

# I will forgive their sin and heal their land

by Hubert Bucher

## I.

There is a wide-spread feeling that the recent conference on 'Salvation Today' which took place in Bangkok from December 28th, 1972 to January 8th, 1973, under the auspices of the World Council of Churches' Commission on World Mission and Evangelism, may herald the beginning of a new period in the missionary endeavour of the Christian churches. A significant feature of the conference was that delegates from churches in the Third World outnumbered those from the West. They attacked the sending of missionaries and funds by powerful Western churches to the poor churches in the Third World, urging that the missionary enterprise should become 'completely mutual and international', and even proposed a moratorium on the sending of funds and personnel to Third World churches, to allow them to discover their own identity and resources for missionary expansion.

Only a few months after the Bangkok conference had discussed the meaning of 'Salvation Today', 720 delegates attended a 'Congress on Mission and Evangelism' in Durban, South Africa. As in Bangkok, the greater part of those who took part in the South African congress were 'Non-Whites'. There was a further similarity of great significance: The aim of the congress was '. . . to discover together the relevance of the Gospel and the meaning of mission and evangelism in present-day Southern Africa . . . to assess the resources and potential of all Christian churches and agencies for mission and evangelism . . . and to give stimulus, inspiration and encouragement to Christians as they face this task'.

It is obvious that in the South African situation such a gathering could not avoid becoming a test as to the sincerity of white Christians. Are they really prepared to go beyond pronouncing verbal condemnations of the country's apartheid system? Will they show deeds of conversion which will convince their African brethren that the word of God has not lost its power in them? The congress was a hopeful sign that the hour may not yet be too late for this to happen. Tireless efforts by the organising committee succeeded in securing the Government's go-ahead for accommodating all delegates under one roof in the Athlone Gardens Hotel. For ten precious days, South Africans of all different races were thus able to experience what things will be like once the present system of legally enforced apartheid will have disappeared.

An imposingly large number of foreign speakers had accepted the

invitation to come into South Africa's isolated *laager*. The Billy Graham Association drew a record crowd of 45,000, belonging to all races, into Durban's biggest rugby stadium, and even larger numbers attended a similar evangelistic session in Johannesburg. Press comments: None of the feared racial frictions took place; there was a tremendous amount of good-will among all attendants, thousands of whom responded to Billy Graham's appeal to come forward to show their willingness to follow Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour. One of the most impressive speakers from Britain was Canon Douglas Webster of St. Paul's Cathedral, who delivered a brilliant paper on the key issue of the congress, entitled: 'What is evangelism?'

There is not enough space to go any further in attempting to convey the wealth of inspiration which the twenty speakers from Europe and the United States (all of them experts in a wide range of subjects), brought to the congress. But the presence of several delegates from countries in the African continent, whose governments actively advocate and promote the downfall of the present South African régime, was especially thrilling. From Kenya there came among others the Rev. John Gatu, General Secretary of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa. He told the gathering that South Africans are now living in a situation filled with the race-hatred, tensions and hostilities which disrupted Kenya 17 years ago, but that a traumatic Kenya-type experience could yet be avoided. However, he warned: 'If the spirit at this congress does not go out into the South African situation, the frustration will grow and the result can be catastrophic. The Whites hold the economic and political power. They can change the history of this land without too much upheaval if they decide to.'

Needless to say the organising committee had spared no efforts to bring to this congress any South African men and women of whom it could be reasonably assumed that they were in a position which would allow them to spread the message of this congress throughout the country. For 25 years South Africa has had a formidable barrage of international pressure brought against her to force her to give up her inhuman racial politics. Equally persistent attempts have been made within her own borders to persuade the political régime to alter its course. No doubt, these pressures have not been in vain. Over the past ten years, the 'Granite Wall' of South Africa's apartheid has been cracking away, but during the recent celebrations which the National Party held to commemorate its 25th year in power, there appeared no sign of hope that it would alter the principal of its policy. Thus the struggle will have to go on. For each of the 720 delegates the euphoria which pervaded the congress has long since given way to the harsh reality of South Africa's racial compartmentalization which permeates their daily experience. Will the message of the congress, therefore, go under as so many high-spirited ventures in South Africa have done before, or are there indications which would

allow one to have a guarded optimism? Could the congress mark the starting point of a real change of heart on the part of the South African public? Could its message grow into that avalanche which will sweep away apartheid and its evil heritage: hatred, fear and frustration?

