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Religious Life

"The table is where it all begins, with an invitation to belong, to be seen and to be nourished. It is a powerful metaphor for the kingdom of God, a place of grace, nourishment and reconciliation." (Dreamstime/Yuri Arcurs)

by The Life Panelists

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Reconciliation has always been central to Christian discipleship. Religious life has long witnessed healing and unity, yet today's divided world challenges us: How do we live as true agents of reconciliation? How do we embody the Gospel's call to healing and peace?

We asked this month's panel to reflect on the following question:

How is healing and forgiveness facilitated or happening in your community?

Anne Henson has been a Presentation Sister in the Lismore Congregation in Australia for 74 years. During this time, she has served as a secondary school teacher, adult faith educator, and spiritual carer in a residential aged care facility. Now living in a retirement community, she contributes a monthly column to the community newsletter and remains committed to being an attentive listener to family, friends and neighbors.

In a spirit of reconciliation, I acknowledge and pay my respects to the past, present and emerging traditional custodians and elders of our nation, Australia. I also acknowledge their ongoing connection to country, community and culture.

Symbolic actions such as flying the Aboriginal flag alongside the Australian flag on public buildings and conducting a ceremonial Welcome to Country by an Indigenous elder before public gatherings are now common practices. Adding Indigenous place names to localities is also gaining ground. For instance, the Australian Broadcasting Commission does this, and other organizations are following suit.

Feelings run deep at this time of the year when Australia Day, Jan. 26, is observed as a public holiday. It commemorates the arrival of European settlers who claimed the country for the British Crown, considering it to be *terra nullius* (land belonging to no one). Australia's First Nations refer to this date as Invasion Day.

This disjunction lies at the heart of the reconciliation movement. For Indigenous people, land is not just territory, a place on which to build. Land is at the very heart of their spirituality. For them, everything is connected: landforms, people, plants, animals, the cosmos itself.

A young girl holds an Aboriginal flag at an Indigenous Australians protest during Australia Day in Sydney Jan. 26, 2024. (AP/Rick Rycroft)

Connectivity is the theme of much current development in spirituality. In "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home," Pope Francis refers to "the seamless garment of God's creation. ... Soil, water, mountains: everything is, as it were, a caress of God." Other organizations are following suit.

In 2017, the First Nations National Constitutional Convention issued the Uluru Statement from the Heart, emphasizing the spiritual connection of First Nations to the land and expressing their ideas for just treatment of Indigenous people. These ideas included establishing an Indigenous Voice to Parliament, which was put to a national referendum in 2024 and defeated.

This outcome was anticipated, as the referendum lacked bipartisan support in Parliament and was rejected primarily due to a lack of implementation details. Notably, significant Indigenous elders voted against it.

Truth telling is integral to the Uluru Statement, calling for an accurate account of Australia's 65,000-year history and the ongoing impact of European occupation on Indigenous lives and culture. This is a sad record of Aboriginal deaths in custody, crime and incarceration of youth, suicide and short life expectancy caused by disease and addictions of European origin. Annual "Commonwealth Closing the Gap" reports provide independent research and policy solutions.

The ongoing positive impact and implementation of the Native Title Act (1992) and the National Apology to the Stolen Generations (2008) encourage us to believe that reconciliation can be achieved with mutual respect, dialogue, goodwill and forgiveness.

Damaris Muthusi is a member of the Sisters for Christian Community, a trainer and a resource mobilization expert, consulting with faith-based organizations, nongovernmental organizations and community-based organizations on organization sustainability and strategic management. She lectures at Tangaza University in Kenya, teaching organizational management, child safeguarding and protection, social entrepreneurship, development studies and spirituality for social transformation. She holds a master's degree in social ministry with a focus on organizational management, among other certifications. She is pursuing a doctorate in social transformation, researching community engagement and food security. She also mentors youth and children and is a member of several professional and religious bodies dedicated to societal transformation.

As Sisters for Christian Community, destined to give witness to a collegial community, we live a shared spirituality that finds its source in Christ's prayer, "that

all may be one" (John 17:20-26).

Facilitating healing and reconciliation in the communities where we live and work is part of our mission. Our sisters today, in communities across various nations, respond to humanity's current challenges by advocating for social justice in all its diversity.

In Kenya, safeguarding and protecting minors and vulnerable adults is a significant concern. Experiences of social exclusion, ideological indoctrination, and harmful practices such as child trafficking, forced migration and sexual exploitation jeopardize the future of humanity. These issues create a disconnection among people, highlighting the urgent need for healing and forgiveness.

Students at Kairungu Primary School in Mwingi West, Kitui County, Kenya, use newspapers provided through the Newspapers in Education program to engage in reading and discussion. The initiative aimed to enhance literacy, strengthen teacher-student relationships, and promote awareness of child rights and protection. (Courtesy of Damaris Muthusi)

In my apostolate, I have been involved in raising awareness about safeguarding and protecting vulnerable persons, emphasizing the sacredness of life and the need for a preventive system that ensures children grow with dignity. This aligns with international laws and church teachings on human rights.

