

Conference on Reconciliation and Change

Roberto Goizueta—
“Opportunities for Reconciliation between Cuba and the Diaspora”

❖ September 14th, 2012, 8:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. ❖
Miami Dade College, Wolfson Campus

Roberto Goizueta—Opportunities for Reconciliation Among Cubans:

First of all, I have to say thank you for inviting me to offer some reflections. For me, as for many of you, it is really astonishing to see myself at a conference like this; not too long ago it would have been unimaginable. A lot of things are happening these days that would have been unimaginable not long ago, and it is thanks to people like Carlos and so many others of you who have been witnesses to the possibility of the unimaginable actually happening that I am here and am very grateful for your inspiring examples.

My task, as I understood it originally, was to bring all of this together and apply it to Cuba. I am afraid I am going to disappoint you, because as I tried to do that, I soon realized that it would be impossible. And in any case, so many of you have more experience and wisdom with these cases than I would be able to bring. What I will try and do is offer some reflections on what some of these very rich excellent presentations may have impacted my own thinking, my own understanding as a Cuban-American, and my own ways of going forward in this process of reconciliation.

I would like to begin by offering some personal reflections, a couple of stories, which are not unique to me. I'm sure a number of you have similar stories that you could tell. As Carlos mentioned this morning, I came to the United States as a 6 year old, so I am part of that second generation that Father Schreiter was

referring to. My earliest memory as a child was sitting on the Pan-American airplane on the tarmac in Jose Marti Airport, looking out the window, with my mother, grandmother, and siblings waiting to leave for Miami; looking out the window and waving at my father who was staying behind because he could not leave at the time. Fortunately, several weeks later he was able to come out, but of course at the time I had no idea whether I would ever see my father again.

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Fast-forward a number of years. After we left Cuba—and I grew up in United States, in the South—it never occurred to me, it had never dawned on me, that I would ever see Cuba again. That was part of my past and I was on to make a life, a living for myself, in this country. I assumed the kinds of positions vis-à-vis Cuba that many of my family and friends, and

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the Cuban community had had during those years. I basically did not want to have anything to do with Cuba. I was now an American.

All of that changed in 1998, when Pope John Paul II visited Cuba. It changed not only because I as a Catholic, as theologian, attach great importance to that visit, but also because the way that visit changed the lives and the views of so many of my family, friends, and others who themselves had not previously conceived themselves returning to Cuba, and now began talking about going to Cuba, just as the Pope had. It took me a number of years, struggling back and forth to myself, with whether I wanted to return to Cuba.

Several years later, I finally came to the point at which I could say “Yes, I want to return,” even though I could not really say why I wanted to return. I want to return maybe for the same reason an orphan child wants to return to go see their parents, parents maybe they had not known or had not known since they were children. And I had some the same fears and anxieties that happen in those situations.

How would my parents receive me? Would they recognize me? Would they turn me away?

With all those anxieties, I went to Cuba a few years ago on a humanitarian mission, wondering how the Cuban people would receive me.

It did not take long for my fears to be assuaged to my fears to disappear. Wherever I went on the island, people would welcome me with open arms. And their response was always the same, almost the exact same words: “Gracias por no olvidararnos.” *Thank you for not forgetting us;*

thank you for remembering us. I, who in a very real sense had left them, had abandoned them, was now being welcomed back with open arms, no questions asked. They were not saying “How dare you, how dare you leave us, how dare you go off and make your money and be a success,” but rather, “Thank you, thank you for coming back, thank you for not forgetting us.”

As a second-generation immigrant, I am profoundly aware and appreciative of the pain suffered by my parents and grandparents and the sacrifices they made in order to make a living in this new society, in this new country, and to help me in terms of my own life. This it seems to me, again as we heard this morning, is the first step; acknowledging the past, acknowledging the wounds. Because the past is not past; it is always a part of the present and it will always be part of the future. The first step, ironically then, in reconciliation, is remembering the pain and really feeling the pain, which is still with us from the past. As William Faulkner once said, “The past is not dead, it’s not even the past.” Accepting the fact that the wounds will always be there and we can never erase them. No matter how hard we try, no matter how much retribution we get, the pain will always be there. The corpses will always be there. The suffering will always be there. The question is what do we do with it?

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One of the memories of my most recent return to Cuba was going to the Cemetario Colon, the Columbus Cemetery, and going to visit the mausoleum that my family had there, in which there were 6 tombs. Only one of them had a body in them, the other 5 were empty. The other 5, of course, were meant for relatives of mine, who ended up being buried in Spain, or in Miami, or other places around the world. So I think that cemetery, that scene of empty tombs, remains seared in my memory. It's important, I think, and it's important for me to accept that those plots will always remain empty; that they will never be filled, no matter what happens in the future. That the fear of losing my father will always be a part of who I am. Yet like Jesus' wounds, they can become instruments of transformation, of reconciliation, of resurrection—if we can acknowledge that we are all wounded. All Cubans, in one way or another, are victims of the past 54 years. So again, as we heard this morning, I think we have to get beyond this notion of victimhood, that “I'm a victim and you're not, that my victimhood is worse than yours.”

