

“THE CHALLENGES OF BLACK LIBERATION”

“The Challenges of Black Liberation to the Black-Arm of the Church in the light of what constitutes ‘Liberation’ within the context of our contemporary situation”

An opening address by: The Hon. M. Gatsha Buthelezi of Kwazulu.

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As one of the children of the CHURCH, I have a free conscience about being here today, not to deliver a homily, but to examine with you as a Churchman, what I see as challenges we face as the Black arm of the Church, vis-a-vis Black Liberation, which constitutes the subject of an animated current debate in our contemporary scene in South Africa.

The Church is harassed and rightly so, in Southern Africa, because as the only ‘foreign’ institution we still embrace, it is poised for a crucial role in the whole struggle for the Black man’s liberation. The whole exercise reminds me of ‘the trials, and hopes of the apostolate, as so well set out by St. Paul in his Second Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 4 vs: 7 to 12:

“We are only the earthenware jars that hold this treasure, to make it clear that such an overwhelming power comes from God and not from us. We are in difficulties on all sides, but never cornered; we see no answer to our problems but never despair; we have been persecuted, but never deserted; knocked down, but never killed; always, wherever we may be, we carry with us in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus, too, may always be seen in our body. Indeed, while we are still alive, we are consigned to our death every day, for the sake of Jesus, so that in our mortal flesh the life of Jesus may be openly shown. So death is at work in us, but life in you”.¹ I am rather fond of Phillips translation of the same passage for its dramatic effect:

“This priceless treasure we hold, so to speak, in a common earthenware jar—to show that the splendid power of it belongs to God, and not to us.

We are handicapped on all sides, but we are never frustrated; We are puzzled, but never in despair. We are persecuted, but we never have to stand it alone. We may be knocked down but we are never knocked out! Every day we experience something of the death of Jesus, so that we may also know the power of the life of Jesus in these bodies of ours. Yes, we who are living are always being exposed to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be plainly seen in our

mortal lives. We are always facing death, but this means that you know more and more of life. All faith is like that mentioned in the Scripture: I believed and therefore did I speak. For we too speak because we believe and we know for certain that He who raised the Lord Jesus from death—shall also raise us with Jesus. We shall all stand together before him.²”

It is a well worn out platitude of many immodest white politicians that the Black man should ever be grateful to the White man for “Liberating the black man from black savagery” he was subjected to before the white man came, and for bringing him what is rather glibly referred to as the ‘Christian gospel’ or ‘Christian civilisation’.

The more I am getting on in years the more I realise that for the black man, the Church has not in practical terms successfully related to Blacks what the core of this Christian gospel is.

The more I realise that we blacks in South Africa seem furthest than all blacks on the Continent from liberation, the more I appreciate that we have never enjoyed fully the fruits of that Christian brotherhood which the White man boasts of having brought us. The more the White electorate supports white exclusiveness, white wealth and white privilege, the more it is brought home to me, that as a black man, I am not supposed to enjoy the fruits of that Christian civilization, about which I have heard so much for more than forty years.

Southern Africa is now, the theatre of the black man’s struggle for liberation and this has placed the Church in a most invidious position. Unfortunately, whilst we are the Church here, it is however still true that the Church is still primarily a white and secondarily a black voice owing to the amount of power whites, wield because of the major role which white leadership still plays in our Church. That is why I have always applauded the action of the African Ministers who founded IDAMASA. This body it might be said, was not necessary to have, because the Church is non-racial. But whilst that represents more what is desirable than what is, the existence of a body like IDAMASA

reflects the reality of our situation. The existence is now more essential and meaningful than at any stage of the black's struggle for liberation.

Whilst the stand of the Church on issues such as were discussed at the South African Council of Churches Conference in Hammanskraal recently, is highly appreciated, it is also equally important to have our black stand, on issues, which are related to our own particular black experience within racist South Africa. By saying this, I am not attempting to play down the epoch-making stand taken by the Council of Churches at Hammanskraal. White over-reaction to that stand is phenomenal.

