

South African Catholic Bishops' Conference  
**DOCUMENTS**

**Open letter to Archbishop Hurley,  
President of the Catholics Bishops  
Conference.**

13 June 1984

Dear Father,  
I am very angry. Those who are horrified at the action of the Bishop of Rome, the Holy Father, who presented the head of the repressive South African regime with a gift - a silver medal. We feel hurt and disappointed at the Pontiff's political insensitivity. The Prime Minister and his entourage represent the perpetrators of injustice. Perhaps you need to be reminded that they head a government and belong to a political party that despises black people. They discriminate against black people on the basis of their skin-colour. For decades they have reserved skilled labour positions for whites. In 1979 the labour laws changed, but discrimination in the labour market continues unabated. Separate and unequal educational facilities have done untold harm. Bantu education has been and continues to be a control-mechanism, ensuring that blacks remain unable to compete with whites in any sphere of life.

This government has uprooted 3 million people from their ancestral homes in order to streamline the apartheid policy. These uprootings have been done against the will of those concerned. At times the police and their dogs have been brought in to force people to new barren areas. This government has crushed every form of resistance. People were killed at Sharpeville, black school children were shot in cold blood in Soweto, Langa and Guguletu. Blacks have been jailed, banned and even killed for flimsy "political reasons". Families have been broken up because of the influx control policy. People have been humiliated because of the Mixed Marriages Act and the Population Registration Act. To crown it all, blacks have been deprived of their South African citizenship. We are being forced to belong to Bantustans. Of late, the "Coloureds" and Indians are being wooed from the ranks of the oppressed only to be made second class citizens. Thousands of black youth are in exile where they have no decent accommodation, no employment and no opportunities for furthering their education.

This is the work of the racist regime whose head the Holy Father has deemed fit to honour with a gift.

There is this empty phrase which church leaders hurl around saying that the church ought to be on the side of the oppressed. The gesture of the Roman Pontiff contradicts this. Or is his gesture indicative of St Paul's position that he is "all things to all men"? Apparently the black man's (sic) oppression means nothing to the Pontiff. He is too distant to understand it. Blacks are not Polish. So why bother. To come closer home, one suspects that the white church leadership might also be in the same position, sympathising with blacks but owing loyalty to their white people. It therefore does not come as a

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surprise when blacks murder white priests and run in the process of self-liberation because they are not sure on whose side they are.

Surely the Southern African Catholic Bishops could have influenced Rome to refuse the perpetrators of injustice an audience - a simple gesture of solidarity with the oppressed millions of blacks in South Africa. Some countries, organisations and individuals overseas have continuously campaigned against the racist policies of this country but Rome has seen it fit to be polite at the expense of blacks.

If the Pope were to visit one of the missions tomorrow he certainly would not be offered as much as a glass of water. He is after all one of them.

Exchange of gifts or not freedom will surely come.

Fr Buti Tihagale  
Rev M.J. Mkhize  
Rev M.R. Makobane OMI  
Rev B.K.E. Shomang  
Rev T.L. Malotse

**Response to open letter from Father  
Buti Tihagale.**

26 June 1984

Dear Father Tihagale,

Your open letter of 13 June also signed by Fathers M.J. Mkhize, M.R. Makobane OMI, B.K.E. Shomang and T.L. Malotse came to my knowledge when you handed me a copy of it on Tuesday evening, 19 June, in Khotsa House, Johannesburg. By that time quite a few people, especially of the press, seemed to be acquainted with it. They were in fact asking for my response before I had seen it. Having now returned to Durban I am taking the first opportunity available to me to compose this reply.

Your letter indicates the agony in your heart over the discrimination practised against black people in South Africa, the oppression inflicted upon them and its attendant sufferings and humiliations. You refer with deep resentment and abhorrence to many of the evils of apartheid. While I say that I understand, I have to confess that because of the colour of my skin personally I have not shared your suffering. Nevertheless when you write "perhaps you need to be reminded ....." may I ask that the record be allowed to speak for itself.

The contention of your letter is that the Holy Father should not have received the Prime Minister and his party in audience and engaged in the conventional exchange of gifts, because in doing so he honoured the racist regime of South Africa, demonstrated political insensitivity and showed that the oppression of blacks means nothing to him since he is too distant to understand it.