Due to the high demand for these services and the gaps identified in organizations, I founded BAFA Network in 2016, a platform that brings together experts in safeguarding and protecting vulnerable persons.

Through partnerships, we engaged schools and faith-based organizations in Kenya and beyond, providing training on safeguarding and protecting vulnerable persons. This resulted in positive outcomes, such as improved performance in schools and zero cases of abuse. So far, BAFA Network has created a safe space for dialogue, policy development and review, and support networks, promoting justice and healing in communities. We aim to expand these efforts globally through training of trainers, fostering a world where respect for human dignity leads to safer communities and nations.

Healing and forgiveness can be facilitated in different ways. However, the most important is addressing the root causes. This is crucial because it helps prevent recurring issues by tackling the underlying factors rather than just the symptoms.

By understanding and addressing these causes, we can implement long-term solutions that foster sustainable change. This approach not only resolves immediate problems but also prevents future occurrences, leading to more effective, impactful, and lasting outcomes.

Whether it is safeguarding vulnerable persons or addressing social issues, addressing root causes ensures a more comprehensive and compassionate response. This is our hope and commitment as Sisters for Christian Community.

Sometimes, we venture into impossibilities in the eyes of many. But by living among the people, we experience the pain communities go through, and together we seek sustainable solutions for peaceful coexistence — "that all may be one ... as you and I are one ... so that the world will believe you sent me."

Karen Englebretsen of the Sisters of the Cross and Passion was born in Aotearoa, New Zealand, where her oma's secret baptism sparked her faith. At 16, she became Catholic, inspired by the sense of community. After completing teaching qualifications and traveling, she felt called to join the Sisters of the Cross and Passion, moving to Australia nearly 10 years ago. Now based in Melbourne, she serves as a spiritual care worker in the homeless sector, opening the mission house doors to each person she meets. Inspired by her foundress, Elizabeth Prout, she responds with courage and compassion to the needs of the day.

In our communities, especially for those on the edges, healing and forgiveness are deeply intertwined. These concepts are not abstract ideals but lived realities that we see unfold daily in our mission work. For me, living out my vocation means being a visible sign of God's presence in the lives of those who are most vulnerable, offering an invitation to sit at the table — both literally and metaphorically — and experience healing, forgiveness and belonging.

The table is where it all begins, with an invitation to belong, to be seen and to be nourished. It is a powerful metaphor for the kingdom of God, a place of grace, nourishment and reconciliation.

When we think of the Lord's table, we remember that it is an invitation extended to all, regardless of their past mistakes or present struggles — an invitation that often goes unnoticed among those on the margins. Yet it is at the table that healing begins — not just physical restoration, but the deeper healing of the spirit, the restoration of relationships and the rebuilding of broken lives.

As a sister, I live with the daily awareness of the gift and responsibility that comes with sitting at this table. I am always struck by the grace of being invited by Christ to partake of the bread of life, to be nourished by his love and to share this love with others. Yet I am also keenly aware of the question that lingers in my heart: "Who is missing from the table?"

In my work as a spiritual care provider at a homeless outreach center, I see this invitation as crucial. It is not just a physical table where food is served, but a table where dignity is affirmed, where people are seen, listened to and respected.

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Each day, I offer the simple yet profound act of presence. I offer the gift of sitting with those often overlooked and forgotten by society, hearing their stories and creating a space where forgiveness and healing can begin and continue.

Forgiveness, in this context, is not just individual. It extends to the collective. Many of those on the margins carry the weight of historical and systemic injustice, wounds deeply embedded in the fabric of our society. Living in Australia, I am particularly aware of the ongoing suffering of Aboriginal communities, whose pain is still felt deeply in the lives of many. The grief of the Stolen Generations — the loss of land, culture and identity — is a collective wound that calls for communal healing.

The table, in this broader sense, becomes a symbol of reconciliation — not only between individuals but between communities, cultures and histories. The process of communal healing involves acknowledging past wrongs, offering apologies and working toward justice. Healing and forgiveness happen when we show up without judgment, when we offer the invitation to sit at the table, to share in the brokenness and the grace that comes with it.

It is not always easy and is often messy, but it is where the real work of transformation begins. As a sister, my calling is to help others see that they, too, have a place at the table — no matter their past, no matter their pain. At God's table, there is always room for one more!

Patricia Lourdes (Petite) Navarra Lao, from the Philippines, holds a Doctor of Ministry degree from Regis College, Toronto School of Theology. She serves as the mission promoter and safeguarding lead for the Religious of Notre Dame of the Missions Philippine Region. With years of dedicated work among the Menubu Dulangan people on their ancestral land, she focuses on Indigenous rights, ecology, interfaith dialogue, and advancing digital educational technology to support her ministry. Her commitment reflects a profound dedication to fostering understanding and well-being in marginalized communities.

My sharing is deeply personal. I was born and raised in Cotabato City, Philippines, a place marked by resilience amid conflict. Bombings and gun violence have long been a part of life here, shaping the identity of its people.