We have to accept and express publically our wounds. We have to learn anew to share our wounds, realizing that we are not alone. When we accept that fact, we will move from being victims to being survivors, as Father Schreiter said.

Suffering can be, I think, healing, when it is undertaken with others. We have to risk making ourselves vulnerable in sharing our wounds with others, even though their wounds may be very different than ours. Our wounds, as we heard this morning, can be sources of healing for others' wounds. Such an acknowledgement will help us realize, believe it or not, that Cubans are not unique. When we acknowledge our common woundedness, we can reach out, embrace and learn from

others who have been similarly wounded, whether in South Africa or Northern Ireland or elsewhere - that the wounds themselves can become sources of bonds and reconciliation amongst people.

In the Book of Job, a turning point for Job occurs when he realizes that he is not alone in his affliction: *I am not the worst of all possible human beings, there are also others who suffer. So many others have suffered similar fates.* This realization empowers Job to step outside of his own world and reach out to others in their suffering.

Another thing we heard this morning, repeatedly, is forgiving is not forgetting. Indeed, unless we remember, we cannot truly forgive. I would go even further than saying we don't have to forget to forgive. I would say that we *have to remember precisely* in order to forgive, because we cannot forgive unless we know what we are forgiving. It has to be based on truth, as we heard this morning. Again, this is perfectly exemplified in the person of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ. That is, the wounds become the instrument of forgiveness. *Look at what you Apostles have done to me by abandoning me to those Roman soldiers; you have inflicted those wounds, but guess what? Peace be with you! That is my response to those wounds, which you have helped inflict on*

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me. I don't erase them, I don't pretend they did not happen; yes you did betray me, yes you did abandon me, but in the midst of that, even because of that, I am able to forgive you and reconstitute the community we had before you abandoned me.

This demands, I think, above all, a willingness to take risks; a willingness to open ourselves up to our brothers and sisters on the island because of what we can do for them, but especially because of what they can do for us. It is not a question simply of altruism. It is a question of what I can learn from, how I can be touched and changed by, other people who have reached out to me in situations in which I would not have expected it. It means placing ourselves in positions of vulnerability and risk, and allowing us to be changed by those situations. And this can only happen, ultimately, between persons. And again, this is something we heard this morning. Reconciliation ultimately does not happen between governments. Governments may have alliances, all sorts of other things, but reconciliations ultimately happen between persons. If we are going to sit around waiting for governments to be “reconciled” to each other, we will be waiting a long time.

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The task for us is to begin to build at the grassroots level the kind of relationships that will make for, and contribute to, the rebuilding of civil society in Cuba.

Two of the victims of the past 50 years have been the willingness to take risks, something that has been made nearly impossible on both extremes of the debate; a people unwilling to risk because

“the Cuban people are still known for their risk-taking. -our entrepreneurial spirit, which you still see very much in Cuba. The ability to risk the security of the present in order to improve the future; to work towards a better future. We need to be able to take that risk, that attitude of risk that we bring to businesses here, or we bring to our professions and apply that to our relationships.”

they are afraid of what they might lose. And yet, ironically, the Cuban people are still known for their risk-taking. -our entrepreneurial spirit, which you still see very much in Cuba. The ability to risk the security of the present in order to improve the future; to work towards a better future. We need to be able to take that risk, that attitude of risk that we bring to businesses here, or we bring to our professions and apply that to our relationships. What would happen if we were willing to risk the intransigence of the present in order to risk having real relationships in the future?

Another victim of the past 50 years has been personhood, the dignity of the person. Too often we assume that the opposite or the counterpart of totalitarianism is individualism. Communism is totalitarian, capitalism is individualistic, etc. I think, from what we have heard this morning, that that is not the case at all. In fact totalitarian governments are the most individualistic governments, I would argue. Totalitarianism depends on individualism to survive, to thrive. Totalitarian governments must turn persons into isolated individuals. Totalitarianism must isolate every person, every individual, from every other individual.

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The real counterpart to totalitarian governments is *community*, is real community, and that is I think what we are about as we try and move toward reconciliation. How we begin to develop bonds with Cubans and how we begin to model a new form of civil society?

In my return to Cuba, I discovered one of the great ironies of the reconciliation process—which Ambassador Rasool referred to this morning—which is that sometimes it is those who are the most victimized that are the most open to reconciliation; ironically, paradoxically. The ones most willing to forgive, the ones most willing to reach out and heal, are the victims themselves; the ones in the positions of least power, least security.

