



Denis Hurley in 2014 – Justice & Peace in South Africa

By Anthony Egan SJ

Ten years ago this week, on 13 February 2004 to be precise, Denis Hurley OMI the retired Catholic archbishop of Durban died. As a priest and bishop, as a theologian and religious leader in the struggle against apartheid, he made perhaps the greatest contribution to putting Catholicism firmly in the South African public square.

Before him, the Catholic Church in South Africa was cautious and quite inward-looking. Prohibited during Dutch rule, coolly tolerated by the British, and treated with intense suspicion after the Union of South Africa in 1910, the Church was (unsurprisingly) cautious in challenging apartheid. With the majority of its clergy foreign-born and thus vulnerable to deportation it was encouraged even by the Vatican to 'play it safe' after the 1948 National Party election victory. But Hurley, a white South African by birth, Oblate priest and bishop since 1946, thought differently. He believed that it was a matter of faith to oppose apartheid.

During the 1930s Denis Hurley completed licentiates [advanced master's degrees] in philosophy and theology in Rome. He had studied in particular Aquinas and Catholic Social Thought, both of which convinced him that segregation was morally unjustifiable. His episcopal motto "Ubi Spiritus, ibi libertas" ("Where the Spirit is, there is liberty") summed up his thinking and would point to the course his life would take: a rigorous, theologically informed search for freedom.

Together with a small group of fellow bishops, priests, religious and laity he pushed the Southern African Catholic Bishops Conference to an increasingly uncompromising stand against apartheid – so much so that in 1957 the Catholic Church was first church in South Africa to theologically condemn apartheid. The Church never looked back from that, and in the decades that followed Hurley was in the forefront of what Protestant scholar John De Gruchy has called 'the church struggle in South Africa'.

As archbishop, Hurley was an active participant in the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) initiated by Pope John XXIII to renew the Catholic Church. Hurley's thinking, informed by his reading of Aquinas, led him to enthusiastically initiate, implement and support the Council's reforms. He was particularly pleased to see the Council's emphasis on justice and the implementation of the vernacular liturgy.

*This same thinking made him controversial in later years: he supported the idea of married clergy, and saw no sound theological reason against the ordination of women. He also criticised the 1968 papal encyclical *Humanae Vitae* that reaffirmed the Church's rejection of artificial birth control. For these views many suspect he was never made a cardinal. The latter point has led some of his supporters to call him "the greatest cardinal Africa never had".*

Were he alive today (he would be 99), I suspect he would be thoroughly disgusted with much that we see in South Africa: corruption, the arrogance of many political leaders, the greed and conspicuous consumption of many of the old and new elites. He would also, I think, be enthusiastically supportive of Pope Francis' vision of a simpler, pastorally oriented Church committed to the poor and to the full implementation of Vatican II.

We the living, who remember Denis with love, can best honour his memory by carrying on what he started.

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