

Opening Address by Archbishop Ndungane at the Conflict Transformation and Peace Studies Programme in the School of Social Sciences, College of Humanities at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (12 to 13 February 2014)

Community Serving Humanity and Beyond – The legacy of Archbishop Denis Hurley OMI colloquium and workshop

I am delighted, honoured and humbled to address this forum on this auspicious occasion and to pay tribute to the late Archbishop Denis Hurley (Oblate of Mary Immaculate).

While I do not by any stretch of the imagination claim to be an expert on human behaviour, I do believe that all actions have consequences and produce specific results, as do all inactions. We are indebted to the Greek philosophers, Socrates and Aristotle who brought us theories such as Causality. All the various circumstances which emerge in this world can be explained through the law of cause and effect. Whether conscious or unconscious, the choices we make are causes and they produce corresponding outcomes or effects. It is something so profound that it has been referred to as the “Iron Law of Human Destiny”.

In addition, I am often intrigued by people’s interpretations of experiences through analogy and metaphor and, even more so when I feel the connection on a personal level.

And, so it is perhaps destiny that today this son of the soil – an Archbishop who in a former life was political prisoner No. 640/63 incarcerated in the belly of Robben Island, stands before you to honour an Archbishop who spent his carefree youth on that same island some four decades earlier as the son of the lighthouse keeper.

Lighthouses have different meanings for different people. For some, those tall towers were designed to aid navigation for maritime pilots at sea and to mark dangerous coastlines. To me and my fellow prisoners the lighthouse on Robben Island resembled a contradiction as both a beacon of hope and a beacon of oppression. Who knows what it meant to the young Denis Hurley? What subliminal messages did his subconscious receive from that tower on Minto Hill with its flashing light?

Henry Longfellow wrote the poem, *The Lighthouse* and I quote the 9th verse:

“Steadfast, serene, immovable, the same,

Year after year, through all the silent night

Burns on forevermore that quenchless flame,

Shines on that inextinguishable light!”

Don't you find it interesting that this verse depicts the very ethos lived by Denis Hurley? - Steadfast in his faith and Christian conscience; serene in his approach to all people regardless of their social status or intentions; immovable in his moral convictions; the same in his unbridled kindness, year after year.

I am reminded of the dark days at the turn of this century when AIDS denialism was still a harsh reality amongst some in South Africa. Just weeks prior to the 2000 International AIDS Conference, we signed the Durban Declaration affirming that HIV was in fact the cause of AIDS. The theme for the conference was “Breaking the Silence” and I led a march through the streets of the city. Denis was already quite frail and unable to join the march but he came to the starting line, bowed in prayer and gave us a blessing, his serene spirit of support was with us every footstep on the way.

In reflection, I am still amused that much to the chagrin of his fellow Catholics, he was so publicly in favour of the ordination of women when the leaders of Anglican Church were sitting in heated debates behind closed doors on the issue. But the quality I most admired was his sheer delight in engaging the Catholic seminarians on a pastoral level and then suddenly doing a complete 360 degree turn and he

would be wholly committed to interfaith dialogue, that of spiritual ecumenism. He realized that the unity of Christians was a reality in heaven, in God himself and, that overcoming the worldly Church's divisions through penitence and charity would offer a renewed faith to the world. His definition of spiritual ecumenism holds together three elements: change of heart; holiness of life; and prayer for unity.

In an address on social justice, he once cited the Industrial Revolution as the cause for the collapse of the Christian conscience of both Catholics and Protestants in the 18th and 19th centuries. He went on to say, and I quote: "The development of Christian social teaching indicates how important the question is of promoting the values of the Kingdom in man's social life and within that social life there is the sphere of politics and government and that is important too, a very important dimension of social life and, the important thing there is for the Church to promote moral influence, to create a Christian conscience concerning the values of society, transferring the values of the Kingdom into human society."

Denis Hurley was an intellectual, a man of integrity who used the English language very precisely and he was not shy to debate social and political issues. In the 1980s when he was chairman of the Southern African Catholic Bishops Conference, he condemned police brutality, "a kind of state of war is developing between the police and the people" he warned. The government saw him as a political maverick and charged him with publishing 'false matter' about the police. Intense discussions followed and the charges were later dropped.

Moving forward more than 30 years to today and not much has changed in terms of mistrust between the people and the police. We see it in the current Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of Police inefficiency and a breakdown in relations between the community and the police in Khayelitsha in the Western Cape.

My experience and observations tells me that our history is a violent one. It also tells me that we are capable of transcending this aspect of our history, much of which has been internalized over generations and finding creative solutions to both past and present day challenges.

But there is another side to South Africa. It is a country of multiple narratives – some known, some unknown, some disavowed, some ignored. Behind, beyond and beneath our cities lies a subterranean cadastral of pain. A long legacy of human suffering, linked to our colonial and apartheid past. The aftermath of the recent service delivery protests by Sebokeng residents is a shocking reminder that after 20 years of democracy, life has not changed for the still disadvantaged and marginalized.

As the latest research conducted indicates, one of the golden threads running through what are deemed to be “service delivery protests”. There is an apparent breakdown in communication and subsequent mistrust between local citizens and various government agencies, especially the police. In other words, what lies at the heart and centre of “urban protest” in post-apartheid South Africa is a contestation over the terms and meaning of “justice” and governance between those who govern and those being governed – the citizens. The informal settlements of today, densely populated, with high levels of urban poverty, unemployment, violent crime and, visible entrepreneurial and innovative spirit, is both a living testament to the apartheid legacy and a testimony to the ability of marginalized South Africans to survive, adapt and, make something out of nothing. But, understanding what makes South Africa “tick”, including its more negative and positive characteristics, both in present and potential future, demands an unravelling of how it has evolved over time and the seeming inability of those administrations to address the scale and scope of challenges exhibited; respond in a relevant way to the aspirations of its growing and essentially youthful population; or, embrace the assets and contribution its citizens could make to the country’s transformation as a whole.

