-20). Again we read in Ephesians 2:15-18: "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 of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit."

At the heart of the Christian message is the sacrifice of Jesus, so that we might be saved. At the heart of the struggle in South Africa was the willingness of people to sacrifice themselves to bring freedom and dignity to all. For us the time for beginning the process of national reconciliation has come. Reconciliation is no longer their word. It is now the common task.

Many believe that the road to nation building and national reconciliation will take a very long time. The act of voting on April 27, 1994, was the first time we had ever done something together as one people, regardless of color. The elections and the inauguration of President Mandela gave a major boost to the process of building and reconciling the nation. Some would argue that only now are we beginning our history as one nation with its first morally legitimate government. The South Africa parliament has set up a commission for Truth and Reconciliation as a mechanism of coming to terms with the past whose work is now underway.

What happened in the past and its interpretation depended on whether you were an oppressor or an oppressed. Part of the role of the Commission for Truth and Reconciliation will be the opportunity for the nation to bear witness to some of the pain, agony, cost and sacrifice which brought democracy to South Africa. The commission will make an important contribution to establishing a national history that future generations of children will learn about at school. For the first time in our history, a commission set up by the state will listen with respect and reverence to the stories of the victims and these will officially be acknowledged by the nation.

The commission provides the context for three exercises. Most importantly it provides a national platform for the relatives of victims and for survivors to tell their story—and for that story, often for the first time, to be acknowledged, revered and recognized by the nation. There will be mechanism to seek reparation and to restore the

dignity of the oppressed, of those whose rights have been violated. There is also be a mechanism for perpetrators to confess their crimes and to be granted indemnity. Finally, the commission also helps us to begin to create a shared memory as a nation.

The commission for Truth and Reconciliation is not another Nuremberg. It turns its back on any desire for revenge. It represents an extraordinary act of generosity by a people who only insist that the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth must be told. The space is thereby created where the deeper processes of forgiveness, confession, repentance, reparation, and reconciliation can take place.

As South African Churches we need to welcome the Commission for Truth and Reconciliation with great humility. We too need to repent of our own complicity as well as what we failed to do to stop the evil of apartheid. Apartheid damaged all of us. The commission provides one opportunity for healing our wounds. However, the commission will hear the stories only of gross human rights violations. There are millions of people in this country who have stories to tell from the apartheid years—stories of what they did, stories of what was done, stories of what we failed to do. Every South African has a story to tell.

As Christians we have a responsibility to provide space in our communities of faith to hear the stories of the majority of our people who will not appear before the commission but have pain which no one has heard. It is important for all the relatives of victims and for all survivors to tell their story—and for that story, often for the first time, to be acknowledged, revered and recognized by the nation. This will help us to begin to create a shared memory as a nation.

The issues at stake are spiritual issues, concerned with the spiritual health of the nation. If we are filled with anger, hatred, bitterness and a desire for revenge, we will never create a just and compassionate society. If we have those feelings, they need to be worked through lest they continue to consume us. Forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation will not happen in an instant. Some say that the process will be worked out over the next hundred years. But we can assist ourselves in the process if we have the will.

Through the power of God at work in our lives we can begin to make what has happened to us redemptive—to bring the good out of the evil, the life out of the death. We cannot be healed until we acknowledge our sickness. As we recognize our woundedness and brokenness and seek healing, the South African nation begins to move from being the polecat of the world to become a light to the nations.

Why did I survive a bomb that was supposed to kill. Perhaps to be a small sign of South Africa's brokenness—yes, but much more

24 *Michael Lapsley, S.S.M.*

importantly to be a sign that love and faith and gentleness are stronger than hatred and evil and death.

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