

A Theological Rationale and a Call to Prayer for the End to Unjust Rule

Soweto, 16 June 1976, is South Africa's most potent symbol of black resistance. Approximately 700 people were killed and hundreds more wounded in unrest which soon extended beyond that day and place to encompass the entire country. These events have come to constitute a fundamental crisis in South African society which the authorities are apparently incapable of resolving. They represent a phase of resistance which began on 21 March 1960 when the police killed 69 people and wounded a further 180 people in the notorious Sharpeville shootings. In the short term black unrest was quelled and white dominance firmly re-affirmed. It is, however, clear that Sharpeville was a turning point in the history of African self-determination. Protest hardened into resistance, and blacks were forced to think more sharply and clearly of the need for fundamental change. The reality of the Sharpeville atrocity was recognized throughout the world, in the wake of which South African and world church leaders met at Cottesloe in December 1960 to reject the apartheid system as un-Christian. The Soweto unrest again compelled the Christian Church to address itself to the crisis within the country - a crisis that continues to this day, as is evidenced in the killing of people at Uitenhage. In response to this reality, those churches who enjoy fraternity through the SACC and other ecumenical forms of contact, have consistently condemned the structures of racial and economic oppression in this land as being contrary to the declared will of God, made known in the Scriptures and the traditions of the Church.

Now, on 16 June, and twenty-five years after the dawning of this phase of resistance it is right to remember those whose blood has been shed in resistance and protest against an unjust system. It is also right that we as Christians reassess our response to a system that all right-thinking people identify as unjust. We have prayed for our rulers, as is demanded of us in the Scriptures. We have entered into consultation with them as is required by our faith. We have taken the reluctant and drastic step of declaring apartheid to be contrary to the declared will of God, and some churches have declared its theological justification to be a heresy. We now pray that God will replace the present structures of oppression with ones that are just, and remove from power those who persist in defying his laws, installing in their place leaders who will govern with justice and mercy.

A firm theological tradition

We do this conscious of a broad and compelling tradition of faith that unites us in a common loyalty to the sole lordship of Jesus Christ. The Scriptural record is clear. Civil authority is instituted of God, in order to rule with justice, goodness and love (Romans 13). This same record is equally clear that civil authority can be a source of blasphemy against God (Revelation 13). In this awareness Christians have through the ages prayed that they may be godly and quietly governed.

With Tertullian, in the spirit of the early church, we recognize that if civil law is not the source of social justice it is tyranny, and that such authority has no right to exist.¹ In the same spirit Augustine defined the objective of "government" to be human peace, and "the republic" as the welfare of the people.² St. Thomas, taught that "human law has the true nature of law only

¹ Tertullian, *Apology*, *Ante Nicene Fathers*, Volume III, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), p. 21.

² St. Augustine, *The City of God*, Book XIX, chapter 21 (New York: Doubleday, 1958), p. 470.

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in so far as it corresponds to right reason, and therefore is derived from the eternal law. In so far as it falls short of right reason, a law is said to be a wicked law; and so lacking the true nature of law, it is rather a kind of violence.³

In this tradition the Reformers addressed themselves to the nature of legitimate government. Luther counselled people themselves to be willing to accept injustices, but warned of the obligation to oppose injustice shown towards one's neighbour. He also warned the tyrant that people would not accept their presumption indefinitely, and allowed that it was not their duty to obey such authority which contradicted the rule of God. In calling the people to turn in prayer to God in their need, he believed that God would not tolerate such rule for long.⁴ Calvin recognized the obligation of citizens to be subject even to the wicked ruler, while at the same time rejecting unjust laws as no laws at all. He stressed that obedience to civil authority should never be allowed to contradict obedience to God, who is the Lord of all and the King of Kings.⁵ He understood the hunger for justice to be implanted in the human soul by God himself. "And this feeling, is it not implanted in us by the Lord?" he asked. "It is then the same as though God hears himself, when he hears the cries and groanings of those who cannot bear injustice."⁶

