

OPEN LETTER: A Widow's Agony

WE HAVE TAKEN the Open Letter that follows over from and by courtesy of the Sunday Tribune. It appeared in the Tribune on August 15 of this year. It may perhaps not fit into the general context of this Special issue on the rôle of women in the Church. It is, however, undoubtedly a woman's voice that speaks, and a most authentic one.

?

THIS IS AN OPEN LETTER to the conscience of White South Africa. It was written by an old woman - a widow of 75. Her husband was a prominent businessman. A building in a South African city is named after him. Now she has been classified Coloured and told to quit the home where she lives with her adopted daughter and grandchildren. Her plight was revealed to the Sunday Tribune by Mr. Eric Winchester, the United Party M.P. Whom does it concern? **IF YOU LIVE IN SOUTH AFRICA TODAY IT CONCERNS YOU.**

YES! YOU KNOW ME.

When my husband was alive we used to visit you fairly often. But I don't go calling any more. Perhaps you've wondered about it at times and supposed that I have too much to do, or that I'd prefer to be left alone.

If you only knew! You see, I don't go out any more because I feel ashamed. And I don't want to embarrass anyone.

But since you're bound to find out sooner or later I thought I'd take this way of letting you know - of telling you what it's like.

The fact is, I am a Coloured. I shouldn't be here at all. Or so the Government says. I'm supposed to go and live in one of the Coloured townships out on the Cape Flats with all the other Coloureds.

And if I visited you and your family as I used to and you found out afterwards I was a Coloured, you might feel cheated. You might report me.

They might make me move and I couldn't face that, not after living here in this same street for over 20 years. And have you seen the Coloured townships?

Of course you say you would never report me. That what the Government calls me means nothing to you. That you judge a person for what he is, not by the colour of his skin. And haven't you many friends who are Coloured?

You may be right, but I couldn't take the chance. The fact is I don't trust you!

Why should I? Remember when my husband was alive and we used to discuss politics, how you used to say that you weren't interested and that politics was for the politicians and that they should get on

with it and leave you alone?

I have found out that they *won't* leave you alone. They've made me a Coloured and they don't even know me!

Remember, too, how you used to say that the one good thing about the Government was the fact that they were the only people strong enough to sort out South Africa's racial mess, and that the Coloureds were all right in their place but should go and live among their kind?

Well, I am a Coloured. Must I go and live among my own kind? You thought I was your kind then, but what do you think now, now that I'm called Coloured? you see why I can't trust you not to tell?

You say it can't be true, that you've known me for years and that you knew my husband. That you could swear we aren't Coloureds. That we always lived and acted like White people.

After what has happened to me, a Coloured who thought she was White, I can only say I'm confused.

I don't suddenly think and act any differently. I feel exactly the same as I did before. I have the same worries about the children when they're sick and when they're away from home. I still love them and my grandchildren just as much as I did before.

Nothing inside me has changed. But outside, nothing will ever be the same.

My husband was a fine man. You knew him well!

When he died they named one of the most important buildings in the city after him. Now I wonder if they'll change the name of the building when they find out he was married to a Coloured woman. That is another reason why I've tried to hide the truth.

There is no question about my husband being White - it's only me they've called Coloured. Even my children are safe because we adopted them when we found out I couldn't have children of my own.

At least the Government can't touch *them*. You have no need to feel panicky about the times they played with your own children when they were small, about how they attended the same school as yours did.

But I can't help wondering what would you have done if you'd known the truth about me then.

One of my children still lives with me, together with her husband and their children. My grandchildren.

I haven't told them what the Government has done to me because I frankly don't know how.

What do you say to three little children to make them understand their Granny is not the person they thought she was, that she is really another kind of person altogether?

How do you tell them their Granny is committing a crime by even living in the same house with them?

HUMILIATION

You will never know what it is like to stand hours on end at a counter trying to explain to a young Government clerk why he should change your "Coloured" card to White. So many times did I visit that office, and each time my humiliation was greater than the last ...

I'm not bitter against them. They're doing no more than they are paid to do. But I am bitter against the politicians who instructed them, and the likes of you who allowed them to do it.

Do you know what it's like to be told where you must live, that you no longer have any right to stay in the same house with your own family? A house, you and your husband saved for and bought over 20 years ago?

Have you ever thought of being forced to leave the friends of a lifetime, to go and live among strangers with whom you have nothing in common? Again, I ask, have you seen the Coloured townships on the sand dunes of the Cape Flats?

Have you ever lived in fear that the next knock on your door will be a Government official telling you to get out of the neighbourhood because you're an affected person, as though suddenly you have some dreadful disease that might contaminate those near you?

Have you ever been told that the only solution to your problem was to go and live in a foreign land?

The person who told me that was a senior official who realised that his own fellow White South Africans had long since lost their souls.

I am nearing the end of my life and my last appeal to the Government was that they issue me with a White card so that at least I could be buried in the same part of the cemetery as my husband. They refused!

Do you think it would have upset some masterplan if they'd shown me a little compassion?

Am I in fact a Coloured? I really and honestly don't know. I am what God made me. All my life I lived and worked among the same people as I do now, and when I was small I never thought to ask my mother and father if they were White or Coloured?

Did you ask *your* parents such a question? Do you think God will ask me?

Letter from the Black Sash

Mrs. Jean Sinclair,
President, Black Sash.

The Black Sash has circulated its "Charter for Women" to various organisations, particularly women's organisations, with a request that it be studied and formally adopted. Our hope is that these organisations will strive for its implementation in whichever way is best suited to their particular activities and constitutions.

The Charter was very carefully drawn up in consultation with a Professor of Constitutional Law, and we feel that there can be no woman who will not support its nine clauses, which are fundamental to the normal life of any women and which are, for the most part, denied to African women.

For many years the Black Sash has run Advice Offices to help the African people to cope with the maze of laws and regulations which restrict their lives and twist them out of normally accepted patterns. The misery and suffering we see every day decided us to inaugurate a campaign to try to ameliorate the plight of African women.

On the basis of the mass of information gleaned in the course of our work we published a series of articles on all aspects of the lives of African women, which were subsequently incorporated in a booklet entitled "Who Cares?". These have already been on sale to the public and will be again, together with a re-edition of our "Memorandum on the Pass Laws" which is a comprehensive explanation and assessment of the exceedingly complicated system which governs and controls the lives of all African people.

The public cannot be expected to understand how some of the absolutely basic clauses of the Charter come to be included at all and are not simply taken for granted unless they are made aware of the actual conditions under which so many South African citizens labour. The Booklet and the Memorandum are our effort to supply the general public with some of the facts which we have learnt through first-hand experience.

The Charter for Women was originally incorporated in a Petition which was presented to Parliament on behalf of the Black Sash by Mrs. Helen Suzman, M.P. on the 18th February, 1971. The Petition contains a fairly detailed account of the many difficulties which beset African women in their daily lives, and was presented to Parliament in an effort to bring home to those directly responsible the repercussions of the welter of restrictive laws they make and pass.

The Charter is enclosed. The Booklet "Who Cares" is on sale at The Black Sash, 37 Harvard Buildings, Joubert Street, Johannesburg, at 20c per copy.

The Charter for Women appears on page 7.