My family's story reflects this reality: In 1995, my father, a government official, was shot at close range; in 2009, my uncle, a city port officer, was maimed by a grenade blast. Nearly everyone in Cotabato carries such stories — of lives interrupted, of grief woven into the fabric of daily life.

Yet, despite its struggles, Cotabato is also a place of hope. As the seat of the transitioning Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, it stands at a crossroads. This region is striving to transform decades of conflict into a sustainable peace. But such a transformation requires more than political and legal frameworks. Healing, forgiveness and reconciliation must take root in the hearts of its people.

How do we heal from years of mistrust, pain and discrimination? Political solutions, while necessary, cannot address the deep wounds that conflict leaves behind. True reconciliation demands a deeply personal and spiritual engagement — a call to transformation for everyone living in this region.

A Religious of Notre Dame of the Missions, left, and a Sister Oblate of Notre Dame, right, walk during the Mindanao Week of Peace celebration in Cotabato, the Philippines, usually observed in the last week of November and the first week of December. (Courtesy of Petite Lao)

The Religious of Notre Dame of the Missions established its presence in Cotabato in 1990, amid the city's challenges. Despite significant risks, we continually choose to be with the people of Cotabato.

As missionaries, we recognize that the process of healing belongs to the local people. Our role is not to lead but to accompany. As an international community inspired by our Trinitarian charism, we bear witness to the enduring possibility that diverse cultures and traditions can coexist in harmony.

We work to confront our own biases. We engage deeply with the stories of those around us, allowing their pain to touch our hearts and strengthen our commitment to being peacebuilders.

In Cotabato, healing and forgiveness are collective endeavors. They lie in the daily choices of its residents to foster trust and build connections. The aspiration for a peaceful lifestyle, a "culture of peace," finds expression in various initiatives, such as peace orientation workshops, integrating peace concepts in education, celebrating the Mindanao Week of Peace, establishing the Mindanao Religious Leaders Conference, and sharing religious holidays across traditions.

These simple yet profound interactions — acts of courage, kindness and understanding — are the building blocks for a sustainable peace.

In this work, we, as Religious of Notre Dame of the Missions sisters, are both humbled and inspired. We are companions of the people of Cotabato, with faith and hope in their capacity to build a future shaped by harmony and mutual respect. Healing and forgiveness may not come easily, but they remain possible, one step at a time.

Born in Myanmar, Stella Mary is a member of the Servite Congregation, which is committed to prayer and service. She was missioned to Australia to focus on supporting her home country financially and spiritually. Currently, she teaches science, math and religious education at a secondary school, shaping both the academic and spiritual lives of her students. Additionally, she serves as a support worker at a refuge for women affected by domestic violence, providing guidance and a safe space for rebuilding their lives. She also offers counseling services in prison ministry and the wider community, helping individuals navigate personal challenges and find healing through her diverse ministry.

Forgiveness is a core virtue in many religious traditions, and in my congregation, it is central to spiritual growth and communal life. Broadly defined, forgiveness involves letting go of resentment or the desire for revenge toward someone who has caused harm, regardless of whether they ask for forgiveness.

In religious life, this act takes on even deeper significance, connecting to divine mercy, reconciliation and communal harmony. Forgiveness is not only an individual act but a communal practice rooted in the teachings of Christ, particularly His command to forgive "70 times seven" (Matthew 18:22) highlights the boundless nature of forgiveness.

Author Lysa TerKeurst clarifies that forgiveness is not about denying what happened or excusing the person's actions. It is about releasing the hold that the past has on our present. It is about choosing to no longer be defined by the wrongdoing.

Forgiveness is a process, not an event. In our congregation in Myanmar, forgiveness is deeply embedded in both our spirituality and daily practices, with compassion as the foundation for all interpersonal relationships. As a manifestation of compassion, forgiveness involves understanding and empathy, especially when one has wronged another.

Servite Sisters seek forgiveness during meditation. (Courtesy of Stella Mary)

It is not optional but an integral part of our faith journey, essential for maintaining harmony within the community. The process of seeking and granting forgiveness is deliberate and prayerful, guided by our constitutions, and reflects our commitment to live the Gospel values authentically.

Forgiveness is expressed through both words and actions. Members who have caused harm are encouraged to acknowledge their mistakes and seek reconciliation openly, while those who have been hurt are invited to offer forgiveness, extending God's mercy. This mutual exchange of seeking and granting forgiveness not only restores relationships but also strengthens communal solidarity.

A distinctive aspect of our forgiveness practice was once observed through rituals for candidates, novices and juniors. When they made mistakes, they would kneel in the center of a circle, kiss the floor, and ask for forgiveness from the other members. This symbolic act fostered humility and accountability.

Over time, this practice evolved into a more flexible approach, where the sisters now engage in personal dialogues with the superior or fellow members to seek forgiveness. Additionally, the community gathers for a special prayer service to seek communal forgiveness, fostering unity and spiritual renewal.

Forgiveness is an ongoing journey, requiring humility, patience and trust in God's grace. While practices may vary across congregations, the essence of forgiveness remains the same: a reflection of God's unconditional love, leading to deeper unity and peace within the community.