This colloquium and workshop takes place in the midst of a year poised to both celebrate and reflect upon what we have or haven’t achieved after 20 years of democratic transition. A transition is about moving from one political era or administration into another, as yet unknown one. And, in the case of South Africa, from the apartheid era towards becoming a country founded on constitutional principles that are enshrined in our much revered South African Constitution. But change is not easy and it is also not easy to discern. How do you change

perceptions, attitudes, and ways of practice in any given society in a context in which what one has known or experienced in the past, in another era, continues to haunt or confront you in the present. And what needs to happen or change to make it possible to transcend “the old” and arrive in a place where life and experience is not only different but better. A place where one’s quality of life is so palpably improved at an individual, neighbourhood, city and country-wide level that one can safely say that “we have arrived”, we have moved beyond the moment of “transition to democracy” into a country not only of our imagination but of our aspiration, the country imagined and articulated in our South African Constitution. But, as the records signify we still have a long way to go.

At the end of the day, I believe that history matters and that it matters even more if one is in the midst of a transition. Moving from one era towards another means that some things, perspectives and, ways of thinking and being need to shift and change. A transition is a movement towards a new paradigm in a given society and it can go in different directions – at the positive level it can lead to an exponential improvement in the quality of life for all or, it could lead back to a negative space if not handled sensitively and strategically. My sense is that we sit on the edge of this dilemma twenty years into our transition and that the breakdown of relationships between the haves and the have-nots is, at its heart an interrogation of post-apartheid governance and how resources get prioritized and allocated in our transition.

Like it or not, South Africa is perceived to be, because it is, a violent country. Remember Shrien Dewani? - The whole world knows that for R10 000 you can hire an assassin to kill someone at your will. We have all seen the footage or listened to the testimonies of the TRC, therefore we know what South Africans, under a specific set of circumstances, are capable of doing to other human beings, to fellow citizens. We have seen how protests can easily morph into violent confrontations and we have seen how citizens and community groups take the law into their own hands when levels of frustration and rage become drivers to brutal beatings and killings. We are bombarded daily by media reports of rape, murder and domestic violence and abuse, the most horrific being violence against infants, children and the aged.

Countries or societies characterized as “violent” have this reputation based on structural, overt and in our case, a covert violent past. Alongside or, the flipside of violence and conflict is the issue of trauma or, psychic wounding. Everything about the past and present with respect to the social history of South Africa signifies the presence of violence and conflict (visible and hidden) and therefore, high levels of trauma, at both individual and collective levels. It also tells me that we are creative, adaptable, innovative and, as a consequence, resilient – we are survivors.

There is something about this past that continues into the present and there is something about this present that reminds us of the past. And there is something about both the past and the present that stops us from moving forward into a better future. The law of cause and effect? Understanding and finding ways to work through, beyond, or with this social reality lies at the heart of the legacy left by Denis Hurley - Love God above all things and our neighbor as ourselves and, promote justice as one of the most important practical ways of expressing our love.

Hurley said that the meaning of Justice and Peace was to extend the horizon and raise efforts to a new level. Yet, he added, the great majority seems incapable of that. From time to time the need for action arises that is attractive and fulfilling to justice and peace workers, for example the programmes for education for democracy and voter education before the first democratic elections in April 1994. But, Hurley asked: “What is the major problem that makes it so difficult for justice and peace to be accepted as an integral part of Christian thinking and practice?” He warned us that the big corporations set the pace and dominate the world economically – prices and profits dominate and those that cannot compete get left behind. The socialization of industry and commerce leads to the socialization of other human activities. For the Church to make an impact on highly socialised societies, it must concentrate on social issues such as education and health, employment and housing.

Since before the birth of Denis Hurley in 1915 and still today, there are communities in South Africa that are unable to meet their own needs –

development is critical and, collectively we need to concentrate on inspiring and mobilizing the groups who wield the power to co-operate and participate vigorously in the issues of social transformation, and to hold them accountable.

One of my fondest personal memories of Archbishop Denis Hurley was how excitedly he articulated his absolute delight when Madiba was released after 27 of imprisonment and his installation as President of our country. He once joked with Madiba that he was a resident of Robben Island long before it became a popular residence for great men! Picture it, the mutual respect of these two giants, tall towers shining their light with an indomitable strength yet with graciousness, compassion and humility.

The last verse of Longfellow's poem reads:

"Sail on!" it says: "sail on, ye stately ships!

And with your floating bridge the ocean span;

Be mine to guard this light from all eclipse.

Be yours to bring man neared unto man."

That was his plea, the message the tall tower of a man called Denis Hurley left for us: Guard this light from all eclipse... Bring man neared unto man.

It is our responsibility, each and every one of us, to cherish the legacy left by Archbishop Denis Hurley – to build community serving humanity.

German philosopher Martin Heidegger reminds us that being is understanding and furthermore that "being-in-the-world is a mode of experience which grounds understanding." – Therefore it would be correct to say that being-in-the-world means understanding knowledge as a process of interpretation and questioning.

This epitomizes the life that Denis Hurley lived in our world. Like him, our primary role is to do the right thing, to commit to social teaching and, never be afraid of raising questions. It is our duty to appreciate and act on the foundations he set for us and so our actions are embedded in his being. This kind of synchronization is what we ultimately define as community serving humanity. Indeed, then

Archbishop Denis Hurley's quenchless flame still burns and his inextinguishable light still shines in and through us.

I thank you.