

## Mandela

Michael Sean Winters | Dec. 6, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

Rarely does a public figure receive such universal praise, still less a political figure. Yet, the encomiums for Nelson Mandela are entirely appropriate not only because of the political decisions he made, but because of the man himself. Last night, a friend from Africa sent me a text calling Mandela "Africa's greatest political icon," and an icon, remember, represents the face of sanctity and, in the Orthodox tradition, an icon is venerated as itself a holy thing. All this, and more, is true of Mandela.

For those of us who have no personal remembrances, and who have not lived in South Africa, our task is less to take the measure of the man than to discern what lessons his life holds for us.

For those of us who are unafraid to see the necessity of force in the conduct of international relations, Mandela's life represents a strong caution. The apartheid regime in South Africa appeared, in the 1970s and 1980s, to be one of those miserable, intractable conflicts that are unlikely to have a happy resolution. It was inconceivable that the white minority government would simply end its repression, or that the black majority could take power peacefully. The example of Zimbabwe provided some legitimacy to a depressing sense of the situation in South Africa.

Yet, apartheid fell, almost like the Soviet Union, with remarkable speed and a remarkable lack of violence. Credit belongs not only to Mandela but to F.W. DeKlerk, the last ruler of South Africa under the apartheid regime, who first went to Robben Island to meet with Mandela, led his government to release him from prison, and began negotiations for ending the evil racial laws. Both men received the Nobel Peace Prize for their efforts but their greatest prize was the emergence of a peaceful South Africa, still beset by problems to be sure, but one built upon one man, one vote democracy, racial equality, and the rule of law. It was no small accomplishment. In the long catalogue of human iniquities that is so much of the historical record, here was something different, something peaceful, something magnificent. Mandela gave hope to his people. His memory gives hope to all that not all political conflicts must end in tears.

The second lesson from Mandela's life is the power of suffering. He spent 27 years of his life in prison. Think of all the things that drive us to frustration or even anger. Being stopped at a red light, and the person in front of you is on his cell phone chatting away, immobile, long after the light has turned green. The acquaintance who always disappoints, coming late to a dinner or forgetting an important paper. The person "in the Church, at the Post Office, at the credit card company, who, when presented with a problem explains there is nothing to be done with complete finality. Compare these irritation to the experience of being ripped from life, from your family, from your occupation, from all normal human interaction for 27 years. Prison brutalizes unless the prisoner can come to terms with the suffering it imposes.

In the movie "The Shoes of the Fisherman," the Soviet leader Kamenev, played by Laurence Olivier, brings the imprisoned Ukrainian Archbishop Kiril Lakota, played by Anthony Quinn, to Moscow and announces his intention to set him free. Lakota replies, "I have been free for a long time. Not entirely perhaps?." I do not know

what Mandela experienced in prison, but surely he came to a similar conclusion, that he possessed an interior freedom that was more precious, and more inviolable, than the walls of the prison and the water beyond Robben Island. I can think of no other explanation for Mandela's complete lack of a vengeful heart upon his release. Only a peacefulness of heart explains his subsequent commitment to a peaceful resolution of the crisis in his country.

Peace and reconciliation are not without their price and they come from more than a good heart. Here we come to the third lesson of Mandela's life. His decision to set up Truth and Reconciliation commissions was critical to the establishment of a new South Africa. The victims of the oppression had a right to have their story told. More deeply, no reconciliation can be truly affected unless it is built on candor: We confess our sins before we are absolved from them. The decision to apply this lesson of the confessional to the politics of a nation was a risk. So many painful details were told. So many old and not so old wounds re-opened. And, to be clear, justice was set aside in the interest of achieving social peace and reconciliation. Yet, it worked, and it worked at two levels. First it did achieve the reconciliation that was sought. But, it also achieved something else. It freed the oppressors as well as the oppressed from their own history.

When I was researching my biography of Jerry Falwell, one of the things that struck me was this: I came to believe that Falwell had a genuine change of heart on the issue of racial segregation, and he spoke often about the sin of segregation and the injustice Jim Crow had perpetrated upon black Americans. But, I never came across Falwell discussing what segregation had done to white Americans, the way it had distorted their moral compass and made them complicit in a moral enormity. "The moral danger, after all, is never that one might become a victim, but that one might be a perpetrator or a bystander," wrote historian Timothy Snyder in his book "The Bloodlands." Mandela invited his fellow South Africans who were white to acknowledge the moral danger that too many white southerners in this country chose never to examine.

Falwell, of course, was one of the loudest voices of support for the apartheid regime in the 1980s. He and his political hero, Sen. Jesse Helms, who led the opposition to sanctions against the apartheid regime in the U.S. Senate, had some explaining to do when they got to the pearly gates. They were outliers, to be sure. When the Congress passed a law imposing sanctions against the South African regime, and Ronald Reagan vetoed it, the Congress overrode his veto by a wide margin. It was the first override of a presidential veto on an issue of foreign policy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. That veto forever tarnishes Reagan's reputation and it remains a large moral blemish on those who supported him in his defense of an indefensible regime.

So, those are the lessons I find myself taking from the life of this icon: Intractable situations can sometimes surprisingly find resolutions that are peaceful, the redemptive power of suffering remains a constant in the spiritual life and can have profound political consequences, and, finally, truth and reconciliation, always and only if they are joined together, are sometimes more important than strict justice. Those are large lessons. They came from a great man, an indispensable man, a man whom today the entire world mourns.

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