

On the Saturday morning of the 65th Synod of the Diocese of Edmonton, September 30, 2017, diocesan Director of Communications Margaret Glidden interviewed Fr. Michael Lapsley. Following is a Q & A representation of that interview:

MG: Father Michael, I wanted to ask you about living a reconciled life in Christ. You've said that when you returned to South Africa in 1992 you discovered an entire nation in need of healing; no matter what side of apartheid people had been on – oppressor or oppressed. Why must we – as Canadians and Christians trying to reconcile our history with indigenous peoples of this country – continue to make space to hear each other's truths?

Fr.ML: What sometimes prevents people from following Christ fully are their unhealed wounds. So often in the gospels healing is tied to discipleship; the response of people being healed is to follow Jesus on the way. So healing is not, for a Christian, ever an end in itself. We need to be healed in order that we may participate fully in God's project for the human family.

But I want to suggest to you that healing of memories is an issue for human beings everywhere on the planet. One of the characteristics of our age is that the unhealed wounds of the past are coming back to bite us. The temptation has always been to seek to bury and to forget. It's the favourite option, but it's never worked. We must ask ourselves, how do we have hope and yet stare the reality of the past in the face? I would suggest to you... that it's only by facing the truth that we can provide a basis by which we can reconcile.

Shared pain is transcendent and the point of connectedness of human beings, across great gulfs of difference and historical reality and oppression and privilege, is the pain. So if we are able with the heart to listen to each other's pain, we get connected. But that's not the end of the journey. That's the beginning of the journey, because as we experience each other's woundedness and common humanity, we find a common basis on which to begin a journey.

MG: You have said that when something terrible is done to you it either causes you to diminish or to grow. You had a very terrible thing happen to you and yet you chose healing over anger and revenge. How did you do that and how can we have the courage to live our lives in the same way?

Fr.ML: I was in Canada a week before the bomb went off. And I want to tell you one element of the Canadian response that was very important to my healing. During my visit I had been to North Bay. I'd been to a small primary school where I came to talk to the children about apartheid and oppression and justice and to tell the story of the people of South Africa and our struggle for freedom. A week later I get a letter bomb and I've got no hands, I'm in hospital, my ear drums are shattered. So the teacher, a man called Greg Brewer, told the children the story and, of course, in a way, the children were traumatized because suddenly this was a real person whom they had met. So the kids said, 'what do we do?' And each of them chose to do a painting. So in my hospital room, on all the walls, were the paintings of children.

Not all the time – but a little bit of the time, I thought to myself, ‘it would be better to be dead.’ I’d never met someone with no hands. I didn’t know whether life would be life in any meaningful sense. But when I felt sorry for myself I’d look at these paintings of children and say, ‘but why are you feeling sorry for yourself? You’re being prayed for; you’re being loved; you’re being supported.’ And I began to see that for myself, my task now – my struggle if you like – was to get better; to return; to live my life as fully, as joyfully, as completely as possible. And I came back a year later to see those children and said, “Thank you. You have played a key part in my healing.” So my healing speaks to the healing power of God that comes through the prayer and the love and support of people across the world.

But I also want to say that the people who loved me and prayed for me were Christians and Jews and Hindus and Buddhists, and I don’t know if the atheists prayed, but they sent me wonderful messages. I want to emphasize this point: I seek to be a follower of Jesus, but the future of humanity is not a Christian future, it is an interfaith future. And we need to get that message FAST if we’re going to live in peace as a human family. And it doesn’t make me any less a follower of Jesus.

I am more and more convinced that what I like to call the ‘foundation nations’ of the human family have a wisdom which the human family needs like never before. Think of the climate crisis, think environmental: first nations have always known how to live in harmony with Mother Nature. But if God is God, then that is the voice of God coming through indigenous people. Not doing things FOR indigenous people but walking beside and having our hearts and minds open to receive that wisdom and I’m very encouraged by what I see and hear in the (Edmonton) diocese in that regard.

MG: Is it necessary to forgive in order to heal and be whole?

Fr.ML: Often when I say that I’m not full of hatred and I’m not bitter and I don’t want revenge, people say to me, “Oh you are a wonderful example of forgiveness.” But I never said anything about forgiveness! In my case, I don’t know who sent that bomb, gave the orders or made it. So in a sense for me, forgiveness is not yet on the table. But healing of memories is always on the table because always, always, always there is an issue of me dealing with my stuff.

Sometimes forgiveness may be the key to healing.

In my mind I imagine an encounter with the person who sent me the bomb. It may never happen in this life – and if it does the reality may be different – but in the encounter in my mind someone knocks on my door and says, “I sent you that bomb. Will you forgive me?”

What do I say? ‘Yes? No? Not yet?’ “But, excuse me sir, do you still make bombs?”

“No, I work at the local hospital. Will you forgive me?”

“Yes, I forgive you and I would prefer that you spend the next 50 years working in that hospital rather than be locked up in prison because I believe 1,000 times more in the justice of restoration than the justice of punishment.”

So often when we say justice, we mean punishment, if not revenge. But there is another kind of justice which, as far as I can tell, indigenous people around the world have always known: the justice of restoring relationships. How do we restore the relationships that are broken?

