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Continuing the miracle into South Africa's second decade

FW de Klerk Foundation

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The Closing Ceremony of the Arts and Reconciliation Festival

Speech by Former President FW de Klerk, Pretoria

I sincerely welcome the initiative which led to the Festival, ending with this afternoon's service. Throughout the past week the focus has been on the continuing need for forgiveness and reconciliation in this beautiful country of ours. That is how it should be.

Notwithstanding our successful transition to full democracy, notwithstanding goodwill in abundance, notwithstanding good work done by the TRC – notwithstanding all this we still face the tremendous challenge of getting all South Africans to find one another after so many generations of division, oppression and enmity. And this we must do in the spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation.

I consequently would like to make these two concepts the theme of my address today – the healing power of forgiveness and the peacemaking power of reconciliation.

One of the central themes of our religion is the commandment that we should forgive one another. One of the central realities of the history of the world has been the utter failure of most Christians and most Christian countries to carry out this commandment.

Forgiveness is essential, not only because it is a central commandment of our Lord, but because it is critically important for our own spiritual and mental well-being and for the search for lasting peace.

Until we truly forgive our enemies, we carry within our hearts a bitterness which can poison every other aspect of our lives. Only when we truly and sincerely forgive the wrongs that have been done to us can we free ourselves from this burden. By continuing to nurse grievances against those who have done us wrong, we give them continuing power over us. With each remembrance of past wrongs we perpetuate the evil that has been done to us. In the end we forgive those who have done us wrong not only for their sake, but also for our own liberation.

There are, of course, also very practical reasons why we should forgive one another and why we should not allow the wrongs of the past to fester in our hearts. We all have sinned against others as others have sinned against us. If we do not clean the slate, our grievances will constantly rekindle alienation, vengeance and conflict.

Many of the conflicts that continue to wrack the world have their roots deep in memories of ancient and unforgiven wrongs.

Think of Northern Ireland, where the origins of the conflict go all the way back to the original settlement of the Province by Protestants in the seventeenth century. Think of the ongoing ethnic conflict in Kosovo, where memories of grievances can be traced back

hundreds of years to bitter conflicts between Moslem Turks and Orthodox Christian Serbs.

The same is true of the conflicts in Rwanda and Burundi, between the Hutu and the Tutsi; in Cyprus, between the Greeks and the Turks and in the Middle East between the Palestinians and the Israelis.

Very often, the fuel that keeps these conflicts smouldering - or ablaze - is the memory of past atrocities - all carefully nurtured and remembered - all of them unforgiven and therefore unresolved.

We cannot truly hope to establish peace between such peoples until we address the root of their sense of grievance - and this can only be done through forgiveness.

We Afrikaners know about this. I grew up in a society that nurtured a deep sense of grievance against the British. For us the Anglo-Boer War was not another distant and bothersome colonial campaign that we read about in the morning papers. We called it the Second Freedom War.

It utterly devastated our two young republics; it deprived us of our hard-won right to rule ourselves; and most tragically, it led to the deaths of a considerable portion of our women and children in disease-ridden concentration camps. When I grew up, there was hardly a family in our community that had not suffered some or other loss. Many of the older people still had first-hand memories of the conflict.

But somehow, or other, we have succeeded in putting most of this bitterness behind us. The establishment of the Republic of South Africa in 1961 played an important part in all of this. For many Afrikaners it was the final resolution of their struggle with Britain.

So we, as a people, know what it is to have been sinned against and to have forgiven. But we also know what it is to have sinned against others and to have needed forgiveness. The apartheid policies that my party implemented for many years caused enormous suffering, disruption and humiliation to millions of South Africans. In 1997 I expressed my deep and sincere apology for these policies to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

I apologised in my capacity as Leader of the National Party to the millions of South Africans who suffered the wrenching disruption of forced removals from their homes, businesses and land; who over the years suffered the shame of being arrested for pass law offences; who over the centuries had suffered the indignities and humiliation of racial discrimination; who had been prevented from exercising their full democratic rights in the land of their birth; who were unable to achieve their full potential; and who in any way suffered as a result of the policies and actions of former Governments.

Today I have no hesitation in repeating that apology.

