Michael Lapsley

Alan Michael Lapsley SSM, known as Father Michael, is a South African Anglican priest and social justice activist. He was born in New Zealand on 2 June 1949 and ordained to the priesthood in Australia where he joined the religious order the Society of the Sacred Mission. (SSM)

In 1973 he arrived in Durban, South Africa, as an undergraduate student. Soon thereafter, during the height of apartheid repression, he became chaplain to students at both black and white universities in Durban. In 1976, he began to speak out on behalf of schoolchildren who were being shot, detained and tortured.

This was the year of the Soweto Uprising, which sparked protests across the country. Fr Michael was taking a stand in his role as national chaplain to Anglican students, a position he held at the time.

In September 1976, he was expelled from the country. He went to live in Lesotho, where he continued his studies and became a member of the African National Congress and a chaplain to the organisation in exile. During this period he travelled the world, mobilising faith communities, in particular, to oppose apartheid and support the liberation struggle.

After a police raid in Maseru in 1982 in which 42 people were killed, he moved to Zimbabwe. It was here that in 1990, three months after ANC leader Nelson Mandela's release from prison, he was sent a letter bomb by the Civil Cooperation Bureau, a covert outfit of the apartheid security forces. It was hidden inside two religious magazines. He lost both hands and the sight in one eye in the blast, and was seriously burnt.

On his return to South Africa in 1992 he helped to start the association Friends of Cuba and later became its first National President. He was awarded the Cuban Friendship Medal by the Cuban Council of State.

In 1993, he became Chaplain of the Trauma Centre for Victims of Violence and Torture in Cape Town, which assisted the country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). This work led to the establishment, in 1998, of the Institute for Healing of Memories (IHOM) in Cape Town. The IHOM aims to allow many more South Africans to tell their stories in workshops where they work through their trauma.

The IHOM is based in Cape Town, South Africa, but Fr Michael has worked in many other countries, in Africa and across the world. The organisation now works with groups including those affected by political violence; those affected and infected by HIV and AIDS; refugees and asylum seekers; prisoners and war veterans. The IHOM is also represented in the USA.

Lapsley is a graduate of the Australian College of Theology, the National University of Lesotho and the University of Zimbabwe. He has honorary doctorates from the Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia, the University of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa and Liverpool Hope University in the United Kingdom. He has been awarded the Queen's Service Medal by the Government of New Zealand for service to Southern African communities. He is also Honorary Consul for New Zealand in Cape Town.

He was the subject of the biographical work 'Priest and Partisan: A South African Journey' (1996) by his fellow South African priest and theologian Michael Worsnip, with a foreword by Nelson Mandela.

The Government of the Western Cape awarded him the Order of the Disa.

Member of the Community of the Cross of Nails

Nelson Mandela has said of him, 'Michael's life represents a compelling metaphor … a foreigner who came to our country and was transformed.... (His) life is part of the tapestry of the many long journeys and struggles of our people.'

March 2007 Speaker: 'Towards Effective Anglican Mission', an International conference on Prophetic Witness, Social Development and HIV and AIDS. South Africa.

April 2008 Honorary Doctorate of Theology from the University of KwaZulu Natal, DTh Honoris Causa) (UKZN)

May 2008 Conference in Belfast – Keynote Speaker on Victim Empowerment and the Contribution to Peace Building on the theme 'Victims/survivors as agents of change'

August 2008 Annual Diakonia Award Citation, Durban

November 2008 Speaker at 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights event in Luxembourg, entitled 'Healing the aftermath of terror and tyranny: A survivor speaks'.

February 2009 Keynote Speaker at world conference for Chief of Military Chaplains, South Africa

July 1010 Doctorate of Humane Letters, Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool, UK

September 2010 Speaker at South African Council of Churches Conference 'The role of punitive justice in reconciling – Is this a christian concept?'

May 2012 Honorary Doctorate at Virginia Theological Seminary, USA

May 2012 USA Launch of memoir 'Redeeming the past – My Journey from Freedom Fighter to Healer'

September 2012 South Africa Launch of memoir 'Redeeming the past – My Journey from Freedom Fighter to Healer'

October 2012 Speaker at the Havel Symposium 2012 'Courageous Citizenship: Redeeming the Past and Building the Future'

October 2012 Speaker at United Theological Seminary, USA, 'Pain Knows No Boundaries: An Interfaith Journey of Healing and Hope'

October 2012 Speaker at St John's University, USA, 'Pain Knows No Boundaries: An Interfaith Journey of Healing and Hope'

2013 First Prize from the Catholic Press Association of the USA - Biography category, for memoir 'Redeeming the Past – My Journey from Freedom Fighter to Healer'

2013 Andrew Murray & Desmond Tutu Prize for memoir 'Redeeming the Past – My Journey from Freedom Fighter to Healer'

8 November 2013 Delivered closing sermon at the 10th Assembly of the World Council of Churches, in Busan (South Korea)