

## First Meeting of Chaplains Serving Parliaments.

"Pastoral Care of Politicians: Spiritual companionship and promotion of the common good"

Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace Palazzo San Calisto  
Piazza San Calisto, 16, Rome

15<sup>th</sup> November, 2013.

South Africa has come out of a very dark place; it has emerged from a long rule by tyranny where the political culture was marked by the silencing of voices (often viciously); where policies, characterised by extreme inequality were designed to benefit an elite at the expense of the majority destining the latter to a servitude marked by poverty and marginalisation, the consequences of which the majority of South Africans are still shackled under. Policies designed to frustrate the common good and destroying the possibility of forging social capital or a national identity through legislation confining people to racially defined existences. It was a land marked by the absence of even the most elementary human rights.

Some [maybe, even many] glimmers of light have, however, appeared since the advent of democracy in 1994, not least the repeal of apartheid legislation, the implementation of a human rights culture, a political environment marked by an ethic of participation, democratic institutions designed to enhance the nascent democracy including a vibrant multiparty, highly participatory parliament..... it is precisely in this domain that the Southern African Catholic Bishops Conference Parliamentary Liaison Office has offered the wisdom of Catholic Social Teaching to the process of policy formulation, legislative clarification and public discussion and has ensured that the voice of the church has found an echo in this significant arena.

In conceptualising this ministry when democracy dawned in South Africa, the bishops underlined the notion of liaison, of dialogue, of an exchange of ideas, thus strengthening the fragile, new experience of democracy and democratic institutions, and privileging this *modus operandi* as a way of affirming the common good.

The SACBC in establishing the Parliamentary Liaison Office has taken on board the inspiration of *Gaudium et Spes*:

"The Church and the political community in their own fields are autonomous and independent from each other. Yet both, under different titles, are devoted to the personal and social vocation of the same people. The more that both foster sounder co-operation between themselves with due consideration for the circumstances of time and place, the more effective will their service be exercised for the good of all. ... By preaching the truths of the Gospel, and bringing to bear on all fields of human endeavour the light of her doctrine and of a Christian witness, [the Church] respects and fosters the political freedom and responsibility of citizens." [76.2]

We understand, broadly speaking, that our work is in the realm of 'theologically informed discourses about public issues, addressed to the church or other religious bodies as well as the larger public or publics, argued in ways that can be evaluated

and judged by publicly available warrants and criteria.’ For some this would come close to the bases of public theology with ‘its two key elements: a certain presence of theological insights and ‘publicness’ in the discourse.’

Let me add-in parenthesis- that following the post conciliar methodology in dealing with public issues, we understand our work in terms of our specific context in SA (the strengthening of reasonably new democratic institutions and processes and public participation against a background of growing inequality still largely following racial lines) , we follow and draw from the deposit of church wisdom (in this case, more specifically, a close reading of *Africae munus* since it has a particular bearing on Africa) and weave them into presentations through thorough and multiple dialogues (‘it is important for the Church to promote dialogue as a spiritual disposition, so that believers may learn to work together...in a spirit of trust and mutual help’[AM 88]) in a profoundly secular, pluralist society a hermeneutic of dialogue is an indispensable tool for advocacy.

A fundamental theological principle in this public witness has been about enhancing the critical notion/value of ‘participation’ echoing the 1985 document of the International Theological Commission that along with freedom and equality, participation remains a core touchstone in the Catholic tradition for involvement in public life.

This ‘participation’ for us has a twin focus: to engage parliament and its committees directly, so that the church’s wisdom can be accessed in the discussion of policies and the crafting of legislation through regular oral and written submissions, through engagement with researches, bureaucrats. We also exert influence through lobbying with individual legislators who express an interest in our work or seek our opinions on specific issues.

In seeking to ensure that the content of policies and legislation reflects sound values, we take special note of the call of Pope Benedict XVI both *Deus Caritas Est* and in *Africae munus*, that the content of policies and public life must accord with the standards of justice. He says in *Africae munus* that ‘justice is never disembodied and is anchored in consistent human decisions. A charity which fails to respect justice and the rights of all is false.’ [18]

In a country still wracked by the consequences of centuries of injustice and brutalisation, the bid to ensure that policies reflect fundamental justice, that they reverse past and present injustices and that they enact legislation that ensures that such a history is never repeated is a key contribution we make in the area of policy content.

We also follow the broad band of concerns raised in *Africae munnus* in our engagement with parliament. We follow life and family issues, the various categories of vulnerable people, of the environment, the economic system and education. In our country issues of land and employment, migration, refugees and itinerant people and good governance all resonate well and in doing advocacy in the context of a country with a Gini co efficient of .72 we indeed heed the warning of the Pope about the injustices and abuses which ‘destroy the continents potential and afflict the young in particular.’