At no time before, have we as the Church been called upon to witness on the whole issue of God's image in the black man as now. I make bold to say that this is the time when we might see within the black arm of the Church churchmen who will make a bold witness such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Otto Dubelius, Martin Luther King Jnr. and Dom Helder Camara, have given in other parts of the World in our own times.

The whole meaning of the gospel's message with regard to current issues of our times such as race, political power, wealth, poverty, violence and non-violence will be brought into focus, for each one of these is relevant to the liberation of the black man. A clergyman I have had the privilege to meet, the Revd. Fr. Francois Houtart in conjunction with Andre Rosseau put this looming conflict here into focus in these words:

"The conflict between religion and revolution can be on the level of historical ideals: The revolutionary wants to establish the "new life" here on earth, whereas the Christian is on his way toward a transcendent future, and believes that the solution of history lies outside history. The conflict can also lie in the area of notion of history: The revolutionary believes that man's role is to transform the world, whereas a certain type of Christian sees social reality as a gift of God which man can only accept. The symbolic images are quite different: For the former development is the only reality. The world can be changed. For the latter, all things come direct and already perfect from the hand of God. Finally, the conflict can lie in conflicting interpretations of history: For historical materialism, revolution must change structures in order to change man, whereas the spiritualist point of view seeks to revolutionize the heart of alienated, sinful man. But there are also areas of agreement: the emphasis on certain values; a thirst for justice; the defence of the downtrodden; and reference to a certain Utopia. P. Blanquart, for instance who offers another comparative analysis of the Marxist and Christian projects for humanity, shows that the former contains a rationale or operative model, a utopia which mobilizes the whole human potential and an atheistic and scientific humanism.

In the latter we find no operative model, but we do find a utopia expressed in mystical terms as well as transcendent humanism."³

I came to speak to you as a churchman who is not committed to violence, as much as you are not. And yet we as Christians are called upon at this time, when this issue of violence is so deliberately clouded in South Africa by so many emotional issues to the extent that the amount of violence so basic to the whole status quo is often overlooked. To bring in some sanity to this whole debate of violence, we as Christians

should take it as our duty to point out what is behind the philosophy of violence adopted by some of our people in desperation. It is often overlooked that the philosophy of violence is a direct result of our system which is structured in violence. It is our duty to point this out to bring about the balance so essential if we can ever hope to resolve our problems through peaceful means.

The theologian I have quoted above, has this to say on this very aspect:

"The tactical importance of violence is especially obvious in armed insurrection and guerilla warfare. Not long before his death Che Guevara is known to have called for the use of more violence. But the Latin American guerrilleros often distinguished between institutional violence, which they judge to be indispensable and the use of personal violence, which should be used only when there is no alternative. The history of South Vietnamese NLF or of the freedom movements in the Portuguese Colonies, shows that they were not originally violent. They become violent because of the systematic opposition they met with in the first place and later, in response to repressive measures used against them by the power system. This is what Dom Helder Camara is talking about when he speaks of the "established violence" of social and political structures. Violence is triggered by police repression, which transforms a non-violent movement into a violent one. Many moralists have failed to take this basic historical process sufficiently into account when pronouncing their judgements".⁴

He goes on later to state:

"It is important, therefore, to recognize that violence is not an end in the revolutionary process. No responsible revolutionary movement uses violence for its own sake. Violence exists in revolution just as it exists in the status quo. In the former it is often more spectacular and it does not benefit from the aura of respectability surrounding what Max Weber calls "legal violence". It is therefore "savage". It is the violence of the poor, of those who have no part in the power structure and who cannot, therefore, use "legal violence" which is less noticeable and better organized. ."⁵ He then quotes a report dated July 31, 1967 the Guatemala Committee for the Rights of Man, which declared:

"The armed struggle in Guatemala, as in any other region where it may arise, can be understood only in terms of the destitution and injustice in which the majority of the urban and rural masses live. Who would think of organizing a guerilla group in the Swiss Alps or in any country where other forms of struggle can be used for negotiation? A serious study should be made to see whether violence stems from orders received from abroad or whether it is the fruit of a revolt against, the repression under which people live. What non-violent means are available to the people of Guatemala to express their problems legally and peacefully?"⁶