## II.

In order to venture an answer to this question one must take a look at the present state of the churches in South Africa. Delegates to the congress came from 31 different denominations and 36 Christian service organisations represented in South Africa. It was stressed during the congress that no new structures should be brought into existence to direct the follow-up to this important meeting, rather, the existing structures should be used. In other words, the responsibility for implementing the impulses which emanate from the congress lies with the country's individual churches. Let us have a look at the forces which are at work among them at present.

Dr. David Gill—who has been working on a study of violence and non-violence for the World Council of Churches' Church and Society Division over the past two years—said at the end of a three-week stay during April this year that he had found surprising signs of hope in South Africa. He noticed especially the growth of Black Consciousness which gives rise to a new awareness among Africans. 'This is what will finally change things in South Africa', he believes. Another recent visitor, Rev. Tore Bergman of the Church of Sweden Mission, remarked that the extent and effectiveness of the work of the South African Council of Churches was one of the most notable changes since his last visit to South Africa in 1971.

At present the S.A.C.C. runs a number of projects which are directly concerned with improving the lot of the African population. Its 'Inter-Church Aid' was originally launched in 1970 to help co-ordinate church relief work and to administer funds from overseas sources. This money was given to help churches in South Africa to overcome the effects of the Group Areas Act. Since then, however, 'Inter-Church Aid' has shifted emphasis to that of providing aid for self-help development, and now receives 80 per cent of its required funds from local sources. An off-shoot of this department is 'Dev-craft' which provides an urgently needed marketing service to the numerous handcraft programmes which have sprung up in churches all over the country. Last year the S.A.C.C. established a Justice and Reconciliation (J. & R.) Division as a positive alternative to the World Council of Churches' 'Programme to Combat Racism', which has been making grants to Freedom Fighters operating in Southern Africa. J. & R. has been charged with carrying out an investigation into wage structures in South Africa, for which task the Christian Aid

division of the British Council of Churches has given a grant of R18,000.

Immediately following on its bold 'Message to the People of South Africa' of 1969, the S.A.C.C. launched the 'Study Project on Christianity in Apartheid Society' (Sprocas 1) which was at the time described as the most representative group of South Africans ever brought together to study their country's problems. Sprocas' 140 members worked in six commissions (church, economics, education, law, politics, society) which have meanwhile produced, in an impressive series of publications, their assessment of the possibilities of bringing about a change in the present South African society. Sprocas 1 has found a follow-up in Sprocas 2 (Special Project for Christian Action in Society), which seeks to rally all those forces which Sprocas 1 had indicated as potential agents for change. It maintains organisers for its different projects in the country's major centres: For the youth in Cape Town, for the Black Community in Durban and for the White Community in Johannesburg.

Sprocas is co-sponsored by the 'Christian Institute' (C.I.), which since its inception in 1963 has been a storm centre in South Africa. In its early years, its director, the Reverend Dr. Beyers Naudé, was physically 'frisked' by the Security Police; he was involved in a court case which resulted in South Africa's heaviest penalty for libel (being imposed on Prof. Adriaan Pont of Pretoria University); and at the moment the C.I. is being investigated by a Commission of Inquiry. In 1965 a group of ministers from several independent African churches approached the C.I. for help. They requested the Institute to set up an association of independent churches, to assist in the raising of funds and in the organisation of theological correspondence courses. As a result, the African Independent Churches Association (A.I.C.A.) was formed, which today represents over 450 of South Africa's 3,000 independent churches.

The C.I.'s repeated wish that A.I.C.A. should assume greater responsibility for its own affairs found an unexpected ally in the rapidly growing Black Consciousness. Hundreds of unaffiliated independent churches were reluctant to join a body which was operating under the auspices of a white organisation. For this reason the A.I.C.A. decided at the end of 1972 to break with the C.I. and to go it alone. The significance of this development becomes clear if one considers that the independent African churches in this country have now a membership of over three million and make up more than 20 per cent of the total African population. Being rid of its pioneering work with regard to A.I.C.A., the C.I. may now feel more free to pursue its original aims. When it was formed, its chief object was to provide ecumenical links between English- and Afrikaans-speaking Christians to replace those broken when the Afrikaans churches cut their ties with the English churches after the Cottesloe Consultation in 1960.