We hear also the advocacy imperative that all policies should be aimed at ensuring that ‘every people may be the principal agent of its own economic and social progress and may help to bring about the universal common good.’ We understand and promote the idea that legislation should enhance the agency and capacities especially of the poor and that our work should seek to allow the poor and marginalised to speak for themselves about their issues and propose their solutions. These thoughts have long formed the matrix out of which we assess the content of policies and legislation.

Through this we influence the actual content of legislation or at least foreground our arguments and ideas so that they gain publicity and are part of the public consciousness and public record even if they do not find exact expression in the final policies. The latter comment points to a deeply valued understanding of ‘success’ in advocacy that underlines the understanding that success cannot merely be equated with your point of view winning in an argument or being directly responsible for some contribution to legislation: that is not the only way of marking our success. Let me admit modestly that we have had such ‘victories’ over the years! We, however, measure our success through our participation in the public domain, through keeping the public space open and contributing to public discussion which ensures that parliament remains a place of discussion and dialogue listening to the citizen’s voices and not merely a self referential chamber. This in itself is a contribution the church makes to the nurturing of democracy. It is clear that in offering ideas for public discussion, clarification, testing, the church contributes to alternative ideas, stimulates discussion about them and re-examines various values and discourses and in doing so contributes to the national life and the vitality of democracy.

We feel a resonance with the sentiment of Nobel laureate Amartya Sen who says: ‘Public debates and discussions can also play a major part in the formation of values. Not only is the force of public discussion one of the correlates of democracy, with an extensive reach, but its cultivation can also make democracy work better.’

We have come to understand that as important as it is that the Church lobbies assiduously to bring politics in line with its own core values, in a country which has inherited such a startling ‘democratic deficit’ there is a huge value in simply participating in the processes and institutions of the democracy in order to nurture and validate the democratic ethos and its public institutions.

In the context of South Africa pursuing this seemingly auxiliary task is critical for the sustenance of a long term successful democracy.

Democracy is sustained by the practise of democratic processes and the regular participation in democratic institutions; it is a repetitive process!

Woven through these multi layers of engagement is the thread of pastoral accompaniment, through an intermittent engagement in spiritual direction, through various pastoral moments and support for state occasions such as grace before state banquets, prayers at memorial services for MP’s. Our best known initiative is through the weekly spiritual reflection which we distribute to all MP’s irrespective of denomination or beliefs, to support staff and others connected to parliament. During Lent we send a daily reflection with an offer of prayer support during the Lenten period. Another pastoral outreach which has been deeply appreciated has been our support and prayerful remembrances on the birthdays of MP’s with whom we have contact, through a card reminding them of our prayers and spiritual accompaniment.

But to return to the area of active participation, we also engage in the dispersal of ideas in the broader (faith) communities, so that communities can engage the political process directly. This is the second focus for participation. Our publications explain in laypersons terms important aspects of policies, we raise theological considerations, stimulate thinking on and discussion about pertinent policies and assist the faith communities to engage issues of ethical and public significance. Through this we empower people to do their own advocacy and keep their own voices alive in the public domain. This passage of information, this expansion of consciousness, this deepening of citizen's agency raises the levels of people's political awareness, their vigilance and equips them for focussed participation in public life.

We co operate with other agencies of the Episcopal Conference in developing joint advocacy initiatives in their areas of expertise thus raising the profile of the church in a cross section of areas and ensuring a sound academic and deep 'experience base' to the church's submissions and comments.

The expertise, the practical experience and the critical consciousness ensure an environment informed participation and prevents a slippage (through apathy) into the exclusion of citizens in public matters and rule by autocracy.

Prof. Tom Lodge says: 'The vigour of institutions like parliament, political parties and local councils as well as the political impartiality of public institutions depends as much on what happens outside and around them as on their inner life.'

But I should add that not only does our work obviously empower the skill set of citizens for participation in shaping the policies that determine their lives but it also, significantly, such work benefits the church in that in underlining the theological component of social ethics, believers can begin to understand and test the coherence of their religious beliefs against the public choices and decisions which they make at a deeply personal level. It thus enhances their skill set but also forms their consciences. This of course is in total accord with the church's traditional understanding of the role of CST in the public arena, repeated succinctly by Pope Benedict XVI in *Deus Caritas Est*: he says that in applying the social doctrine the church does not seek 'to make this teaching prevail in political life. Rather the church wishes to help form consciences in political life and to stimulate greater insights into authentic requirements of justice as well as a readiness to act accordingly, even when this might involve conflict with situations of personal interest.' [28a]

In a society in which political and indeed public participation was barred to the majority of the population there is still something of a novelty value in all of this and the practise of political participation needs to be deepened. The theological task of formation for participation is a critical area for both individuals and for groups.

