

Cosmas Desmond

## Priests, Protest and Politics

THE PRIESTS WHO SHOWED interest and concern over the recent removal of African families from Meran to Limehill, were accused of meddling and interfering and were warned by friends that they should be careful. Archbishop Hurley, in their defence, pointed out that they were simply fulfilling a basic Christian duty of helping those in need. True. But surely there is more involved than that? This hardship should never have arisen and could never have arisen unless the lack of Christian leadership, witness and protest had lulled the vast majority of the White population into a sense of indifference to the application of Christian principles to the political and social spheres. The events of Limehill should serve to highlight the question of what it means to be a Christian in our particular social set-up. Can we simply mind our own business and not risk getting into trouble?

An other-worldly, individualistic, ritualistic religion may be very cosy and conducive to the building up of my own spiritual edifice. But it is not Christianity. As Martin Redfern writes: 'Christianity means nothing at all unless it means utter commitment to and in the world. Christianity is, in very essence, about politics and not about religion, about this world and no other'. And the Vatican Council warns us that '... the expectation of a new earth must not weaken but rather stimulate our concern for cultivating this one'. We cannot as Christians opt out of our involvement in our social situation. Nor can we satisfy our obligation by paternalistic 'charity'.

The Bishops of South Africa have repeatedly stated the Christian social principles as they apply in the South African context. But these have never been pushed to their logical conclusion by the Bishops themselves, Catholic institutions, priests and the vast majority of the laity. They have certainly never led to any concerted Christian protest against a system which the Bishops themselves have described as 'intrinsically evil'. There has been and is compromise all along the line. This compromise has no doubt kept many Catholic institutions in existence; it has saved the Church from open persecution; it has kept hundreds in the fold, (though it has doubtless driven out many more). But

can such reasons ever justify the compromise of basic Christian principles? The judgement of history has certainly not condoned such compromise in other times and places.

In his very incisive article on the Church in South Africa, Paul Goller speaks of the 'tacit acceptance of the status quo by the middle class clergy and laity'. It may well be here, especially with the clergy, that the main fault lies. In the present structure of the Church, the clergy are looked upon as leaders and have the opportunity of instructing and forming their parishioners. But are we really trying to form committed Christians or are we satisfied with playing the role of tame spiritual medicine men? How can we proclaim the Gospel Sunday after Sunday without relating it to the immediate concrete situation? Experience has shown that it is no good preaching general principles; it is not even enough to point out the universality of the law of love of neighbour. For many people it seems that a person with a different colour skin is not even included in the concept of 'neighbour'. Hence the need for every detail to be spelt out. We do not compromise on other, less important aspects, of Christian doctrine, e.g. divorce and sexual morality in general—yet we shrink from telling a white parishioner what exactly his Christianity would involve in relation to an African employee if it would cause an unpleasant scene and mean the loss of a R10 pledge.

Love of neighbour and concern for the world in which he lives is not just a part of Christianity; it is Christianity. It is true that, in the South African situation, background, upbringing, inborn prejudice etc. tend to cloud the vision when it comes to White-African relationships. These considerations may mitigate the culpability for the failure to practise Christianity and may call for a tremendous effort. But they cannot change the basic demands of Christianity, which we are obliged to preach "Proclaim the message and, welcome or unwelcome, insist on it". (2. Tim. 4.2.).

But it is not enough to proclaim this message—the message of love which Christianity is all about in

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sermons, instructions, discussion groups and through other educational media. Human relationships, especially love, cannot be effectively taught, they must be experienced. Therefore, the only way to educate the consciences of Christians is by action. It is completely unrealistic even to consider the possibility of re-educating the conscience of every White Christian in this country through the ordinary means of communication. Do they want to see? 'How many times can a man turn his head and pretend that he just doesn't see?' But there can be no excuse for the official teaching Church not seeing. Do we, priests and Bishops in particular, know what Christianity means? If we do, then why don't we practise it? The Vatican Council, which deliberately tried to avoid condemnations, said: 'The church rejects (reprobat) as foreign to the mind of Christ any discrimination against men or any harassment of them because of their race, colour, condition of life or religion'. How then can we refrain from action? We must show by our actions that we realise what it means to be a Christian and that we are willing to do this whatever the consequences. This is the most effective way of proclaiming the message of Christ, who was and always will be 'a sign of contradiction'. Christianity is not just a body of truths. It is a way of life and therefore demands action.

On the part of the Bishops this will involve an elimination of any semblance of apartheid in the official Institutions of the Church. (No one could claim that our house is in order at the moment. To take a few simple examples which are the ones that matter in the long run there is no law which says that an African must use the back door, drink out of a jam jar, eat from a tin plate etc.). It will demand further an unequivocal application of Christian principles to every situation which may arise even though this may entail any amount of loss to the institutional Church in terms of position, privilege and personnel. For the priest at the parochial level it will mean not trying to titillate pious ears but applying the Gospel teaching with all its social demands, regardless of what this will cost financially and otherwise.

## LAY RESPONSIBILITY

The greatest effort will be demanded of the layman. He must be willing to act as a Christian in relation to his own servants, his fellow workers of another race and in any occasional contact with such people. This may well leave him open to ridicule, loss of friends and even social ostracisation. But there are many

others, non Catholics and non Christians, who have been willing to suffer far more than that in the struggle for justice and the recognition of human dignity. We, as Christians and Catholics, have the clear teaching of Christ and the Church to guide us yet we still hesitate and compromise. Catholics seem determined not to rock either the barque of Peter or the ship of State.

The Cross is meant to be a scandal and a stumbling block to many. It is not meant to be comfortable and accommodating. It is such a stumbling block that we cannot hope to convert the whole world into fully committed Christians. Therefore, we are faced with the choice: do we water down Christianity so as to ensure as large a nominal role as possible or do we preach Christianity in its entirety, with all its most exacting demands, even though this will mean having a small number of committed Christians? Christ promised that His Church would be rejected. How then can we justify compromising his demands in order to avert this very rejection? How can we ever get around Christ's own insistence on the necessity to love and serve 'even the least of these my little ones'? This is the basis of the obligation to become involved in the political and social welfare of our brothers. There seems to be no other response open to a Christian. He must love his brother no matter what this may entail or he must stop calling himself a Christian. If his conscience tells him that he cannot fulfil these demands of love then it must also tell him that he cannot be a Christian.

The treatment of Africans being removed from Meran and other 'Black Spots' is only another example of the indignity to which Africans are subjected. Such situations can only arise because we as individuals and as Christians have failed. By our failure in our ordinary everyday relationships with members of other races we have created the climate in which such injustices can be perpetrated and not cause a public outcry. We have failed and are failing to recognise in practice the dignity of any human being whatever his race, colour or social standing. Yet we claim to follow Christ, who said: 'Whatever you do to the least of these my little ones you do to me'. ●

SISTER MARY JEAN PEW, I.H.M., is an Associate Professor of Political Science at Immaculate Heart College, Los Angeles, California. Recently she lectured at the University of the Witwatersrand for some months.

FR. COSMAS DESMOND, O.F.M., has been deeply involved in the Meru-Limehill situation.

EDWARD HIGGINS, senior lecturer in sociology at the University College, Durban, resumes his regular column.

THOMAS KERVENS, a Hollander, played a prominent part in the Lay Apostolate Congress in Rome.

Political comment and sub-editing in this issue by A. P. Goller, 703 Caroline, Soper Road, Berea, Johannesburg.

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