

The 39th Niwano Peace Prize awarded to Father Michael Lapsley, SSM of South Africa

Reason for Selection

Dr. Ranjana Mukhopadhyaya

On behalf of the Niwano Peace Prize Committee, it is my pleasure to announce that the 39th Niwano Peace Prize shall be given to Father Michael Lapsley, SSM of South Africa in recognition of his relentless struggle against apartheid and social discriminations, his support for the liberation movement in South Africa and various peacebuilding activities in other parts of the world. Father Lapsley, as a religious leader and a global social activist, has called upon faith communities to reflect and acknowledge social discrimination within their societies and mobilized their support against racism, apartheid and all forms of social discrimination that prevails in different parts of the world. The exceptional aspect of his social activism is that he has not restricted himself to addressing the socio-economic and political basis of racism but has also emphasized on the process of healing to deal with the bitterness, racial hatred and other socio-psychological impacts of injustices that emerge out of social discriminations.

Father Michael Lapsley was born on June 2nd, 1949 in New Zealand. He began his education at the Anglican Society of the Sacred Mission in New Zealand. As white man, he could have enjoyed the ease and trappings of his privilege, but his religious conviction led him to join the priesthood. In 1971, he joined the religious order of the Society of the Sacred Mission (SSM) in Australia. He was ordained to priesthood in 1973.

He went to South Africa at the height of apartheid in that country and began his work as Chaplain in black and white campuses, which exposed him to student activism and the injustices experience by black students under apartheid. He raised his voice for black students who were being shot, detained and tortured. Because of his involvement in anti-apartheid activities, he was expelled from South Africa, but he took this opportunity to travel the world to raise awareness against racism and mobilize support for the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. In 1990, he sustained severe injuries, including losing both hands, the sight in his right eye, and extensive burns from a letter bomb explosion. This incident, rather than leaving him bitter, angry or dejected, reshaped his life's work and lead to his transition from being a freedom fighter/ social activist to a healer. He realized the need to combine healing and reconciliation into his non-violent peacebuilding efforts.

Father Michael Lapsley was the Chaplain of the Trauma Center for Victims of Violence and Torture in 1993. He founded and became the Director of the Institute for Healing of Memories (IHOM)

in Cape Town, South Africa in 1998. Since then, he continues the Institute's work in South Africa and internationally organizing community forums to combat xenophobia, violence against refugees, workshops for prisoners, human rights education for youth, participating in dialogue sessions and other peacebuilding activities. His "Healing of Memory" workshop provides platform to those who want to share their experiences of injustice and discrimination and want to be heard compassionately. Father Lapsley, in his approach, is very inclusive as he embraces persons of all ages, gender, ethnicity, faith, and marginalized groups.

As a global activist, Father Lapsley after recognizing that racism was not confined to South Africa alone, he did not restrict himself within his country, but has moved globally such as launching the association called Friends of Cuba or creating the International Network for Peace, along with the families of those killed in the September 11 attacks in USA, to promote effective and nonviolent solutions to terrorism.

Father Lapsley's draws his spirituality from his reflections on injustices, pain and sufferings caused by social inequalities that he witnessed around him and this led him to seek justice for all based on his understanding of the Bible. Therefore, while being rooted in Christianity, his appeal has been universal and interfaith. Father Lapsley's non-violent, multi-faith peacebuilding efforts and activities of healing based on restorative justice approach, dialogue, and reconciliation are continuing to contribute to the healing of South Africans as well as many others all over the world.

In this way, Father Michael Lapsley has contributed immensely to the cause of peace and inter-religious cooperation, which is in congruence with the mission of the Niwano Peace Prize.