

# JUST BECAUSE



Advocate  
how she v  
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## Reconciliation process goes beyond just saying 'sorry'

**E**ACH year at this time, Australia marks Reconciliation Week.

The week is contained by two significant anniversaries. In 1967, on May 27, in a national referendum, 92 per cent of Australians voted in favour of acknowledging the citizenship of the original inhabitants of this land.

On June 3, 1992, the Australian High Court passed down its verdict in the Mabo case, recognising the Native Title rights of Australia's indigenous peoples to their land. These have been two significant steps in our national journey of reconciliation, which acknowledges the painful parts of our history.

Reconciliation involves more than just saying "Sorry", and continuing as if nothing had ever happened.

The old adage says "Forgive and forget". But real hurt and genuine forgiveness can never really be forgotten because they are experiences that shape us as human persons.

It takes courage to offer forgiveness, but it takes equally as much courage to receive forgiveness.

Reconciliation is about people or groups of people moving on together after hurts have been acknowledged, accepted and forgiven, and with a mutual commitment to doing things differently in a new relationship.

There is a wonderful story that illustrates for me the challenge and reality of Reconciliation.

“But real hurt and genuine forgiveness can never really be forgotten because they are experiences that shape us as human persons.”

It comes from the many stories that were shared during the Truth and Reconciliation Hearings in South Africa following the dismantling of Apartheid in that country. This is no fictional tale, but a recounting of the life experience of real people. It goes like this.

A frail elderly black woman appeared at the hearings as a victim of apartheid. Standing opposite her in the court-room was a group of white security police officers, one of whom, during his trial, had been implicated in the murders of both the woman's son and husband.

The woman recalled the day when her son, her only child, had been taken from her home, shot at point-blank range, and his body thrown on a fire and burnt.

She also remembered the time some years later, when the same group of men came again to her home, and took away her husband. She knew nothing of his fate until about two years later. It was then that the same man came a third time to her home, this time for her. She was taken to a place near a

river, where she saw her husband, beaten and bound, lying on a pile of wood, which was ready to be set alight.

As this happened in front of her eyes, she heard her husband's final words: "Father, forgive them".

In the courtroom, the convicted officer confessed to his involvement in these events, and the woman was asked what consequences she thought were appropriate, in justice, for this man who had destroyed her family.

She had three things she wanted. She wanted to be taken to the place where her husband was killed so that she could gather some of the dust and give him a proper burial. Secondly, she asked that the convicted man become like a son to her, that he visit her twice each month so that she could pour out on him the love that she longed to lavish on family.

And lastly, honouring the memory of her husband, she asked that this man accept her forgiveness; she requested that someone lead her across the courtyard so that she could embrace the man and assure him

of her forgiveness.

Imagine the response of the convicted officer!

The report goes on to say that at this point he fainted. Would it not have been easier for him to have spent some years in prison?

It would have been possible, then, for him to avoid the change of heart that is needed for genuine repentance. But by her request for him to establish a relationship with her, this woman challenged him to authentic, ongoing change of heart and mind and attitude.

Reconciliation involves heartfelt sorrow, genuine repentance, generous acceptance and willingness on the part of all involved to journey into the future, together, conscious of the past, but not bound by it.

Perhaps Kevin Rudd captured the essence of this in his statement of Apology to the Stolen Generations in February, 2008, when he named the future as one "where we embrace the possibility of new solutions to enduring problems where old approaches have failed".

The greatest challenge in doing this, it seems to me, lies in finding ways to do it together, in respectful relationship with each other, indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. It is when we know the face and the story of the ones with whom we are called to be reconciled, that reconciliation can be a seed for a new future.

Is there something you can do this week to help make Reconciliation real in our nation?

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