

LESSONS FROM CHURCH LEADERS

Peter Henriot

First, let me begin my column this week as I did last week, with serious prayers from all of us at JCTR for the good health of President Mwanawasa. And blessings for his family and all who are attending him in Paris. With prayers for political stability and maturity in Zambia at this very serious moment in our country's history. To echo the sensible sentiment of a POST editorial last week, "Pray for the best, prepare for the worst...."

This past week saw the conclusion here in Lusaka of an important conference of over 200 church leaders from ten countries in Eastern and Central Africa. The Catholic leaders spent several days in intense study of the theme "The Church in Service of Reconciliation, Peace and Justice." Among the many outcomes of the AMECEA conference, three lessons strike me as very important for the region at this time, especially for Zambia. These are lessons about reconciliation, poverty, and politics and the church.

RECONCILIATION

There has been much discussion in recent weeks about "reconciliation" among prominent political figures in Zambia. What is the meaning of such reconciliation? What will be its effect upon the political landscape of this nation? How will its effect be felt in the lives of ordinary Zambian citizens? And should personal reconciliation be evaluated in terms of its long-term social consequences?

What impressed me during the AMECEA meeting were the very concrete cases that were spoken about when reconciliation was addressed. Eritrea and Ethiopia and their border conflicts; Uganda and the Lord's Liberation Army rebel war; Kenya and the violent post-election strife. These are terrible cases of conflict, causing thousands of deaths and wastage of scarce resources that should be directed to development.

To speak of reconciliation in these situations is to call for more than pious words or hopeful promises. Rather, it is to work to put in place the conditions of change necessary for justice to prevail in the future. A phrase mentioned again and again during the conference was the reminder that "Peace is not simply the absence of conflict, but it is the presence of justice" (Pope Paul VI).

I remember being told several years ago by a Zambian minister of the Gospel that for an African, reconciliation required four moments. First, to come to a settlement with the person I had offended; second to put in place the mending of the community bonds I had broken through my offense; third, to come to peace with God whose love I had denied; and fourth, to settle my position before the ancestors, the spirits I had disturbed by my actions.

So whether we speak of the reconciliation required in Zambia today in order to have a political order that moves the whole country forward, or the reconciliation so desperately needed in the midst of the tragedies proudly promoted by leaders in Zimbabwe, we know that it is no easy task but a very necessary and serious task if it is to be real and lasting.

POVERTY

Repeatedly during the AMECEA conference, reference was made to the fact that Africa is not a poor continent, that the countries of this region are indeed very rich, and that the potentials far outweigh the problems faced. Yet so many of our people live in desperate

situations of impoverishment, deprivation, lack of basic needs, inhuman conditions of hunger and illness.

Two points were raised from the experience of the persons participating from different countries. First, conflict situations that surprisingly flare up (e.g., in Kenya) so often reveal deeper and longer lasting conditions that have been either ignored or only superficially dealt with. Land disputes, tribal and regional discriminations, corrupt practices, etc., all contribute to the fire that breaks out and fuel its destructive blazing.

Second, although there is simply no justification for the frequently heard statement that “The poor are poor because they are lazy,” there still is indeed a need to address work ethics, cultures of dependency, lack of serious commitment to personal and social development. Sometimes government policies, or the programmes of churches and civil society groups, have contributed to a set of expectations that have weakened the hard work that might have characterised days gone by. In addressing problems of poverty in Zambia and elsewhere, this often ignored issue of work ethics should not be side-stepped.

What was consistently echoed in the AMECEA discussions, however, was that poverty is not primarily an economic or political or cultural issue in our countries. No, it is a moral issue, a religious issue, because it degrades the human person made in the image and likeness of God!

POLITICS AND THE CHURCH

Of course, as might be expected when church leaders take up issues like reconciliation and poverty, the question of the political stance of churches would emerge. I was glad that the AMECEA conference dealt head-on with this issue. In wise words offered in his presentation to the conference, Fr. Joe Komakoma emphasised that it is imperative that our churches should be “political” while striving to avoid being “partisan.”

Being “political” means relating to the real life issues of church members, whether it be poverty or oppression, lack of health and education services, corruption of government officials, policies affecting development, etc., etc. When people come to a Saturday or Sunday church gathering, they come as whole persons, not simply as “souls” floating outside their bodies that are affected by rising fuel prices or agricultural setbacks. The church must address the congregants’ whole person or it does not share a whole Gospel.

Being “partisan” means endorsing a political party manifesto and or candidate. While church members may – indeed should – be active in party politics, church leadership and structures should not give support to MMD or UNIP or UPND. Not always an easy distinction to make but always an important point to emphasise.

Listening to some of the exchanges during the AMECEA conference, I thought how fortunate we are in Zambia to have three church “mother bodies” that cooperate closely together to take political stances that promote social justice and concern for the poor. And my feeling was echoed in the strong affirmation President Mwanawasa gave at the opening of the AMECEA conference when he expressed appreciation for the justice and peace work of the church, even if at times he might feel himself to be the target of their efforts!

These three lessons from the church leaders gathered last week for the AMECEA conference do indeed have relevance for our current situation in Zambia. Let reconciliation be realistic, poverty be addressed and the church be political!

[1090 words]

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