Forgiveness helps to break the vicious cycle of bitterness, revenge and escalating conflict. It is the beginning of the road to reconciliation.

Reconciliation is a concept which requires thorough analysis if one is to avoid the misuse of the word as simply another rhetorical catch-phrase. It has a number of different meanings, each, in its own way essential for the establishment of lasting peace.

Its first and foremost meaning is the Reconciliation of man with his God. As Christians we believe that the central act of history was the sacrifice that God made through the incarnation and crucifixion of His Son. We believe that through this sacrifice Christ took upon himself all the sins of all people through all the ages. By so-doing He made it possible for them to be reconciled with God, after the alienation that had been brought about between man and God by original sin.

Its second meaning is the bringing together of those who have previously been alienated from one another. It is the reconciliation that so many people caught up in conflict situations fail to achieve - because they could not find it in their hearts to forgive one another.

It is the coming together that continues to elude many warring communities throughout the world - because they cannot liberate themselves from their burden of bitterness and grievance.

It is the new sense of common purpose and communion that I hope we, in South Africa, are beginning to develop after so many centuries of division and alienation.

Reconciliation in this sense, requires us to put the hurt, reproach and conflict of a divided past behind us and to concentrate, instead, on the promise and common purpose of a united future.

The second sense of reconciliation is the auditing concept of balance. All of us have, at some time or other, struggled to reconcile our bank statements with the often wildly inaccurate figures in the stubs of our cheque books. We overlook long-standing debts and debits. Sometimes we are surprised by unexpected credits. And we have all experienced the satisfaction when we finally succeed in balancing our books to the last penny.

So it is also with our search for reconciliation with one another. We must forgive and we must hope to be forgiven. But we should not do this blindly without cognisance of our responsibilities, debts and credits.

For that reason reconciliation requires that we should also carefully, and dispassionately, examine our collective accounts of our past relationships and seek to find a balance. The purpose of such an exercise must not be a reversion to the kind of reproach or retribution that caused our alienation from one another in the first place. But it is a necessary exercise before we can finally close the books on the past.

The essence of the exercise, however, remains balance and the production of a statement that accurately reflects all of the data at our disposal. If all statements are not brought into reckoning, the accounts will not balance and our efforts will not lead to reconciliation.

A third meaning of reconciliation is the acceptance of things that, in an ideal world, we would rather not accept. We say, in this sense, that we have reconciled ourselves to this or

that reality. We would have preferred something more but the imperative for compromise requires us to accept something less.

Reconciliation, in this sense, is also a prerequisite for peace. The reality is that any search for lasting solutions to the problems that have caused conflict in the past, will require all parties to make real - and sometimes painful - compromises.

We in South Africa have learned that reconciliation and peace require us to accept compromises. This is what we did in negotiating the Constitution and Bill of Rights of which all of us are proud. And this is what we have to do in managing our process of social and economic transformation.

The reality is that our constitutional transformation has had very little effect on the lives of at least half of our population. All South Africans now have the vote – but a large percentage of them do not have jobs or adequate housing; we all enjoy the full spectrum of human rights; but in practice so many continue to live in poverty and deprivation; the world has been promised – but in reality many feel that they have received only crumbs from the new society.

Of course many black South Africans have made steady progress in the middle echelons of the private sector and firmly control the public sector. A great deal has been done to alleviate poverty during the past ten years: more than 1.2 million houses have been built and millions of South Africans have benefited from improved child maintenance grants and pensions.

Nevertheless, the truth remains that we are still very far from achieving the human dignity, the equality and the advancement of human rights and freedoms for all proclaimed in the first article of our constitution.

The manner in which we deal with economic and social transformation during the next decade will determine the long-term success and viability of the new state that we founded ten years ago. If we do it in a balanced way and if we find compromises which can offer security and opportunity for all, there is no reason why we should not succeed. It is a question of justice.

We have come far in South Africa. We have achieved great constitutional victories; we have, I hope, accepted the need to forgive one another and to strive for reconciliation. But there is still a long road ahead of us and many more mountains to climb until we finally achieve all our dreams. Let us today take hands and recommit ourselves to reconciliation in a spirit of forgiveness.