

Memorial wall is ‘a necessary reminder’

CAPE TOWN, South Africa (CNS) — A memorial wall with the names of 68,000 people killed in South Africa’s violent past is a necessary reminder that freedom can’t be taken for granted, said a church official.

“At the park one faces this solid and impenetrable monument that represents what we need freedom from,” said Holy Family Sister Shelagh Mary Waspe, who counsels people affected by apartheid and is the coordinator of the Johannesburg Diocese’s justice and peace commission. Apartheid was South Africa’s official system of strict racial segregation.

Monuments like Freedom Park are also an essential part of South Africa’s reconciliation process, she told Catholic News Service Dec. 27.

However, she said: “We need to keep watch that we don’t fall into complacency now that we have achieved freedom.

“Without watching that all people’s rights are protected we could fall back into something similar,” said Sister Shelagh.

South African President Thabo Mbeki dedicated Freedom Park’s memorial wall and eternal flame, located outside Pretoria, in a ceremony Dec. 16.

The names on Freedom Park’s wall are of people who died in the anti-apartheid struggle, the two world wars, and the 1899-1902 wars between the British and Afrikaners. The names of Zulu warriors who died in battles over land also are on the wall.

“Some argue that the names of those who died fighting for South Africa” as conscripts to its apartheid defense force “should have been included,” Sister Shelagh said.

“We will always have debates around these issues as there are many different perspectives,” she said. But “listening to each other’s points of view is crucial” to avoid more conflict, she added.

South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which investigated human rights abuses from 1948, when the nationalist government came into power, until the country’s first all-race elections in 1994, recommended that memorials should be built to commemorate victims and events from the apartheid era.

The commission also recommended payment for victims of human rights abuses and the proper burial of the dead.

Sister Shelagh helped run “Healing of the Memories” workshops in Johannesburg to fulfill the church’s commitment to the commission to teach about apartheid.

At the workshops, South Africans of a mix of races and ages showed each other how different people lived through the apartheid era.

Freedom Park, which will include a museum, amphitheater and garden of remembrance when it is completed in 2009, is on a hill near the Voortrekker Monument, built in praise of the 19th-century trek by Afrikaners to escape British rule, Sister Shelagh said.

“Their proximity reminds us how humans can err,” she said. “Our struggle for human freedom is never over.”