



The Christian Institute

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The Roman Catholic Archbishop of Durban here reflects on the contribution of the Christian Institute to the work of the Church in South Africa over the past fifteen years.

BASICALLY the story of the Christian Institute is a story of conversion and evangelisation in a context not normally associated with conversion and evangelisation, yet a context destined to become it seems the testing ground of the Church's credibility in the years ahead.

Conversion

Those who experienced the conversion related to here were dedicated Christians of the Dutch Reformed faith. Fellow believers would not normally think of them as needing conversion. Yet they went through a painful transformation and emerged as men keenly

aware of the demands of love in a race-ridden South Africa.

With other Christian colleagues, Black and White, they founded the Christian Institute in August 1963 and entrusted its direction to their acknowledged leader, Dr C. F. Beyers Naude.

For Dr Naude, conversion had been a slow process. It had begun during his days as a student pastor in Pretoria from 1949 to 1954 under the prodding of students' questions and reflection on events in Africa. It had developed through careful study of what a keen mind, profoundly biblical, had come to realise was the central issue for the Church in South Africa: the racial problem. Landmarks along Dr Naude's pilgrim path were the Reformed Ecumenical Synod at Potchefstroom in 1958, Sharpeville in 1960, "Delayed Action" in November 1960 and Cottesloe in December of the same year. The consummation came in April 1961 when Dr Naude stood alone before the Synod of the

Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk of the Transvaal and refused to repudiate the resolutions of Cottesloe unless the Synod could convince him that they were in conflict with Sacred Scripture.

Conversion had occurred. It was now the time for evangelisation. In April 1962, *Pro Veritate* came into existence with Dr Naude as its editor. On 15 August 1963 the Christian Institute was founded and Dr Naude, now, despite his conflict with his church, Moderator of the Southern Transvaal Synod, was offered the directorship. He accepted and had to resign his status as minister and moderator.

The Christian Institute was founded as an ecumenical agency with a special South African dimension of the social gospel as its purpose, and membership was open, not to churches, but to individual Christians.

Corporate membership of churches was ruled out, both by the antagonism of the

Dutch Reformed Churches and by the inevitably cumbersome processes of inter-church collaboration.

Having the social gospel as purpose means dedicating oneself to promoting Christ's vision in a situation of conflict, suffering and privation, involving not merely individuals in a community but communities, groups, societies within a broader human context. Social conflict can operate on the basis of class or culture or language or race or nationality or religion — or all together as it seems to operate in South Africa.

Social Evangelisation

Social evangelisation does not overlook the individual because in the ultimate analysis it is the individual that counts, but it deals with the specific problems that arise from social differences.

It is a relatively new form of evangelisation having come into existence only about a hundred years ago as a somewhat tardy Christian response to the Industrial Revolution and Karl Marx. It could not really have existed in any significant way before the Age of Revolution because prior to that time there were few social conflicts outside of wars and these were mainly the responsibility of individual rulers and the Church leaders had come to live with them, to get involved in them and, as in the case of the crusades and the religious wars, to promote them actively.

Social evangelisation is still in its infancy. It will come of age when the social dimensions of Christian ethics are an integral part of everyday Christian teaching and witness. We are still far from that stage. And because of that, some of the best of Christians throw up their hands in horror at manifestations of Christian social involvement and cry: Politics. There is politics and politics. There is the politics of the pursuit and use of power. There is the politics of sensitising the Christian conscience to all the wide and varied social dimensions of love and justice. This is the politics of the social gospel, the greatest challenge facing the Church today. For the greatest evil in the world is social evil, the evil of human communities, fiercely confronting one another across social barriers. As the Church moves into the work of evangelisation and reconciliation in this field it is engaging perhaps in the most difficult task it has ever tackled.

The Christian Institute has been a pioneer in the field in South Africa. It has been a prophetic presence and, like most prophets, it has paid the price: suppression.

Goals

At its inception the Christian Institute set itself these objectives:

- promoting Christian unity across barriers of denomination and race;
- pursuing social justice in the light of the gospel;
- undertaking practical forms of ecumenical service as living examples of what unity in Christ should be.

Means

The methods that the Christian Institute chose were:

- Bible study and discussion in small groups, challenging local congregations and parishes to take seriously the unity of Christ's body;
- appealing to Church leadership to assume its responsibility in the field;
- participating in forms of ecumenical service such as that offered to the Independent African Churches;
- fostering the publication of Christian literature reflecting these concerns.



Dr Beyers Naude, Director of the Christian Institute

In keeping with these aims and methods, the Institute began with a strong ecumenical trend in its early Bible discussion programmes and then moved more and more into the sphere of reconciliation and witness.

In the matter of reconciliation it built up a powerful connection with Black independent churches, helping with their theological education. In due course this gave rise to AICA — the African Independent Churches Association.

In the sphere of witness the Institute participated in 1968 in the compilation of *A Message to the People of South Africa*. This evoked widespread reaction. In 1969 it collaborated with the South African Council of Churches in sponsoring SPRO-CAS (Study Project on Christianity in Apartheid Society) with Mr Peter Randall, whose brainchild it was, as Director of the Project. The end of 1968 marked the emergence of Black Consciousness with the hiving off of the South African Students' Organisation from the National Union of South African Students. In due course SASO was to be followed in this field by the Black Peoples' Convention and the South African Students' Movement which played a large part in the Soweto events of June 1976 and subsequently.

The deep concern of the Christian Institute for Black South Africa made it inevitable that the Institute should keep in close touch with these Black Consciousness movements. Black Consciousness aims at promoting the human dignity of the Black man in a situation of humiliation and privation. What could be more Christian than this? Long before this the Institute had reached the conclusion that, if change was to come in South Africa it would come, not through Whites being persuaded to take the initiative in making concessions but through Blacks forcing the issue and confronting Whites with the need to adjust. The Institute understood such forcing in a non-violent sense. This did not mean that the Institute looked on direct involvement with Whites as a lost cause. It was always willing to work with White initiatives in the line of reconciliation and where necessary, to provide assistance, inspiration and advice. Witness the frequent participation of Dr Beyers Naude and his colleagues in such efforts. But in weighing up the relative importance of Black initiative and White initiative the Institute came down in favour of the former in the light, no doubt, of the lesson of history that moves for change come not from the haves but from the have-nots. In the end the Institute saw its role principally as maintaining close and supportive contact with Black liberation movements to ensure a Christian influence.

Gospel and Liberation

Black liberation it saw in the context of human liberation in general as an achievement worthy of the deepest Christian concern. To reach out for the fullest expression of ones humanity is after all to fulfil the will of the Creator and this fulfilment Christians believe is unattainable without the healing, justifying-sanctifying work of Christ.

Those in power in South Africa did not see it this way. In the Christian Institute they saw a threat to their control of the good things of South Africa and an ally of communism. They used every form of intimidation against it, declared it an affected organisation to deprive it of overseas funds, and finally brought down the heavy hand on the 19th October 1977.

Does this mean that the Black liberation movement in South Africa, which is as inevitable and as unsuppressible as an ocean tide, will go forward without explicit Christian influence? To those who value their Christian faith and fear the consequences of out-and-out radicalism and violent confrontation this is the danger.

The churches could react by throwing an enormous effort into the conscientisation of Whites. It would have to be an enormous effort indeed. If it occurred it would be an event flying in the face of history and a miracle of the first order. Unless something extraordinary occurs, our churches working among Whites in South Africa seem unable or unwilling to raise more than an ineffectual ripple.