## III.

There are hopeful signs that such an undertaking would indeed have much better chances for success today than it had a mere two years ago. In January this year, English and Afrikaans member churches of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches agreed to set up a continuing body for contact, communication, discussion and liaison between themselves. Reconciliation will be one of the first major topics of discussion. The churches in question are the Nederduits Gereformeerde Kerk, and its daughter churches, the 'N.G. Kerk in Afrika' and the 'N.G. Sendingkerk' for Africans and Coloureds respectively; the Nederduitse Hervormde Kerk, the Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa; the Bantu Presbyterian Church; the Tsonga Presbyterian Church and the Congregational Church. A month before this, a call for dialogue between the Nederduits Gereformeerde Kerk and 'people of other races, colours, language and convictions' had been made in *Die Kerkbode*, the official journal of the N.G. Kerk, by Ds. H. J. C. Sniijders, who is one of the better-known figures in that church. However, the 1.5 million-strong N.G. Kerk did not send official representatives to the 'Congress on Mission and Evangelism', though one of the leading speakers during the congress—who took part in his personal capacity—was the N.G. Kerk theologian Dr. David Bosch of the University of South Africa.

## IV.

Black Consciousness has already been referred to as another vital aspect of the churches' increasing involvement in changing the South African society. As we have seen, it has been the main cause for A.I.C.A.'s breaking away from the C.I. Black Consciousness teaches the South African Black that he should no longer interpret his existence in terms of the white man's culture and its values. As Steve Biko, the first president of the militant all-Black South African Student Association put it: 'The unadulterated quintessence of Black Consciousness is the realisation by the Black man of the need to rally together with his brothers round the cause of their oppression—the blackness of their skin—and to operate as a group in order to rid themselves of the shackles that bind them to perpetual servitude'. The potential dynamite which is contained in this new awareness was forcefully demonstrated by the spate of strikes by African workmen which shook Natal during February this year. It led to unprecedented events: the Prime Minister, Mr. B. J. Vorster, told members of the House of Assembly that he intended to benefit from the lessons of the strikes. 'And I hope the rest of the country will as well', he said.

The six-week rash of strikes was followed by dramatic pay rises for Blacks throughout the country. Many employers, notably municipi-

palitics, increased their workers' pay up to 50 per cent. It is well known what effect the strikes have had also on British firms operating in South Africa, following accusations made in the *Guardian* that some of these were paying starvation wages to their Black workers. As a result of those events, a loud call for political change and a better deal for the country's 18 million Blacks has come from Parliament, churches, and African leaders in the homelands. It appears that nobody has officially dropped the hint: But have these developments, and indeed the steep rise in Black Consciousness itself, had nothing to do with the spade-work which has been performed by Sprocas?

Black Consciousness has begun to throw its reflections also on to the theological scene. The search for a South African 'Black Theology' is in full swing, and the American Black evangelist Howard Jones, an associate of Billy Graham, thinks that what has been produced so far in this line in South Africa is much truer to the gospel message than its American counter-part (which he thinks has discredited Jesus Christ as 'the White man's liberator'). There is also a steady move towards stepping up the greater representation of Blacks in the executive posts of most of those South African churches whose membership consists of both Blacks and Whites. Thus the Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa (40,000 Whites, 26,000 Blacks) this year appointed the Rev. James Jolobe as its first Black Presbyterian Moderator of the church's General Assembly. And in February 1973 the Interdenominational African Ministers' Association of Southern Africa (I.D.A.M.A.S.A.) made the surprising announcement that it is going to raise three million Rand for the establishment of the first Black bank in Southern Africa. I.D.A.M.A.S.A.'s 1,000 members said they will give the project priority for 1973 and they intend to raise the money before the end of the year. Barclay's Bank will train the Black employees and second some of their staff to the new bank to help it on a managerial level.

