

## THE SOCIAL MISSION OF THE CHURCH IN SOUTH AFRICA

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SOME day no doubt an attempt will be made to probe the roots of the colour bar in the psychology of certain European nations. The colour bar did not originate in South Africa. It came with Dutch and British colonists. But it found a vigorous stimulant to its growth in the formidable challenge of that very thing, the black skin, in the dread of which it consists. It has been suggested that the list of capital sins needs amplification, for it contains no reference to one of humanity's worst failings, the tendency to restrict the scope of the connatural love of the species to a particular community constituted by language, lineage, race, religion, politics, economic interest or colour. In our days, colour is one of the most fiercely sundering of these restrictive elements.

Colour dominates the South African social scene. It would be a mistake, however, to simplify the picture and put all the blame for the country's ills on White oppressors. There can be no denying their guilt, but we need not add to it by making them responsible for all the tensions that have resulted from the meeting of Western sophistication and African backwardness. White colonizers have probably made all the mistakes in the book; but even without colonial conquest there would have been conflict a-plenty arising from the impact of Western dynamism on the social stagnation of Africa.

The ideal arrangement would have been for the Faith to make its penetration first and achieve its pacific conquest by the usual process of the preaching of the word, the dispensing of divine life and the acceptance of martyrdom. It would have transformed Africa from within, absorbing and informing all that was noble in African life: the essential humanity, the piety, the patience and laughter and courtesy, the concern with the spirit world, the bonds of family and tribal life, the respect for age and authority. It would have given an internal impulse to a new African culture and the inward strength to meet and absorb the sophistication of the West.

But in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries this was impossible. Even without colonial conquest the West would have arrived like a whirlwind with its science and technology, its industry and commerce, its popular democracy, its secularism, its Mammon and its Marxism. With that cultural bomb exploding in its vitals, Africa's

evolution would have been a painful one with or without colonial occupation. In the transition to Western ways from an unlettered, improvident, ancestor-dominated, cattle-conscious, polygamous condition of tribal society, much of what has taken place under colonial rule would have taken place also under self-government. There would have been the same uneven advances giving rise to economic exploitation and grinding poverty, the emergence of foreign and local plutocratic interests, frustrated proletariats and uprooted intellectuals; conservatism and vested interests would have been locked in struggle with the messianic vision of violent young radicals; there would have been exploitation and corruption, demagoguery and repression; with the evil genius of Marx brooding over it all. To imagine anything else would be the height of innocence.

All this would have been bad enough in itself. But to add to the confusion in South Africa, the transition has been set in motion under White domination, and as a sort of by-product of the White man's exploitation of the country. One must not discount the dedicated labours of missionaries and humanitarians and their influence on some aspects of government policy. But by and large, the White man is not in South Africa on a religious and humanitarian mission. He is there to make a good living for himself, and in order to do so he believes that he must preserve his racial identity and retain political and economic control. In the pursuit of this objective he feels he has no obligations to the Black man apart from permitting him to remain alive and in something approaching satisfactory working condition.

The English-speaking South African does not rationalize about the situation. He accepts the colour bar as a practical guide to social living. It protects the *status quo* so conducive to the pleasant and comfortable life the White man enjoys. The Afrikaner rationalizes. The maintenance of the colour bar is part of the national struggle. The Afrikaner is concerned not only about his colour but also about his nation and is involved in a ceaseless campaign of national preservation and self-assertion. Religion plays an important part in that struggle. Afrikaner Calvinism is an ingredient of the national spirit, providing it with a sense of divine mission. The man who sets his face grimly to do what he understands to be God's manifest will for his race is capable of swallowing any apartheid horror with a clear conscience. That is the tragedy of political Calvinism.

