

## The role of the church in Society

President's report to the January Plenary Session of the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference 2011.

Archbishop Buti Tlhagale OMI

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As a Bishops' Conference, we are being continuously challenged to redefine the role of the Church in our changing societies. It is relatively easy to appreciate the public role of the Catholic Church in the area of social services, health care and development projects. During the past three years, the Bishops' Conference has been discussing the topic of sexual morality with the view to issuing a pastoral document. What is missing in the public spaces of our societies is the voice of the Catholic Church (or the religious sector) that genuinely seeks to engage the public on moral-ethical issues which impinge on the society at large. Our 3 nations are developing democracies. They are politically stable, but fragile. To varying degrees, they are characterised by graft, violent crimes, corruption, the serious lack of service delivery and self enrichment by those in positions of responsibility. The South African jails are overflowing with prisoners. To the majority of the ordinary citizens, the promises of democracy and rule of law are not only dreams that have failed but in many a reminder of the painful experiences of the past.

Our materialistic society protects and promotes the rights of individuals to accumulate wealth. Christian principles of fairness, equality and justice have fallen by the wayside. Our societies have lost a basic tenet of morality: the upliftment of those who have a greater need. The rich flaunt their wealth. They have become incapable of postponing their own personal interests in favour of the upliftment of poor communities.

All this begs the question. What is the role and possibly the influence of Christian morality on our societies and nations? Is the church capable of persuading individuals to move away from a rights-based morality – "It is my right to accumulate wealth". Is the Church able to persuade our fellow citizens that to be truly moral person it is equally important not to harm others and to avoid greed.

Some pressing questions come to mind. If our Christian morality is based on our faith in God and if faith is a matter of choice (personal), is morality also not a question of personal choice? There is such a thing as a secular morality? How does Christian morality face up to it? Can Christian leaders discuss moral issues with non believers without reference to God? Is it a fair assumption that our countries are Christian Countries? If so, does this allow Christian leaders to impose on the people Christian moral principles or threaten them with the fires of hell? What about African Traditional morality, do we as Christians simply dismiss those who believe in traditional morality pagans (levirate, polygamy etc)?

In spite of many questions, what is abundantly clear is that we need morality to build compassionate human communities; Government can only do so much. Is the church leadership willing to invest resources and time in responding to this challenge? Where are our own moral theologians?

The second issue concerning morality which I wish to raise flows from the statement released by the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith explaining the context of the statement of the Holy Father concerning the use of condoms by gay men. The statement points out that the real challenge is to

focus on behaviour change rather than on condom use. My question is: What the status of the principle of a lesser evil in Catholic moral theology today? Is casuistic moral thinking still in vogue? Again here I sense a stagnation, a poverty of moral thinking in Africa and a dependency on American-European thinking. HIV & AIDS is not a North Atlantic problem. It is an African problem. It is a disease Africa shares with gay people in Europe and North America. When Europe thinks about moral issues around HIV & AIDS, they think of gay people. In Africa, we think about millions of ordinary men, women and youth, it is high time we challenge our moral theologians to assess the moral challenges of HIV & AIDS. It is high time for the conference to invest in the training of moral theologians in a more systematic fashion. Cynics would say, what more is there to think about? We have the Ten Commandments! We have a duty not to allow the imaginative genius of the human spirit to stagnate or die.

National Religious Leaders Forum (NRLF).

On January 5<sup>th</sup> 2011, a meeting of NRLF, National Interfaith Leaders Council (NILC) and the Commission for religion and traditional affairs of the African National Congress was held in order to discuss Unity amongst the two Interfaith organizations. The consensus reached was that instead of forming a third umbrella body, as was suggested by Luthuli House, both NILC and NRLF should amalgamate. Each organization will appoint 7 members to constitute a working group. This body who will prepare a concept paper and recommend procedures for the formation of a single National Interfaith organization or forum.

The Challenge of follow-up.

The challenge that continues to confront the conference is to develop a mechanism that will ensure that the results of the various ground-breaking conferences and documents are systematically discussed and implemented. Here we refer to *Ecclesia in Afrika*, the African Synod on Justice and Reconciliation, the IMBISA triennial Conferences (self-reliance, good governance, good work ethics) and the economic justice pastoral document. Unless we have a way of monitoring implementation, we run the risk of reinventing the same ideas every few years.

Lay Formation.

By lay formation I understand the empowering of lay people to participate fully and meaningfully in the life of the church and society by virtue of their baptism. Lay formation has not yet been given content at Conference Level. It is also not clear how this dove-tails with the evangelization and catechesis. Lay formation is a broad term that refers to information dissemination, the imparting of specific knowledge and training. But there is a debilitating vagueness about this term. LUMKO has been suggested as a possible institution to put together a laity formation programme. To date, no plans have been forthcoming.

It is equally important not to lose sight of the need for a laity structure, a platform, a forum where lay people can make their voices heard. If the Conference does not help to facilitate such a forum or structure, other structures will emerge to occupy the empty space. There are many lay organizations in the church. It is imperative that there should be a possibility of networking for the benefit of the church. The Conference needs to dialogue with representatives of the lay faithful.

Joint Witness.

It is sixteen years since the last Joint Witness Conference. In our view, meetings at metropolitan level are good and desirable. But this can in no way substitute for a national, regional encounter between Bishops and Leaders of the Consecrated Life. A formal structure would facilitate such a dialogue.

The religious are partners in the work of evangelization and should from time to time be consulted on important issues our times. Otherwise, it appears that the work they do is hardly given any recognition. Again, such as in the case of the laity, if no forum is given at conference level, some will always create their own platform to express their concerns and unhappiness with the Church. We appeal to the Bishops to consider Joint Witness III in the interest of collaboration, openness and dialogue.

+B. Tlhagale

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