

**DEALING WITH A PAST BURDENED BY VIOLENCE. CONDITIONS OF AND OBSTACLES TO
RECONCILIATION PROCESSES.**

SIERRA LEONE AS A CASE STUDY BY

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In this presentation, I wish to share the Sierra Leonean experience towards the bright promise of a renewed and reconciled country that has taught us much about the power of reconciliation. In the recent past years, we have gradually travelled the long road from violence and vengeful scorn to seeking forgiveness and reconciliation. This journey has been a concerted effort by all stakeholders in nation building: The Government, International Agencies, Non Governmental Organizations, Religious Bodies, Civil Society, and most importantly, the perpetrators and victims of the conflict in Sierra Leone.

Let me take this opportunity on behalf of the people of Sierra Leone to thank all of you for walking with us, for being there in solidarity and friendship. To the many men and women, organizations who through our Christian faith and shared humanity have contributed to make us live decent lives after a violent past, I thank all of them through their representative gathered here today.

Our work at the Justice and Peace Commission has taught us to be campaigners against the dangers of violence and passionate advocates for reconciliation and forgiveness. Our justification has emerged from a shared vision of the future, one in which we realize that freedom from the conditions of the past may emerge out of a process of renewal. It is our model of this process of renewal that I intend to share with you.

The fundamental question is: How can Sierra Leone as a country recover from violence to reconciliation? The quest for justice, truth and reconciliation is an iconic symbol of what for us is a profound achievement in restructuring peaceful society. My many years of experience and a careful analysis of the complex issues – legal, historical, social, psychological – embedded in such a process has taught me that the psychological life of a survivor of extreme violence is cut through by these complexities in transforming societies.

In my brief time here, I cannot go into all the arguments supporting one priority over another. Let me just point out that our record in this quest is not merely composed of official declarations, seminars and symposia. It is also made of the sweat and blood of hundreds and thousands of people and communities that have given their energies, their love, and in some cases their dedication at the grassroots level in order to build a just, reconciled and peaceful society despite enormous difficulties that we have had to fight against. Because of this fundamental consistency, long term focus, grassroots commitment and strong charitable activities that do not discriminate between ethnic and religious affiliations, the Catholic Church have kept a high reputation.

Reconciliation through justice and peace are of extreme importance in the present day Sierra Leone society, and the Catholic Church has both the right and moral authority to address them.

Pope Paul VI is frequently quoted as saying, "If you want peace, work for justice". This statement would seem to give priority to justice (that is right relationships of human dignity and community) over peace (that is, harmonious living even amidst tensions). Well this is a challenge.

Reconciliation requires right relationships essential to justice, the relationship both personal and structural that respect human dignity and promote human development in the fullness of society. And that true peace is not simply the absence of conflict or violence, but the presence of justice is necessary for any lasting reconciliation. The Social Teachings of the Church spells out four concrete elements involved in this process of establishing right relationships: universal human rights; social and economic development; solidarity with the entire human family and a world order based on non violent response to conflicts.

In a constructive approach, we have focused on the peaceful teachings and practices of the Christian faith. These practices espouse forgiveness, reconciliation and dialogue as essential realities that help create a context in which peace building becomes possible. As religious actors, we have helped to create an atmosphere in which conflict prevention, mediation, resolution and transformation is possible.

An essential aspect of our ministry has been based on the belief that reconciliation takes place between perpetrators and victims. In principle, our Third Party role has been to administer the relation between the parties. Our efforts in this regard have been geared towards the building of a conflict transformation capacity through the principal modes of nonviolence, empathy and creativity. We have come to realize that the best way of building nonviolence is by practicing it, by doing reconstruction and reconciliation through learning by doing and doing while teaching. The best way of building empathy is to understand how deep culture and society work and to develop an insight into joint sorrow to heal, joint reconstruction, joint resolution of the pain of apology/forgiveness process. The best way of building creativity is by the courage to take on the challenge of finding a way out of a deeply entrenched conflict. The conflict parties have to engage in the processes themselves.

Here is suggested a set of relationships, relationships that if not acknowledged and lived to the full can become a hindrance to conflict transformation, and makes both perpetrator and victim less human. A person is only a person through reconciled relationships with self, neighbor, ancestors, earth and above all God.

Reconciliation with myself – as acceptance of who I am as I am, a creature beloved by God, a sinner forgiven by God.

Reconciliation with my neighbor – an expression of the fundamental sign of living as Children of God, sisters, brothers able to pray the Lord's prayer.

Reconciliation with my ancestors - as recognition that my community embraces not only the living but the living dead, whom I remember with reverence.

Reconciliation with the earth – as respect that I am member of the community of creation, called to preserve, protect and care for the integrity of ecological relationships.

Reconciliation with my God – as reverence of the One with whom I live and move and have my being (Acts 17:28).

It is therefore aimed that as peace builders, we must commit to permanent relationship building that includes the social, political, cultural, religious and economic dimensions of fully communal life. In our own case, we have embarked on:

- Observation and Witness
- Education and Promotion
- Advocacy and Empowerment
- Conciliation and Mediation.

It is also important to state here some of the obstacles we have encountered in our work from a violent past to a reconciliation process.

1. Reconciliation is all about individuals; it cannot be forced on people. They have to decide on their own whether to forgive and reconcile with their oppressors.
2. Reconciliation must be recognized as a “bottom up” process and thus cannot be imposed by the State or other Institution.
3. The reconciliation between immediate urgencies and longer term sustainability in most cases is extremely weak in post conflict situations.
4. Reconciliation is a long and laborious process and therefore the risk of it being rushed hampers the true transformation of a conflict situation.
5. The lack of confidence on the side of the parties to the conflict though fear and anger.
6. The persistent systemic, political, institutional and operational obstacles that confront society immediately after conflict.
7. The ambiguities of international conflict resolution systems imposed on conflict situations.
8. The lack of physical infrastructure to the lack of social amenities can be a major obstacle to reconciliation.
9. The proper integration and the lack of oversight and evaluation programs to enhance the adjustment of both victim and perpetrator.
10. The lack of a coordinated and integrated national strategy to reconciliation.

11. The lack of funds and other logistics to help in the work of reconciliation.