Such are the actualities of the present South African scene. The Afrikaner drives on relentlessly in pursuit of the national destiny and the will of God. The South African grumbles at the discomfort

of being pushed around in the process. The African ekes out what existence he can, dogged by legal and political disability, bodily starvation, social dislocation and the spirit-wounding lash of the White man's arrogance. The Coloured man and the Indian are the companions of his misery. In all three non-White races the flame of resentment burns ever more strongly as the pressures build up in the rest of Africa and elsewhere in the world. Some White men read the signs of the times and, as Liberals or Progressives, devote their attention to the problem of building a common society. But in the race between them and the fast-running sands of time observers favour the latter.

In this bitterly divided South African community the Church must pursue its mission of salvation. It cannot do so without turning its attention to the social ills of the country; for, like all social ills, the South African ones constitute serious obstacles to the life of the spirit and have their immediate source in human behaviour, in the slowness or the failure or the refusal of men to respond to the call of God. Two things are happening simultaneously: the social ills of the South African body politic are reaching crisis point, and the Catholic Church, after a century of painfully slow growth, is beginning to give expression to its South African personality, in the emergence of native<sup>1</sup> vocations, the spiritual leadership of native bishops and the embryonic stirrings of a Catholic social conscience.

The Church is a profound mystery. It is in fact the confrontation of two profound mysteries: the strength of God and the weakness of man. Both are inescapably evident in the life of the Church: in the triumphs that reflect God and the failures that reflect man. We can thank God for the success, modest though it be, of the apostolic labours of the Church in South Africa, of its doctrinal and sacramental apostolate and also its work of education, hospitalization and social welfare. But there are shortcomings to deplore, chief among them the lack of a true social apostolate, a systematic effort to concentrate the energies of divine light and life on the failings in human conduct responsible for the colour bar.

Many reasons for this can be enumerated: smallness of numbers, both absolutely speaking and in relation to other religious groups, lack of priests and religious and almost total dependence, up to a few years ago, on overseas sources of supply, to the extent that the Church in South Africa suffered from the colonist mentality of looking over its shoulder to a home in Europe. These factors, however, do not really explain the slowness of the Church to interest itself in South Africa's social problems. After all, minorities are

1 'Native' in the general meaning of the word.

often better placed than the masses to tackle such problems. The full explanation lies elsewhere: perhaps in the general human weakness (to which the Church, alas, is not immune) of failing to notice sudden social changes and their political and economic consequences; perhaps in the individualistic Catholicism characteristic of the age, which permitted the best-intentioned people to give meticulous attention to certain religious observances while remaining blind to enormous community sins of omission; perhaps in the lack of Catholic intellectual leaders with the ability and the leisure to focus the Gospel teachings on the situation; perhaps in the fact that the culture which produced the social problems was not a Catholic culture and the Church, busily occupied in defending itself against hostile manifestations, found it difficult to take responsibility for the failures of that culture.

Whatever the explanation, the truth of the matter is that the Church did not begin to bestir itself until a generation after socialists, marxists, and secular humanists had become busy about South Africa's racial problem, and long decades after certain Protestant leaders had raised the first cries of alarm. There was, of course, never an entire absence of concern on the part of Catholic clergy and laity. There was, in fact, a most active interest in the socio-economic development of Africans which originated in the twenties in response to leftist-inspired Trade Union agitation. Father Bernard Huss of Mariannhill was the leader of the movement which grew into the Catholic African Union, a federation of church associations aiming at the cultural and economic betterment of Africans under Catholic guidance and inspiration. Unfortunately the Catholic African Union achieved only limited success. Unfortunately, too, there was no serious attempt to tackle the colour bar, nothing resembling the political efforts of the left and the cultural endeavours of mainly secular humanist inspiration.

The Catholic conscience can be said to have come to life formally and officially in 1952 when the bishops, formed into a hierarchy the previous year, published their first statement on race relations declaring that 'justice demands that non-Europeans be permitted to evolve gradually towards full participation in the political, economic and cultural life of the country'. In 1957 they issued another statement containing a downright condemnation of apartheid and a call to clergy and faithful to consider the factual situation. 'The practice of segregation, though officially not recognized in our churches, characterizes nevertheless many of our church societies, our schools, seminaries, convents, hospitals and the social life of our people. In the light of Christ's teaching this cannot

be tolerated for ever. The time has come to pursue more vigorously the change of heart and practice that the law of Christ demands. We are hypocrites if we condemn apartheid in South African society and condone it in our own institutions.'

