

Church of England in South Africa. Testimony before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, East London, 17 November 1999. [disclaimer](#)

We now call on the representatives of the Roman Catholic Church. Order please!
Thank you.

We welcome you very warmly and you will say, you will tell us that there are only the two of you but the house is full of angels here (laughter) who are accompanying you. Thank you very much Bishop. Are you both going to make the submission? So both of you will take the oath.

ADMINISTERS OATH.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you very much. We are deeply grateful that you have come and I am even more grateful that you are so understanding about the need to flexible time wise and we are quite certain too that you will be precise and show us how you can say these things in as few words as possible. Thank you very much. Bishop.

BISHOP KEVIN DOWLING: Thank you your Grace, Chairperson. Permit me to introduce on my left Father Buti Thlagale, who is the Secretary General of the Southern African Bishops' Conference, representing South Africa, Botswana and Swaziland. And I am Bishop Kevin Dowling. I come from a little place in the North West Province, that you might know of, Rustenberg, and we are the two devils here and we are thankful that our angels are in the audience praying for us.

Chairperson, your Grace, we in our submission today have decided to follow the three questions which we received from the Johannesburg TRC office last week and I will be dealing with the first two and then Father Buti will be dealing with the last one concerning the future and recommendations.

We are here in the name of the Catholic Church and speaking to our document which we submitted on August the 15th to certain issues in that document. But when we look at ourselves as the Catholic Church in Southern Africa, in South Africa in particular, we have to recognise that as the people of God, the Catholic Church is peopled and will always be peopled by the full spectrum of the South African society. And so you will find in our community in terms of political stance, the right, even extreme right, and the left, even extreme left and everything in between, and therefore we have to admit that we haven't had one single vision or understanding of our society, be it political, economic or social, and we haven't had a single unifying perspective on the issues which we have grappled with in the struggle in the apartheid era. And this perhaps one of the crosses we have to admit, we have to bear from the past. However, at the level of leadership, that is the Bishop's Conference, there has been one voice, although we have to ask, having said that, how effective that one voice has been in terms of expressing a unified stance of the whole church

community and the effect it has had on the whole church community in terms of the development of the apartheid struggle.

So to come to the first question we were asked to deal with: To what extent has your denomination suffered from apartheid in the past? We have to say in the first instance that the Catholic Church reflected indeed the divisions of the society in which it found itself. Just as apartheid divided people according to colour, so did it divide the church, our church, into a black community and a white community. There was in effect a black church and a white church. And therefore seeing the issues of the day from that reality and perspective, it was very much a black community affected by the discrimination, a suffering black community and for the most part, a white more affluent community that was to a great extent, marginalised or not aware of the reality of the apartheid system as it was affecting the great majority of our people in this country.

...[inaudible] comprised in excess of 80% membership black and the rest white and therefore to a very great extent our church mirrored the fact that this community was, to a great extent, a suffering community. The divisions therefore of parishes according to black and white communities compromised in our church the gospel message of reconciliation, it also compromised a witness of being a united community, responding to the issues of the day. There is a saying that in terms of our relationship with the Nationalist Government, which came to power in 1948, they targeted three main enemies of the so-called "Volk" and people smile at the Afrikaans way this was expressed. There was the "swart gevaar" there was the "room se gevaar" and there was the "rooi gevaar". And in 1948 the Catholic Church was guilty on two counts, but as time developed, we became guilty on three counts and we had to bear the brunt of many accusations about being wolves in sheep's clothing, with the apartheid state questioning which kingdom was being served by this church community.

Another effect of the apartheid system on our church community has to do with education. Today the whole nation is reaping the very bitter fruit of the National Party's policy of segregated education. In 1953 the hated Bantu education was introduced and the government removed all subsidies from the Catholic Church Mission Schools, so as to exercise a form of social control. At that time, the church was deeply involved in education and was to pay a very high price for its opposition to this act. In 1953 the Catholic Church ran 688 state aided schools, and 130 unaided schools and that represented roughly 15% of all schools for black learners. Twenty years later in 1973, after many confrontations and struggles there were only 367 schools left. The Bishops in response to the withdrawal of the subsidy mounted a campaign to try and provide for financial support to these schools from our own resources. It was a very difficult and painful struggle and in the end we had to admit we failed because it was too great a task and the whole quality of education began to fail. So this affected not only our church but also the advancement of black people through education in which we were involved. The same picture is mirrored in terms of our Catholic hospitals and clinics and the other institutions and associations which followed the same path.

The growing commitment to justice within the church demanded a high price. I'll come back to this. But just to cite a couple of things. Archbishop Hurley, as President of the Southern African Catholics Bishops' Conference and Father Smangaliso Mkatshwa had to appear in court. The Conference headquarters, Khanya House, was fire bombed some six weeks after Khotso House by the security police. Many priests were imprisoned and exiled or deported. Many of our church workers were detained for long periods. Religious communities were targeted, Bishops and leaders harassed, houses searched, documents seized and so on. We were part of the suffering community. But when we move now to what did the church as a community do in the struggle against or how did it support apartheid in the past.

