

A SEARCH FOR TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION: HOPE FOR THE HOPELESS  
ADDRESS TO THE DIOCESE OF LOUISIANA CONVENTION  
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The Act of parliament which created South Africa's Truth and reconciliation Commission called on *"the need for understanding but not vengeance, a need for reparation but not retaliation a need for ubuntu but not for victimization."*<sup>1</sup>

1994 ushered a new era in South African history reversing policies of the past where the weak and most vulnerable citizens of this country had lived under horrendous laws. The suffering and injustices endured sparked off protests and uprisings which ultimately made the country ungovernable. The new black government realizing the frustration and anger that lingered in the new dispensation, made a conscious decision to deal with the painful history and legacy of apartheid. The conclusion was that a facility be created which would provide space and time for the people who had suffered from the atrocities of the unjust laws to tell their stories - a facility that "provides a perspective on the truth about the past..." This debate resulted in Parliament passing a Bill that created a Commission that would engage the nation on the process of finding the truth about the past and reconcile the people of South Africa in the new dispensation. This was critical for healing of the "new nation" and promoting national unity.

The process was, therefore, voluntary and open to both victims and perpetrators to come forward and share their stories -of suffering on the part of the victims and of human rights violations for the perpetrators. Full disclosure of the truth and political explanation or motive was all that was required for the granting of amnesty in order to bring closure to the past. Lies and deception of the apartheid regime were therefore exposed as some human rights violators sincerely apologized to the victims.

<sup>1</sup> Preamble of the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act No 34 of 1995

It is important to note that, unlike other investigations of past atrocities, the hearings were public and transparent. The process sought restorative justice rather than a punitive one because the objective was to correct imbalances and to restore broken relationships so that people can live in harmony and peace in the new dispensation. We should not lose sight of the fact that the Act did not encourage retaliation but reparation, thus the end results put emphasis on reconciliation.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) concluded that apartheid and racism played a similar defining role in the history of the old South Africa. Therefore, what was sought was to give an opportunity for confession, forgiveness and reconciliation for all stakeholders -victims and perpetrators. This was not easy as many people were alienated from one another, but it was worthwhile for peace and national unity. Notwithstanding, the process brought about forgiveness, healing and appreciation of one another as fellow citizens committed to the reconstruction of the country - namely a democratic and peaceful South Africa.

You may not have had horrendous experiences such as we did under the apartheid system but most of you in this State of Louisiana can tell stories that are dominated by subtle conflict between the minority and the majority people of this 'free land' - particularly the majority who have reserved for themselves the greater effect of most rights and privileges, yet claiming equal rights for all. To some degree you have had similar occurrences though not legislated as was in the apartheid state. Like us in South Africa, the minorities in this Diocese have for many years, been subjected to racism. Therefore, your struggle for basic Human Rights has not been unreasonable but fair and just for those who have felt the pinch of discrimination. Katrina exposed the US to the world regarding how certain citizens are treated differently from others based on attributes, which only those in authority know but which most of you in Louisiana can imagine.

There are lessons for you to learn from our experience that will assist you in establishing your own Truth and Reconciliation platform, should you seriously wish to commit yourselves to correcting the imbalances of the past for a just and peaceful State. If your process is to be widely acceptable, it must be inclusive and transparent.<sup>2</sup> Its objectives must be clearly understood by all stakeholders so that all concerned feel valued. And lastly, all affected must be willing to honestly tell their story as they experienced it. This is what we did in South Africa - all political parties and those outside them were involved, first in the decision making and secondly in the hearing process and management. This and the fact that it sought understanding and not vengeance earned it respect and credibility not only in South Africa but internationally. This simply means that the intended outcome must be made clear and acceptable to most people.

The focus here will, of course, be different as your definition of the past history will determine what the TRC aims to achieve. In our case, most of what we sought to uncover were violations that came out of the apartheid policies which affected people of South Africa other than 'whites' as defined by law. The 'white regime' used violence to enforce apartheid policies. In your case it may be limited to issues of under allocation of resources that have lead to poverty.

I want to suggest that you aim at enabling the affected to transcend the divisions and sufferings of their past history which impoverished certain sections of communities whilst depriving others of their Constitutional rights. This approach can only help you achieve your goal, supported by most people as it will be dealing with human experience which touches everybody who is concerned about peacemaking and unity.

