Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples in the Australian and International

Context
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In 1995 after my tertianship in the Philippines, I was privileged to spend a couple of months as a chaplain with JRS in a Sudanese refugee camp on the Ugandan border in the West Nile region. Life was basic but with the radio you could pick up the ever reliable BBC World Service. One night, I heard the news that the South African Constitutional Court had just ruled the death penalty unconstitutional. The lead judgment had been delivered by the President of the Court, Justice Arthur Chaskalson. I had met Chaskalson when we both spoke at a legal convention in New Zealand a couple of years before. I had no idea he was now in this exalted position. A few weeks later, I was in Johnannesburg and I decided there was nothing to lose by phoning the Constitutional Court, asking to be put through to the chambers of the President. The phone answered, "Hello, Chaskalson". Taken aback, I introduced myself and told the story of sitting in my tent in the refugee camp. Arthur invited me to meet with several members of the court the next day, including Albie Sachs the well known Communist lawyer who had lost his arm and suffered severe injury in a State authorised car bombing during the apartheid era. We discussed the landmark judgment. Chaskalson gave me a copy. He had quoted at length from the dissenting judgments of Justice Brennan on the US Supreme Court.

Within a couple of months, I was in Washington as the first visiting fellow at the Australia and New Zealand Studies Centre at Georgetown which was the brainchild of John Eddy. I had the good fortune to have open access to the chambers of Justice Brennan with whom I shared a name and lunch once a fortnight. He was a benign, generous old man, maintaining a glint in the eye. He had tears in his eyes when I gave him a copy of the South African decision which invoked his dissenting pleas, successfully overthrowing the barbaric death penalty on the other side of the world. There are many possibilities born of connections and inter-connectedness. We are often privileged to make connections which would otherwise go unmade. These connections can effect reconciliation in ways we would never imagine or achieve on our own.

In 1998, we celebrated the 50th anniversary of the UN Declaration of Human Rights. Here in Sydney Albie Sachs was guest of honour at the big symposium put on amidst the grandeur and glitz of Darling Harbour. He told the story of himself and Henry. Just after the Constitutional Court had been established, he received a phone call in his chambers from a man named Henry. Henry was downstairs and wanted to meet him. Albie came down, wondering who this could be. He beheld a big man who looked shattered and broken. Henry told his story. He had some involvement in the planting the car bomb

years before. He wanted to talk. Albie was lost for words. He decided against any sick jokes about shaking hands. Finally he and Henry agreed that it would be best for Henry to go and tell his story to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Just before coming to Australia, Albie was at a party. As he was leaving, a man called to him. It was Henry - looking more together and fuller of face. Henry said he had been to the Commission and told his story. Albie said, "Henry, there are no witnesses. I have only your word for it. I believe you. Let's shake hands." Reconciling the estranged requires considerable effort on both sides. For us Christians it is a graced experience.

Though the way to reconciliation is not clear, there are some very obvious dead ends. Whenever, we start distinguishing "us" and "them", we are usually going the wrong way. Even more so when it is applied to us and those who are "non-" or "ex-" whether they be non-indigenous or ex-Catholics. A commitment to reconciliation requires both solidarity with the marginalised and co-responsibility with the powerful.

There are always two sides to every story, and "both sides" need to trust so as to break down barriers ensuring that there are no longer sides - the empowered and the disempowered, the reconciled and the unreconciled - and ensuring that we communally discern our future, consonant with the constraints of confidentiality and religious obedience.

In 1985, I attended a meeting of Aborigines living in a fringe camp at Mantaka on the outskirts of Kuranda by the Barron River in North Queensland. The Aborigines had lived on a reserve which was run by a church and which had since closed. Some of the people moved to government housing in Cairns but they did not like it much and the neighbours liked it even less. Eventually they ended up as fringe dwellers on land they regarded as their traditional country. They were seeking land title and money for houses from governments in Brisbane and Canberra. At the end of the meeting, the convenor pointed across the river and said, "See that house: that is Mr X's weekender. They don't come very often but when they do they come by helicopter. See that helipad on the roof. It cost $3/4 million." That was almost twice the amount they were seeking for basic permanent housing.

I have often told this story in schools. Especially in the better off schools, there are many questions: Why don't the Aborigines build their own houses if they want them? What are they complaining about? If the white man didn't come, they wouldn't even have a water supply. If it weren't for Mr X paying his taxes, there would be no money to pay these people welfare. After many years, I gave up trying to answer these questions or to refute these comments. In response, I ask only one question: Which side of the river are you standing on as you ask your questions?

There is never any doubt about which side of the river people are standing on. Can you see that there are just as many questions that can be asked from the other side of the river? They are just as unanswerable. They are likely to make you just as upset and powerless and confused. Reconciliation is about being able to stand on either side of the

river. It is also about being able to assist with the bridge building needed so that others can move more readily from one side of the river to the other.