That is one interpretation that can be placed upon the audience and I can understand what bitter resentment inspires it. But it is not the only interpretation. Jesus himself had resentful interpretations placed upon his behaviour when for the sake of the kingdom he ate "with tax-collectors and sinners" (Matt. 9:11).

My good friend Bishop Desmond Tutu has conveyed to me that your interpretation is a common one among the people that he and you can be said to represent. Can be it for me to condemn this interpretation, but I claim the right to suggest an alternative. Since Jesus, in promoting his Father's kingdom, did not hesitate to communicate with sinners the Holy Father obviously feels that it is not wrong for him to communicate with political leaders of whose policies he does not approve, in the hope that he can do some good. You are clearly convinced that no good can be done, but is that not placing an absolute and unjustifiable limit on the grace of God? What answer do you give to the question of Jesus: "And if you save our greetings for your brothers, are you doing anything exceptional?" (Matt. 5:47).

The Holy Father was well briefed on the situation in South Africa and though we do not know what was said in the audience the statement issued by the Vatican after the audience gives some indication of what was conveyed to Mr. Tutu. I quote in full the unofficial translation from the Italian published in the South African press on the day before you wrote your open letter:

"As is noted, the Pope receives heads of state and of government and political personalities of different regimes that request to be received. Such meetings, while they do not mean per se approval of the politics that a government follows, offer the occasion to make the point of view of the Holy See and the Church on specific questions known to the interlocutors.

1. The orientation of the Holy See is known: about some problems that regard the entire region of Southern Africa, and particularly the independence of Namibia, hoped for by the Pope, even in a specific mention in his speech to the Diplomatic Corps of last January 14; about the situation among bordering states marked by guerrilla activity that even afflicts some areas of missionary activity; about the tensions with African people obviously opposed to any form of colonialism and racial discrimination.

On some of these problems a positive evolution is noted following recent accords between South Africa and Mozambique, South Africa and Swaziland and contacts between South Africa and Angola.

The worry and reserve that the Catholic bishops of South Africa have publicly manifested every time concerning the orientations of the internal politics of apartheid, judged to be against the Christian principles of equal dignity for all men are known. Equally known on the racial question is the clear teaching of the supreme Pontiffs of the Church, inspired by the Holy See's adherence to the International Convention of the United Nations on the elimination of all forms of racial discrimination on May 1, 1969.

You may consider infelicitous the reference to a positive evolution "following recent accords between South Africa and Mozambique, South Africa and Swaziland, and contacts between South Africa and Angola." However suspect the behaviour that has produced these accords and contacts, the frontline states seem to have welcomed them, as the presence of their diplomatic representatives at Monati on March 17th in support of President Sandra Machel indicates.

You say that "surely the South African Catholic bishops could have influenced Rome to refuse the perpetrators of injustice an audience". Because they did not, suspicion arises in your mind that "the white Church leadership might also be in the same position (as the Holy Father) sympathising with blacks but owing loyalty to their own people". It was the Administrative Board of the Bishops' Conference that had to consider a recommendation. There was no division of opinion among them though six of the thirteen members are black.

I write to suggest that an interpretation different from yours can be placed on the audience granted to the prime minister by Pope Paul II, and to hope that when you have got over the worst of your resentment you will regret the unkind and disparaging language you used about the Holy Father. Your final comment that "if the Pope were to visit one of the missions tomorrow he certainly would not be offered as much as a glass of water; he is after all one of them" is the unkindest cut of all. I am sure that a visit of the Holy Father to a parish with a black community would prove you overwhelmingly wrong. In keeping with a recommendation of the Bishops' Conference I avoid, as far as possible, the use of the term 'mission'.

If there ever is such a visit may we celebrate the occasion together in love and loyalty and in united pursuit of our common goal of Christian liberation for South Africa.

Fraternally yours in Christ,

+Denis E. Hurley OMI  
Archbishop of Durban  
President: Southern African  
Catholic Bishops' Conference

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We hope you find this issue of our journal interesting and useful in the struggle. We look forward to receiving your support and criticisms. This is your journal. Treat it as such.

The Editors

All correspondence to: *Azania Worker*  
8M Box 4863  
London WC1N 3XJ