



Response

October 5th, 2018

A Vatican Tribute to Nelson Mandela

Archbishop Paul Gallagher, the Vatican's Secretary for Relations with States, and Head of the Delegation of the Holy See to the 73rd Session of the United Nations General Assembly, participated in the Nelson Mandela Peace Summit in New York to mark the centenary of Mr Mandela's birth on 18th July 1918.

The meeting took place on 24th September, appropriately, on the same day that South Africa celebrated Heritage Day. Mr Mandela's lasting influence is widely regarded as one of South Africa's proudest legacies. In his contribution to the Summit, Archbishop Gallagher quoted Pope Francis' words at the time of Mr Mandela's death, when the Pope paid tribute to his "steadfast commitment in promoting the human dignity of the nation's citizens and in forging a new South Africa built on the firm foundations of non-violence, reconciliation and truth."¹

The Archbishop pointed especially to two enduring characteristics of Madiba's legacy. Firstly, he noted that the name of Mandela is now synonymous with the promotion of peace, non-violence, reconciliation, non-discrimination, and human rights. A sign of this is that Mr Mandela showed that peace is not built by flaunting victory over, or humiliating, the defeated foe; instead, he responded generously to those who caused his suffering when he emerged from 27 years of imprisonment. The Archbishop said: "He was gracious and generous in victory and, before the cheers of the world, remained humble. His wisdom led him to reject recrimination in favour of reconciliation and to extend a hand of friendship to those who had made him suffer, convinced that the future demanded moving beyond the past."²

The second characteristic of Mr Mandela's legacy is the reminder that peace is consolidated when nations can discuss matters as equals, something that is embedded in his understanding of *Ubuntu*. Archbishop Gallagher quoted Mr Mandela's words that "to make peace with your enemy, you must work with your enemy and then make him your partner."³

He went on to underline that this almost family-like working together, this dialogical methodology that Madiba exemplified, was also at the heart of the UN's efforts in working for peace. He made the further point that Nelson Mandela was born at the end of the First World War, at the same time roughly speaking as the birth of the League of Nations, designed to find alternatives to war and injustice. Elaborating on this theme, the Archbishop said: "As Pope John Paul II affirmed in his Address to the General Assembly on 5 October 1995, 'the United Nations Organization needs to rise more and more above the cold status of an administrative institution and to become a moral centre where all the nations of the world feel at home and develop a shared awareness of being, as it were, a family of nations.'"⁴

The Archbishop also noted that trust, respect, and mutual support are key, as in a family, to ensure that international relationships work optimally. And he closed his remarks with a challenge: “This would be the type of conversion of mind and heart, to flourish through helping others flourish in peace and freedom, that we celebrate in the magnanimous life of Nelson Mandela. May Mandela’s inspiring perseverance in seeking justice, freedom and peace, be for this ‘family of nations’ a motivation to redouble our efforts and dedication in the quest for a more just, and thus peaceful, world.”

A close reading of the text underlines key ideas, such as the restoration of trust that Mr Mandela showed after his release; the commitment to dialogue; and the strengthening of mutuality and generous relationships, as opposed to a spirit of annihilation. Archbishop Gallagher wove these same values into his discourses later in the week, especially in his call for the ratification of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and his call for the entry into force of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. He mentioned that, in an age when so much trust between nations has been destroyed, the possession of nuclear weapons remains a threat and is opposed to the key principles of the UN. In his remarks in preparation for the 70th anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, he again underlined the importance of human dignity and of ensuring that the ideals of human rights and human dignity do not become empty concepts.⁵

It is salutary to see how the lessons drawn from Nelson Mandela’s life have become part of the hermeneutic for strengthening the call for – and providing the policy insights necessary for – building a more just and peace-filled world.

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¹ <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/pope-francis-lauds-mandelas-creation-of-a-new-south-africa>

² <https://holyseemission.org/contents/statements/5ba96d2d28020.php>

³ <https://holyseemission.org/contents/statements/5ba96d2d28020.php>

⁴ <https://holyseemission.org/contents/statements/5ba96d2d28020.php>

⁵ <https://holyseemission.org/contents/statements/5ba96d2d28020.php>