I well recall my first visit to Bourke in western New South Wales. I was asked to come because there were race problems even in the primary school playground. I arrived at the school, being asked, "Are you a blow in?" I was then introduced to the school staff, including the Aboriginal teacher aides. The person introducing me listed my qualifications and credentials but omitted the main one - that I was a blow in. I then introduced myself, admitting upfront that I was a blow in. I had never been to Bourke before. I might never come again. I knew little about life in Bourke except that it was difficult and it did not matter whether you were black or white, an adult walking down the main street at night or a child in the school playground by day. Race relations were poor. Everyone's quality of life was affected. We Australians are very good at passing the buck. We could blame Canberra or Sydney or history. But the buck has to stop here and now. The blow-ins cannot solve the problems. We have to accept joint responsibility for our local situation. This is another key aspect of reconciliation.

That night at a community meeting, some local Aborigines told the story of their history in the area. A white cotton farmer was very moved, observing that his family had lived in the area for many generations but that he "had no idea" that these things went on. Telling and hearing the stories is often the beginning of true reconciliation.

Last year I was living and working in the two worlds of West Timor and East Timor. I think these two worlds are stark mud maps of the intellectual, emotional and spiritual terrain traversed by those on both sides of unreconciled borders . The people in the refugee camps in the west are in a closed world dominated by fear. While some of the people are ex-militia carrying a heavy past, others are innocent bystanders who have been absorbed into the intrigue and evil of the situation. Many of them are illiterate. They are dependent on their village leaders. They cannot decide to return individually. They must go as a group. They receive little reliable information. They are bombarded with propaganda. They are afraid and they are lost. They do not belong where they are but they have no power of self-determination to bring themselves home. When you look into their eyes, you see people who are trapped, scared, and abandoned.

The east is a place full of possibilities, especially if you can score a job with the UN or with one of the big NGOs. Here are idealistic young UN workers from every nation on earth. They have all come to make their contribution and to make a difference. There is much talk about infrastructure, economic potential, reconciliation, democratisation and constitutional development. But so much of it is rhetoric flooding a landscape inhabited by people who are simply trying to put their lives back together. Much of the public carry on is a foil for the power elite of Timorese society making its accommodation with the international agencies while ordinary people continue to miss out. The UN can talk all it likes about constitutional empowerment of people but it does not get you far when you are addressing one of the most illiterate societies in Asia. They can design and resource theoretically wonderful machinery for reconciliation but it cannot get you far when the major alienated faction is still across the border, their leaders not having been at the table

to negotiate the procedure. The east is a whole new world which could easily collapse once the outside supports are taken away. It is also the place where people are taking hold of their freedom and constituting themselves as actors for peace and reconciliation.

I give one example. One of our JRS staff was a 20 year old man from Maliana on the border. His name is Fidelis. His father was the CNRT leader in the area and was killed by police and militia in September 1999. Fidelis worked with our returnees team assisting refugees when they return from West Timor. We sent him to Geneva for the hearing of the UN Human Rights Committee. For him, it was a fantastic experience - and a long way from the border. He had told me early in the year that he was in no hurry to go to university because for the moment, the border was his university. On his return from Geneva, we had a two-day meeting of our 30 staff discussing the meaning of reconciliation. He said, "Sometimes I feel like a hypocrite when I help the returnees because my father was killed by the militia. But I am lucky and blessed because I have a mother with a big heart and she is a great inspiration for me." As you can appreciate, despite his age, he was more like a teacher than a student down there at the university of the border.

Together we might be reconcilers of the estranged because we are committed to reconciliation with each other, because we are committed to being further reconciled to the irreconcilable within ourselves and within our church and our world (we being the church and the world), and because we believe in a God who reconciles all, ultimately. We can do this only in the simplest of ways, by:

• Listening to each other

• Trusting each other

• Being true to self, to each other and to the truth

• Hoping in each other and for each other

• Believing in others, especially each other

• Forgiving each other

Like Albie Sachs, do we even know our Henrys? Do we listen to them? Do we extend the hand of friendship? Like Henry, do we own our past and seek to make faltering steps in the present despite the enormity of the task for the future? For us Christians, Paul put it to the Corinthians in these terms:

So for anyone who is in Christ, there is a new creation: the old order is gone and a new being is there to see. It is all God's work; he reconciled us to himself through Christ and he gave us the ministry of reconciliation. I mean, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not holding anyone's faults against them, but entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. (2 Cor 5:18-19)

One of the highpoints for indigenous reconciliation in Australia was the conclusion of the Reconciliation Convention in 1997 when those of us who are not indigenous Australians proclaimed:

We who are recent migrants and descendants of migrants who have come to this land, having attended the Australian Reconciliation Convention, thank you, the Indigenous peoples of Australia gathered at this conference, for your tolerance of us, our cultures and aspirations.

Also, we apologise for the hurt done to you, your ancestors and your lands by our ancestors and by our presence and our actions in this land over the last 209 years.

Indigenous leader Patrick Dodson then invited all participants (indigenous and non-indigenous) to stand and proclaim:

Committed to walking together in this land, we commit ourselves to reconciliation, building better relationships, so that we can constitute a united Australia, respecting the land, valuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage, and providing justice and equity for all.

May the women of the Sacre Coeur tradition, like the mother of Fidelis, be an inspiration for reconciliation, being women with hearts large enough to carry the unreconciled burdens of history in hope of reconciliation enfleshed in their children.