These statements exemplify the Church's growing awareness of its social mission in South Africa, and there are hopeful signs that White Catholics are disposed to listen to the truth despite the weight of inborn prejudice. Catholic Action organizations frequently give an example of communication across the colour line. Individual Catholics manifest a keen interest in the new forward-looking political parties, the Liberals and the Progressives. In the general election of 1958 there was a Catholic among the few Liberals who contested parliamentary seats, and recently a prominent layman of Durban, a leading spirit in the recently formed Progressive Party, told *The Southern Cross* that one of the principal factors responsible for the creation of the Party was 'the awakening of the moral conscience of South Africa in response to the repeated calls of religious leaders for a national policy based on human rights, the common good and the dignity of man rather than on sectional interests'.

These are encouraging developments but they are only a beginning. The long hard trail ahead will demand a systematic treatment of colour bar in pulpit, class-room and Catholic Action organization until the average Catholic is as fully conscious of the sinfulness of race discrimination as he is of the evil of missing Mass on Sunday and breaking the sixth commandment. Steps will have to be taken to develop a Catholic intellectual force. At present there is no effective centre of Catholic thought. Perhaps the Pius XII College in Basutoland and the recently established seminaries and scholasticates will begin to supply the need and produce the effort necessary for the application of Catholic principles to the hard facts of experience. There is an immense labour awaiting the energetic Catholic scholar, the sociologist, the economist, the political thinker.

In the pursuit of her mission of social regeneration through the deployment of her spiritual forces, the Church, from the very nature of the South African scene must seek the collaboration of non-Catholic Christians and of all men of good will. They have much to offer: compassion, conscience, scientific and practical knowledge and in many cases a fairly long experience of inter-racial communication.

So far mention has been made principally of measures concerning Europeans. Corresponding measures must be taken also in regard to non-Europeans chiefly Africans, measures designed to give a

Christian character to their hunger and thirst after justice, after personal dignity, racial self-respect and civil liberty. It will be dangerous work, for the Church's educational effort must impinge on the raw and passionate stuff of racial, political and economic exasperation.

All the while the dominant force in South Africa will most probably remain totally impervious to Catholic influence; its eyes fixed on the target of national survival; its religious, political, cultural and economic powers concentrated on what it imagines to be the God-given mission of the Afrikaner nation. So the day comes on apace when White supremacy and Black nationalism will meet in head-on collision, and trial by ordeal of the Church's social mission seems destined to accompany the pangs of its birth and the first uncertain steps of its infancy.

### THE GREEKS IN THE COUNCIL OF FLORENCE<sup>1</sup>

JOSEPH GILL, S.J.

THE history of the ecclesiastical breach between East and West, and of the attempt to heal it, is very long and obscure. There was the Photian schism of the middle of the ninth century, but that was over within a few years. Two centuries later the Patriarch Cerularius was excommunicated by an over-zealous papal legate and retaliated in kind; but that quarrel was not final. The Fourth Crusade captured Christian Constantinople and never went any further, but set up a Latin kingdom there which lasted less than sixty years and did as much to antagonize the Greeks as anything else. Yet, a little more than ten years after he regained his throne, the restored Greek Emperor—but not the Greek Church—had accepted the Latin faith and union in the Second Council of Lyons (1274). His purpose, however, was political, to win the Pope's help to prevent any attempt to re-establish the Latin kingdom of Constantinople.

From then on over the next century, whenever Constantinople was more in danger than usual by reason of the rapid advance of the Turks, the Byzantine emperors approached the pope of the time, as head of western Christendom. They asked for military aid, and they

<sup>1</sup> This article by the author of *The Council of Florence*, which the Cambridge University Press published last year, appeared first, in Italian, in *La Civiltà Cattolica*.