In more recent times Karl Barth spoke of the obligation of the Church to pray for the state, never as an object of worship, but on its behalf, that it might be legitimate, governing according to the rule of God. In so doing he recognized that such prayer cannot be offered without a corresponding commitment to work for good and legitimate government.⁷ He left us with no doubt in this regard that the Church is obliged to be unconditionally and passionately for the lowly and against the exalted.⁸ The Dutch Calvinist, Abraham Kuyper, has also spoken of the obligation of government: "In order that it may be able to rule people, the government must respect this deepest ethical power of our human existence. A nation consisting of citizens whose consciences are bruised, is itself broken in its national strength." For this reason, he continued, "we must ever watch against the danger which lurks, for our personal liberty, in the power of the state." Indeed, "the struggle for liberty is not only declared permissible, but is made a duty for each individual in his own sphere."⁹

It is this affirmation that stands central to the contemporary emphasis of the Roman Catholic Church, which proclaims a preferential option for the poor. It is this opinion which requires the theologian to analyze the process of authority from the perspective of the poor, the marginalized and the oppressed – an option reaffirmed by Pope John Paul II in his recent commen-

3. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II/1, question 93, article 3 (London: Paternoster, 1915), p. 32

4. Martin Luther, *On Secular Authority*, *Works of Martin Luther*, Volume III (Philadelphia: Holman and Castle, 1930), pp. 374 and 397.

5. John Calvin, *Institute of the Christian Religion*, Volume IV, ed. by J.T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), Book IV, pp. 1503 and 1520.

6. John Calvin, *Commentary on Habakkuk, Minor Prophets*, Volume IV (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), pp. 93-94.

7. Karl Barth, "Church and State", in *Community, State and Church*, ed. by Will Herberg (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1960), pp. 135 and 145.

8. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Volume III (Edinburgh: T and T Clarke, 1964), p. 386.

9. Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1931), pp. 107, 108, 81, 98-99.

tary on Latin American theology.¹⁰ Pope John XXIII, has stated that "if civil authorities legislate for or allow anything that is contrary to that order and therefore contrary to the will of God, neither the laws nor the authorizations granted can be binding on the consciences of the citizens, since God has more right to be obeyed than men."¹¹ Paul VI, in turn, recognising that governments can become tyrannical, declared: "There are certainly situations whose injustice cries to heaven . . . whole populations destitute of necessities live in a state of dependence barring them from initiative and responsibility, and all opportunity to advance culturally and share in social and political life."¹² "We want to be clearly understood," he concluded, "the situation must be faced with courage and the injustices linked with it must be fought against and overcome."¹³ It is this affirmation which forms the basis of Vatican II theology which states: "Where citizens are oppressed by a public authority which exceeds its competence, they should not on that account refuse what is objectively required of them for the common good, but it must be allowable for them, within the limits of the law of nature and the Gospel, to defend their rights and those of their fellow citizens against this abuse of authority."¹⁴

The Church in South Africa

The considered judgement of every synod, assembly and conference of the Roman Catholic and mainline Protestant Churches (with the exception of the Afrikaans Reformed Churches), has been that the present regime, together with its structures of domination, stands in contradiction to the Christian Gospel to which the churches of the land seek to remain faithful.¹⁵ We have continually prayed for the authorities, that they may govern wisely and justly. Now, in solidarity with those who suffer most, in this hour of crisis we pray that God in His grace may remove from His people the tyrannical structures of oppression and the present rulers in our country who persistently refuse to heed the cry for justice, as reflected in the Word of God as proclaimed through His Church both within this land and beyond. In constant and solemn awareness of the responsibility we take on ourselves in this regard, we pray that God's rule may be established in this land. We pledge ourselves to work for that day, knowing that this rule is good news to the poor, because the captives will be released, the blind healed, the oppressed set at liberty, and the acceptable year of the Lord proclaimed (Luke 4: 18-19).

A Call to Prayer

We invite Christians, and all people of goodwill, to join consistently in prayer for a new and just order in this land. In so doing we share in a community of those who believe throughout this world, who will pray on June

16, in commemoration of those who died at Soweto and other places such as Sharpeville, Crossroads and Uitenhage, in commitment to a new South Africa for all its people.

10 Pope John Paul II "Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation", *Pastoral Action*, Number 38, South African Catholic Bishops' Conference, Pretoria, nn 5 and 10.

11 Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, 1963.

12 Pope Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, 1967.

13 Vatican II Ecumenical Council, *Constitution on Peace*, 1965.

14 See documentation in *Apartheid is a Heresy*, edited by J. de Gruchy and C. Villa-Vicencio (Cape Town: David Philip, 1983) pp 144-84.