Critical to both aspects of participation and what for us has become a brand mark, has been the commitment to providing critical spaces for engagement on specific issues where a cross section of role players can dialogue over specific issues around a table. Not surprisingly we call these discussions 'Round Tables' and we host on average 26 of them a year covering a broad range of topics. It provides a space for members of parliament, academics, civil society organisations, people working on the coalface of issues, church personnel, theologians and interested parties to engage in conversations

in ways that allow for an interrogation of issues by diverse voices and allow voices that would remain unheard to register and bring to the attention of other stakeholders their wisdom. It also offers a space for church teaching to find an ear amongst many who would not hear it in their usual domains.

Prof. Njabulo Ndabele captures the importance of this kind of participation for a vibrant public life, when he says ‘The quality of democracy is enhanced by the depth of public intelligence. Such intelligence is developed over time through interactive voices, writings and visual images offered into the public domain by citizens. It is through such interactions that higher order public understandings emerge and develop. Public intelligence finds its own levels. The purpose of government is to understand and to work with this phenomenon, not to prohibit or control it.’

There is of course a strong echo of this in *Africae munus* where the Pope expresses the ‘desire that lay people with responsibility in the political, economic and social fields be equipped with solid knowledge ....which can provide them with solid principles for acting in conformity with the Gospel.’[128]

The experience of being listened to, of engaging with, being taken seriously in parliament, of being acknowledged by politics parties means that there is an acknowledgement that the church has a contribution to make to the common good. It does not always translate into endorsement of the church’s position on particular issues but it does locate the church as a serious interlocutor on multiple issues. In an aggressively secular society the church has gained respect in the parliamentary domain for following the basic standards of public discussion. It abides by the general criteria of intelligibility (coherence), truthfulness (warrants and evidence), rightness (moral integrity) and equality (mutual reciprocity) which type of discussion ultimately contributes to a broad, common frame of reference for public life.

One very innovative response to Pope Benedict’s call, again in *Africae munus*, that in order to strengthen the Church’s visibility, coherence and effectiveness, there should be solidarity at in action at all levels and that regions and national conferences should share resources and structures [106] we have realised this challenge through a series of training events for Episcopal Conferences undertaking advocacy work in legislatures, for church groups doing advocacy in specific areas of public policy. For the past four years we have trained women and men from different countries, para church groups involved in advocacy and staffs of major church NGO’s in the art of advocacy, in understanding and receiving CST and the broader theological tradition and applying this to public issues. We also offer training in the myriad of practical issues that support the more public face of church advocacy. In September of this year we trained a group of bishops from the IMBISA region and we have addressed numerous Episcopal conferences across the length and breadth of Africa from the Sudan in the north and Ghana in the west, to Namibia in the south and Malawi in the east. We take to heart in spreading the ideas, theology and skills in this area, the understanding that the ‘the church in Africa must help to build up a society in co operation with government authorities and public and private institutions that are engaged in building up the common good....encouraging real and active participation by citizens in political and social life.’ [81] We take some pride that our CPLO was the very first of its kind in Africa and the networking and sharing of skills and

information with others on the continent is an important area of work for us and a critical way of deepening democratic practise across the continent and in ‘harnessing Africa’s rich intellectual, cultural and religious heritage we make an important and positive contribution’[9] become exemplary in justice and charity[18]

This type of work also has another important consequence, it counters the fairly significant, widespread trend towards the privatisation of religion, it questions the contention of the secularists that religion has no public role in the public domain but is at best a private motivation for personal choices and thus has nothing to say to a wider public than its own adherents especially in significant pluralist times. Our work in parliament asserts the public even sometimes prophetic role of religion and the reality that theological discourse can contribute to a shared contribution to rigorous analysis and the implementation of common values in public life.

Jo Lancaster says: ‘Not only does local peoples’ influence contribute to better and more sustainable services and policies, it also builds trust in public institutions, builds partnerships with communities and ultimately helps to build social capital and stronger, more influential and resilient values.’

It has been pointed out very poignantly in this regard that negotiating theological positions which others can access without subscribing to every aspect of the belief system in very pluralist societies, building partnerships with those who do not fully share our outlook, is not a wholly new role for Catholicism. St. Augustine in equally pluralist times wrote a series of letters to non Christian Romans soliciting support on issues related to the common good. *Africae munus* reminds us that Africa needs to foster dialogue among members its constituent religious, social, political, economic and scientific communities. [11]

In the words of Pope Benedict XVI, in *Africae Munus* through work in the public domain and especially in the spaces where considerable leverage can be applied, we must actively prevent ‘withdrawal or evasion present in a theological and spiritual speculation which could serve as an escape from concrete historical responsibility.’ [17]

Steve Bantu Biko one of the legendary martyrs in our struggle for a new dispensation wrote with prophetic insight: ‘We regard our living together not as an unfortunate mishap warranting endless competition amongst us; but as a deliberate act of God to make us a community of brothers and sisters, jointly involved in the quest for a composite answer to the varied problems of life.’ In those words he in fact crafted a metaphor for the activities of parliament, a compass for the accompaniment of politicians and a vision for a dispensation that would truly allow politics to be the highest form of charity.’

-Peter-John Pearson