Therefore, not only the Church must be involved in the process, but other institutions such as Non-governmental organizations (NGO), Community-based organizations (C60), and everybody who is resident in Louisiana because it is through the participation of these people which will ensure that the truth which comes out of the process reconciles people and rebuild relationships. And everybody who wishes, without exception, must be given the opportunity 'to tell their stories of suffering and struggles'. The government, both Federal and State, is key to the whole process.

At the end of it all, the process of your Truth and Reconciliation, must help people regain their dignity and to have identity. The causes of the current situation under consideration must be disclosed with frankness. Only such understanding will help enhance harmonious co-existence between people. Again I remind you that it is all about reparation and not retaliation of the offenders. It is for this reason that those who tell the truth and only the truth were candidly rewarded with amnesty with respect to the atrocities committed during the apartheid era.

Jesus spoke of truth as a freeing agent and I want to emphasize this by saying that the truth marks the beginning of a move towards the healing process that ultimately produces reconciliation. Of course, reconciliation is difficult to define but it is an experience of being free of anger, fear, guilt and desire for revenge. So, in brief it is a process and a goal that is necessary for peace and unity. It is not something we choose but an obligation entrusted to the followers of the Way by "God who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of the reconciliation...", (2 Cor 5:18 ff). Therefore, reconciliation is not an optional extra but a ministry that should be practiced by each believer in Christ. In this case we, the believers are called to take the rest of the population with us in the quest for reconciled living. That way we practice yet another injunction of our Lord - to be the salt and light of our society (Mtt 5:13-15).

The most important part of the Truth and Reconciliation process is the telling of the individual and institutional stories in truth, particularly by those who have done wrong. Every person, victim and perpetrator, willing to tell his or her truth must be given the opportunity to do so voluntarily. Truth stories must be geared towards revealing the painful experience of the community where deprivation and suffering existed or still exists. However the stories should not be used for revenge at some stage during or after the process of the hearings but as a means of healing the wounds of the past. For the rest of the people this must be an opportunity to learn from the errors of the past in order to build a better future for generations to come without repeating past mistakes.

In order for the stories to heal and restore the dignity of the victims it is crucial that they are verifiable, either by the victim or the community where the incident may have taken place. This is critical for future relationships. There is no doubt that this experience can arouse further hurt and anger. As a precaution counselling facilities must be in place to deal with accompanying trauma. Otherwise the forgiveness and reconciliation can be very superficial. It is also important that those who give evidence are protected before, during and after the hearings so that those who volunteered information feel secured.<sup>1</sup>

The process also requires that there be readiness to deal with trauma of the victims, perpetrators, family members, community and to some extent the members of the Commission. And therefore the involvement of counseling services is crucial throughout the hearings.

Those that have contributed to the suffering of others and or benefited from an unjust system must be willing to contribute towards the rebuilding and reconstruction of the future society. For example, in the case of South Africa, there are some who were involved in gross human rights violations on

behalf of the state, and who, having confessed, went to live and worked amongst the people whose community they destroyed. This was a very assuring move for the communities that had suffered from the racially managed system of segregation and oppression.

In conclusion, I wish to say that the TRC process in South Africa was a better option for honest forgiveness and peaceful coexistence. We could have elected to grant general amnesty or follow the route of trials and prosecutions but the TRC was, if you like, a better compromise for transition from the old order to the new democratic South Africa. It has chartered a new path to a reconciled nation.

The important lesson in all this for me, is that the sinned against must be willing to embrace the rewards of grace by readiness to forgive those who sinned against them when they confess in truth and sincerity. If you have been the cause and source of the pain of injustice that others have experienced, you must be ready to confess your sinfulness, and risk not being forgiven. [You must be prepared to face the full consequences of your actions, and gain the undeserved reward of grace and peace in reconciled forgiveness]. I hope what I have said makes sense to you and that it will help you in your search for forgiveness and reconciliation. I thank you.

21,000 people of all ages groups came before the Commission to give testimonies  
About 38000 gross violations of human rights were reported to the Commission  
Majority of those who gave testimonies came from the black communities