So maybe I'll sit down and drink tea with my new friend and say, “Well, I've forgiven you, but I still have no hands, only one eye and my ear drums are shattered. I will always need someone to help me for the rest of my life. Of course you will help pay for that person, not as a condition of forgiveness, but as reparation and restitution in the ways that are possible.”

Often because forgiveness is so central to our faith, we speak of it as something glib and cheap and easy, where most human beings find it costly, painful and difficult. Often when I work with clergy I say, “Do you find forgiveness easy?” And they shake their heads and say, “No.”

“And when you preach do you tell your people that?”

“Oh no, we never tell them that!”

I'm sure present company excepted, but when people are hurting sometimes we increase their burdens by telling them to forgive. When people are hurting often they need a hug not a sermon. They need their pain to be heard and acknowledged and then perhaps they can begin a journey of forgiveness.

The session was then opened to questions from the floor. The first speaker was Jeff Hangar of St. Mary, Ponoka, followed by the Rev. Maralyn Benay of St. Columba, Beaumont, Carol Blair of Immanuel, Wetaskiwin and the Rev. Ron Hörst of Emmanuel, Gibbons.

JH: What do white people in South Africa today say they wish they had done differently?

Fr.ML: It's interesting, today in South Africa there are no white people who supported apartheid! They were all against it! So you get this revisionist view of history.

Tragically, much of the white community in South Africa remained in denial. Yet throughout South African history there were always some white people who made common cause with the struggle... who suffered and sacrificed and died and were killed and were tortured; not many, but there was an element through our history. And they were very important in preventing race war, because it said to black people: there are white people who make common cause. The

problem is the system, not the colour.

In a time of great injustice, to be a decent human being requires heroism. And so often we're not, and then we live with our complicity. Many white people would say, "I wish we'd had the courage."

We all have regrets, but I think guilt gets a bad rap. We can use guilt to paralyze ourselves or we can say, "It's true that that was wrong. We can't change the past but we can face it and we can say, 'God help us to have the courage today to work for a better world.' Let us do what we can."

We need to be permanently sorry about what happened to indigenous people – permanently sorry. But that sorrow should be what galvanizes us to say, "I can play my part to create a gentler, kinder, more just world."

MB: When we look at Christianity and how did (the early church) grow – they grew by stories. And the indigenous people are great story-tellers. And I see healing through the telling of stories in my work. But I also see families, all focused on their ipads and phones and I worry that they're not talking to each other and will have no stories. Is this something you see and are you concerned?

Fr.ML: Thank you. I want to say a couple of things:

(First) Story telling does not equal healing. Wars are kept going by storytelling. Grandparents told their grandchildren stories that had poison in them. "Don't you ever trust *them*, because of what they did to us." So I say, 'yes to storytelling,' but it's not enough. We need to speak about story telling in the context of a journey of healing. Story telling from the head alone won't bring healing. It has to be from the heart.

(Second) Yes, let's do the speaking, but let's do the listening. It sounds glib, but maybe God had something in mind when she gave us two ears and one mouth. And in training for ministry, how much do we train them to speak and how much do we train them to listen? We need to consciously create space for telling stories.

CB: What about individuals who (in regard to indigenous issues) are 'deny-ers,' who say things like "Why can't they just get over it?" When we encounter that, how do we deal with it?

Fr.ML: I don't come here with glib and cheap answers to complex realities in a particular context. I come with a loving embrace. I come with solidarity. We struggle with some of the same things.

There are points of commonality. When they developed the so called Bantustan system in South Africa where did they copy it from? Canada. Some of the horror that was developed in South Africa was copied deliberately and consciously from Canada. So it's easy to be self-righteous and to forget that we, too, have travelled journeys.

I would say that people are seldom changed by argument. People are changed by experience. People are much more likely to be shaken by the quiet voice that says, 'well, that's not my experience.' We need to have ways that keep us humble, but we also need to ask for that courage, when we hear someone say something racist to say, "I'm sorry but not in my name." Not to shout and scream, but not to remain silent, because when we remain silent we are complicit.

RH: What did the world do during that time that was successful (in pressuring South Africa to end apartheid)?

Fr.ML: The liberation movement said there were four pillars of struggle: mass mobilization, organized political action, armed struggle, and international solidarity – including and especially the pressure of not being able to play sport on an international level! Imagine if the world told Canada, 'you can't play hockey anymore!'

Some claim that one aspect was key, but I believe they all played their part. FW de Klerk and his regime 'did not see the Lord on the road to Damascus.' In the end the pressure was so great they had no alternative. And of course, as Archbishop Tutu says, we had a generation of young people with iron in their souls who were willing to face the bullets with dustbin lids.

But I think we were the most fortunate nation. Our cause became the cause of all humanity. You could go to any part of the world and there is a generation of us across the world who were shaped by the struggle against apartheid. For me, one sense of deep pain is that the Palestinian people are not getting the same solidarity that we got, and they deserve it today.

(Those in the international community) couldn't take away the death and the dying but you could shorten the time and lessen the cost and as a people we're grateful.