Political Reconciliation: An Imperfect but Promising Model for Peace

WASHINGTON D.C. — Effective peace agreements are rarely accomplished by idealists. The process of moving from situations of entrenched oppression, armed conflict, open warfare, and mass atrocities toward peace and reconciliation requires a series of small steps and compromises to open the way for the kind of dialogue and negotiation that make political stability, the beginning of democracy, and the rule of law a possibility.

For over forty years, Charles Villa-Vicencio has been on the front lines of Africa’s battle for racial equality. In his new book, Walk with Us and Listen, Villa-Vicencio argues that reconciliation needs honest talk to promote trust building and enable former enemies and adversaries to explore joint solutions to the cause of their conflicts. He offers a critical assessment of the South African experiment in transitional justice as captured in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and considers the influence of ubuntu, in which individuals are defined by their relationships, and other African models of reconciliation.

Villa-Vicencio challenges those who stress the obligation to prosecute those allegedly guilty of gross violation of human rights, replacing this call with the need for more complementarity between international organizations, like the International Criminal Court, and other traditional African mechanisms to achieve the greater goals of justice and peacebuilding.

Walk With Us and Listen includes a foreword by Archbishop Emeritus of Cape Town and Nobel Peace Prize-winner Desmond Tutu. According to Tutu, this important work “provides an important corrective to the tendency among some participants in the transitional justice debate to relegate reconciliation to the status of a poor cousin of punitive justice.”

Charles Villa-Vicencio is a visiting research fellow at The Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University and senior research fellow at the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation in Cape Town, South Africa. He was executive director of the Institute from 2000-2007. He was also national research director of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

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