We as the black arm of the Church should see our role at this time, as a very serious and crucial one in restoring sanity in this whole debate taking place in Southern Africa on violence. This we must do not because we wish to condone violence in any way, but because if the issues behind the conflicts now taking place are not seen in their correct perspective, it will be impossible for the Church to play its role of reconciliation successfully. I am convinced that if we do this as Christians,



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we will be living up to the Beatitude, "Blessed are the peace-makers: for they shall be called the Children of God". Dietrich Bonhoeffer makes it clear that being peace-makers has a price we have to pay. He states in his comment on this Beatitude, "... But nowhere will that peace be more manifest than where they meet the wicked in peace and are ready to suffer at their hands".⁷

It is no longer sufficient to point out that violence is wrong but in our condemnation of violence, let us point out that the personal violence chosen by guerrillas in Southern Africa is a product of the institutionalized violence, which stands as an invincible monolith in the midst of all the powerless and the voiceless in Southern Africa. In a country often glibly described as Christian as ours often is, it is important for us to be contrite, if we expect God to show mercy on us and on all the peoples of this country. To keep on pointing out culpability of only one side, of those two sides who are facing one another in violence, is like fanning the flames. It is only by pointing out wrong on both sides that humility which precedes contrition can take place.

I am convinced that this is one of the thankless tasks that we as the Church are called upon to perform at this point in history in the interests of all our peoples in South Africa. Neither side has a right to use force to destroy the image of God in their fellowmen. Hunger, poverty, illiteracy, lack of economic justice, are all evils which postpone the liberation of the black man and we have to do something about them.

Having pointed out what the issues are, I heartily applaud the Church's involvement in promoting grass-roots development of their people. I have in mind here the Community Development plan of the Zululand Council of Churches, spear-headed by Bishop Zulu. I have in mind the efforts of IDAMASA in relation to the Black Bank project.

We can not hope for manna from heaven anymore, however devout we may be in our prayers. Prayers can only strengthen us to stand up and have the self-awareness without which we cannot liberate ourselves.

We are called upon to witness in an era of revolution in Southern Africa. We can only witness in such a revolutionary era through revolutionary methods. Revolutionary ideas do not mean only bloody revolutionary ideas. We are aware that during our own times there have been exponents of non-violent revolutionary movements such as Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Albert Lutuli and Dom Helder Camara. All these were God-fearing men and I challenge anyone to show me if we have a single man more God-fearing than these servants of God. To me this is not merely a question of politicising Christianity. It is a matter of rising to the occasion by seeing all the dimensions of our problem at this crucial moment in history and making a relevant contribution. Our Lord stood for non-violence to the end, as we all know. As a non-theologian, I am always aware that my Church has always told me that our bodies are God's temple. Therefore any desecration of the temple cannot be forgiven. Our Lord gave a whacking to those who desecrated the Temple. It was the only occasion when our Lord is recorded as having used violence. So that all forms of exploitation which cause the body of man to suffer, are forms of desecration. I will not go so far as to prescribe that only violence can be good enough for those who desecrate in this way, but this is a point I think we would do well to remember as followers of Christ.

In conclusion, I wish to quote Fr. Francois Houtart and Andre Rosseau on the role of the Church in a revolution situation'

"The function of social critic is essential to the Church, which exists not "in-itself" but for the parousia. It is in view of future reality, announced by Jesus Christ, that the institutional Church has the obligation to a witness of hope and, therefore, a tangible sign of hope. This means that it has the obligation to organize itself in such a way as to be the institution of critical freedom". I ask brethren, How else can the Church bring about "God's Kingdom on earth as it is in Heaven? " To me this is the major challenge of the Church, particularly her black-arm, in the context of what constitutes liberation of the black man within the context of our contemporary scene. I am honoured to share my rather wild thoughts at this time, with you. Forgive me, despite my wildness in daring to speak about matters so above me, I am still your Brother. □