Why is it that I have experienced that the greatest resentment exists not among Cubans who have had to live under the horrific circumstances they have lived under in the last 54 years in Cuba, but that the greatest resentment towards other Cubans comes precisely from Cubans who have had such great success as members of the community in this country and who have the ability and the power precisely to reach out and help other Cubans? Why is it the victimized who are able often times to forgive most readily?

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The reconciliation of the Cuban community, I think, demands that we commit ourselves to a long process—and there’s that word again, “process,” of risk-taking. Like that old Cuban lady who, when I returned to Cuba, embraced and kissed me on the cheek and said, “Thank you for not forgetting us.” Like Jesus himself who appeared to the Apostle’s who betrayed him and said “Peace be with you.” How do you overturn the logic of an eye-for-an-eye, of retribution, in favor of the logic of mercy and reconciliation, of a reconciliation that is a process?

As we work together towards a new community, towards reconstituting new relationships, we begin to build relationships in the process. Even if that means disagreement and debate, which it will mean, necessarily. Disagreement, debate, argument is all part of engagement, it is all part of relationships.

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Only by risking reconciliation can we stand up to the logic of violence and mistrust that all Cubans, whether in the island or in the Diaspora, have lived under in the past 54 years.

This does not mean, as we heard this morning, that we obviate demands of justice. But justice cannot be its own end; justice is not its own end. The end of justice is reconciliation. The end of justice is a reconstituted community. That’s why justice has to be, as we heard from Ambassador Rasool and Father Schreiter, restorative justice. Restorative justice recognizes that the goal of justice is a reconstituted community. Restorative justice recognizes that we cannot bring back the dead or the lost years, but it can help make past loss the seedbed of a new future, like Jesus’ wounds. Without such a reconciled community, I would argue, we cannot have true freedom, for we will continue to be enslaved by our anger, our fears, and

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our resentment. Our wounds will continue to control our lives, as Father Schreiter said. We cannot be free and still be enslaved by our wounds. True freedom will only come about when we are all free, when we are all able to be related to each other as free human beings.

How do we create spaces? The Cuba Study Group is once such space, but there are plenty of other spaces. How do we create spaces for this kind of risk-taking, for this kind of person-to-person reconciliation? How do we create spaces that will allow and facilitate people to risk doing what we assumed was impossible? As Pat Doherty said, “The British government could not possibly be in dialogue with Irish Republicans.” How do we create spaces in our community that will facilitate us and encourage us to start looking for our keys where we lost them and not where the light happens to be shining? How do we create spaces that will allow us to risk vulnerability? A vulnerability that will

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make possible for us to learn that maybe that other person was not exactly what we thought he or she was because they played a particular role in the government, or they played a particular role in the Church, or in the Cuban community. How do we create spaces that allow us to risk learning that “I am not the one who I thought I was, that I don’t have it as together, that I don’t know everything there is to know, that maybe my perspective is not absolutely correct”?

As I mentioned earlier, there was one time at which a conference like this would have been deemed impossible, and yet here we are. And so step by tiny step we must learn to do what we always assumed was impossible, become accustomed to doing the impossible. It demands a reprogramming. Like Thomas standing before Jesus, it is impossible that Jesus had been raised, that he appeared before the Apostles. But Jesus said, “touch my wounds, wounds which you helped inflict. Peace be with you. Do not be unbelieving but believe.” If we all dare to bare our wounds to ourselves and each other we can all experience a resurrection together; the resurrection of a community, not the resurrection of individuals, the resurrection of a community that has been destroyed.

More importantly, as a second generation Cuban, I know that I owe such a future to my children and grandchildren, and those I are words I know we have not heard too much here today but are certainly on my mind here today. I owe this to my children and grandchildren. Even if we remain enslaved to our past, we must not allow our children and grandchildren to be enslaved by that past. By embarking on the process of reconciliation we will perhaps be taking the greatest risk in the history of our people, but it is a risk we owe our children. “Dad, what did you do when that window or door was open? Did you ignore it? Did you close it up?” What will I tell my children, 10 or 20 years from now? That I was too afraid, too self-righteous to walk through that open door? We ourselves also betray our grandparents if we allow their suffering, their loss, their death to define our children’s lives. The alternative is continued mistrust for generations to come. 54 years have ingrained mistrust in the Cuban people; it is simply the air that we breathe. If we do not risk changing that default position of mistrust, we will simply continue this pattern of betrayal and reprisal, for we will have betrayed our own children. And we will

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betray our own parents and grandparents, whose suffering will never be allowed to become a seedbed of resurrection in our community.

I also owe a commitment to reconciliation not only to my children and grandchildren, but to those empty tombs in the Cementerio Colon. That the sufferings of those who came before me will not be in vain; that their sufferings and deaths do not have the last word, and that the last 54 years of our common anguish do not have the last word. Thank you.

Carlos Saladrigas: Now we move on to the question and answer period, and Archbishop Wenski will moderate this particular session. Thank you.

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