## V.

Perhaps this sounds all a bit too marvellous, especially to the ears of British readers. To this one would reply that, certainly, any over-optimism would be wrong. The activities of the Schlebusch Commission, and its sharp confrontation with the S.A.C.C. over the Wilgespruit affair during last April, are a reminder that basically nothing has changed in the government's repeated warning to the South African churches that they should keep their hands off politics—a rather un-Calvinist demand, by the way. On the other hand, Black pressure on the hitherto mainly white-controlled churches keeps increasing, urging them to show greater involvement in South Africa's political issues. Thus said the former Transkei Cabinet minister

Curnick Ndamse during a function to mark the 10th anniversary of the interdenominational Federal Theological Seminary in Alice: 'The problem with Christianity is that religious leaders preach the Risen Christ to Whites and Christ Crucified to Blacks. How are you going to preach the Risen Christ to people subjected to unjust laws and inhuman treatment on the grounds of colour of their skin?' He therefore told his audience that Christians should get into every arena of power—whether government-sponsored or not.

One should also mention here the resolute 'No' which leading figures in the N.G. Kerk have given in answer to a hint dropped by the President of the conservative Afrikaner organisation S.A.B.R.A. (South African Bureau of Racial Affairs). During a youth congress held in Ermelo, Prof. C. W. H. Boshoff, a theologian in Pretoria University, who is married to a daughter of the late Dr. Hendrik Verwoerd, said that 'there should be room for orderly visits between White and Black Churches'. But there are clear indications that this 'No' will not remain unchallenged. Early this year the N.G. Kerk was plunged into a fierce internal controversy over the question as to whether its delegates to the 1972 Reformed Ecumenical Synod in Sydney had not in fact deserted their Church's negative stand with regard to racially mixed worship.

From all this it is clear that over-optimism would be wrong, but it would be equally wrong to side with the prophets of inevitable doom sitting in comfortable armchairs. Despite continuing harrassment and intimidation, the majority of churches in South Africa have remained an articulate and—as behoves them—uncomfortable group in this country. There is no end to the prophetic actions which committed Christians undertake to draw the public's attention to the incongruity of the South African way of life. Take the Rev. Dav'd Russell, an Anglican priest, who for six months during 1972 ate only what the needy people of Dimbaza (an African resettlement village in the Eastern Cape), can expect to eat. Sprocas subsequently issued a discussion paper in which the Dimbaza rations were compared with provisions Boer women received in a concentration camp near Bloemfontein during the South African War. Similar publicity was given to the 'Pilgrimage for Family Life' which was undertaken by a group of Church-men in December 1972/January 1973. They walked 600 miles between Grahamstown and Cape Town in order to draw attention to the evils of the migratory labour system 'which debases man at his deepest level—as husband or wife, as father or mother, reducing him to a labour unit, an "it"', as one of the pilgrims told the press. In like manner the banning of eight members of the Executive of the National Union of South African Students (N.U.S.A.S.) in March this year provoked quick, sharp reactions from churches and Christian organisations throughout the country.

But at least of equal importance is the 'grass roots' change which

takes place in many local communities and which mostly escapes the attention of the press. Such as the one which the Division of Justice and Reconciliation in the S.A.C.C. is out to provoke by bringing White people face-to-face with the actual conditions in which the country's underprivileged race-groups must live. Going a step further is the plan to step up the exchange of pulpits among preachers ministering to congregations of different colours, which has gained considerable momentum since the end of the 'Congress on Mission and Evangelism'.

The congress-theme was chosen from 2 Chron. 7, 14: 'If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land'. It has been stated above that the hour may not yet be too late for this promise to find its fulfilment in present-day South Africa. There is still hope that the small number of men will be found whose righteousness will save the land from Jahweh's wrath and the fate of Sodom and Gomorrha.

# Bartholomew de la Casas, Samuel Purchas and Colonialism

by Enrique Ruiz Maldonado, O.P.<sup>1</sup>

## *Contradictions in a Controversy*

Las Casas has always been surrounded by controversy. Not only did he play a highly important role in what is known as the 'Indian Controversy', but he himself has been the object of violent and protracted dispute. He has been regarded as the glory, and at the same time as the disgrace of Spain: as a fanatic, and a man of enlightenment. He has been used as an example for all kinds of people, for Christians as well as atheists, for Protestants and Catholics, for those on the left as well as those on the right; for people who love Spain, and those who hate the country.

This article does not seek to cast new light on that problem, which is sufficiently vast and complicated to inspire a book and much more. The present task is more modest; it is to look again at one or two important points in the interpretation of Las Casas, and to arrive

<sup>1</sup>English translation by Paul Potts O.P.