Firstly, we came (our church community) out of a context of a struggle to survival in what was basically a hostile context. This from last century. And we viewed with great alarm the rise to power of the nationalist government in 1948. Our conference, the Bishops' Conference was established in 1947 but even before then some of the bishops began to see the danger lurking in the apartheid system which was coming in. For example in 1939, Bishop Henneman of Cape Town said: "In accordance with the spirit of solicitude which the Catholic Church has always shown for the moral and material welfare of the people, I feel it incumbent upon me to condemn any segregation on the grounds of race or colour. Any attempt therefore to introduce legislation based purely on race or colour must be opposed and condemned unjust". That was in 1939. But from 1947 when the Conference was established, the Bishops sought to speak as a Conference on the issues of the day and they began to attach the false theological base on which the ideology of apartheid was based. In 1951 one of the first Conference statements condemned racial discrimination but didn't use the word apartheid, but here we see the fact that we were a church community of the day. We reflected the way issues were looked at in that day. For example, it reflected a paternalistic spirit, the statement in 1952, maintaining that most non-Europeans (was the word commonly used at the time) were not yet ready for full participation in the social, political and economic life of the country, but must be allowed and encouraged to evolve towards such participation. That was an early statement, but by 1957, the Conference had begun to focus much more critically and it in 1957 called apartheid what it really is: intrinsically evil.

Statement after statement followed which focused on abuses by the state, on current issues and it also took on an increasingly prophetic stance by the Conference in terms of the evolving situation. Also it revealed an evolving more democratic process in the way these statements were arrived at. We developed new ways of listening to our suffering majority through consultations, study days, draft documents which invited comments, and then the Bishops made the statement. But we must ask: All these many statements over the years – what was their effect? They were directed primarily as pastoral statements at the people within the church community. As the Bishops tried to help the ordinary people, especially the white community to understand what was happening in the country and how to cope with this in the context of their faith. But even there we had to cope with conservative and right wing groups in our own Catholic Church community, for example the Catholic Defence League and the group

called Tradition, Family and Property, which not only fiercely contested the Bishop's statements but in every way objected to them and were not part of them.

However, the Catholic Church, we would say, failed to live up to the principles of its gospel faith. Not so much by failing to proclaim them, but by proving inadequate in communicating them successfully to its church community and to encourage and empower them to live by those gospel values, particularly the white community. It was a difficult task because really it required a conversion process in the full theological and spiritual meaning of that term and the average white church member in particular needed quite a degree of heroism and experience of the black reality to live up to the demands of the gospel in the face of the apartheid juggernaut. People considered their families, jobs and so forth. It needed courage. The critical and condemnatory statements which were issued against the government were not spoken directly to the electorate in terms of trying to produce change (the white electorate) but to the government. And of course the government took no notice of them at all. And so looking at our long list of statements, we could say that our pastoral statements came from a minority church and reached only a minority in South Africa. There are also expressions of solidarity, especially during the years of extreme repression during the eighties during the ...[inaudible] sessions each year. We went as a body to celebrate eucharist with communities that had suffered gravely. For example Sebokeng, Mamelodi, Soweto and Sosangule. We also paid a visit to that infamous electric fence to expose its horrors and to celebrate eucharist with the Mozambican refugees in their camp. We used vigils, processions and other services to help people pray through their distress and also as a means of ...[indistinct] people. And our church buildings took on new meanings as places of refuge, sanctuary and truth for suffering people, for example Regina Mundi Church. Through our YCW movement, we promoted and tried to help young black workers to reflect on the interaction between their lives as workers and their lives as christian believers using the "See, judge, act" method.

Other ways we tried to struggle: We involved ourselves in investigations and exposing the role of the South African Defence Force in human rights violations in Namibia, in particular the Koevoet Battalion. We started and sponsored the New Nation Newspaper, as a means of allowing the voice of the oppressed people to be heard. The Bishops endorsed and supported the standing for the truth campaign. Our church halls and other institutions were made available to the people's organisations in resistance to apartheid. We tried to give those on the run from the security forces sanctuary, refuge. We used also our international Catholic structures to expose world-wide what was going on in South Africa. International funding for development projects and anti-apartheid activities was channelled through our Bishops' Conference. But then we also began to reflect upon our own internal structures. For example, we ran segregated seminaries for the training of our priests and pastors. We saw the need for radical change in order to be effective witnesses in society. So in 1976, we began the process in which we opened in the face of tremendous opposition, our Catholic Schools to all races. Perhaps one of the moves of our church, maybe bold at that time, was to openly support the Black Consciousness

Movement. But however much we tried to do, we have to recognise with humility and sorrow that we could have done a lot more and in conclusion to this section, I would just like to basically sum up the stance of our church in terms of what this hearing is all about.

There were times when, as a church, we were deaf to the cry of the poor. There were times when we were blind to the limitations of our own practices. Times when we were more concerned for ourselves as an institution rather than as servants of God's people. Times when we turned a blind eye to evil, when we remained silent. Times when we were more concerned with not having ex-patriots deported, than with drawing attention to the wrongs done. And silence, in the face of ongoing and systematically oppression at all levels, is perhaps our greatest failure. And so in conclusion, I would just like to use the words our church community and our Bishop's Conference issued after the Rustenberg Conference:

"The declaration issued by the Rustenberg Conference has led us with considerable pain to examine our own history. We recognise that its message applies to our church as a corporate body. We must admit with sorrow that although as a church we have often spoken out against the sin of apartheid we are not innocent of all complicity in supporting or going along with it. So we ask forgiveness from all those, both within the church and beyond who have suffered from our actions, blindness and negligence in the past. We reaffirm our commitment to remove all vestiges of apartheid in our institutions and procedures"

And now as we move into where we go to in the future, I would ask Father Buti Thalgale to continue.

CHAIRPERSON: Please switch on your microphone, Father. Thank you.

FATHER BUTI THLAGALE: Perhaps before one makes some comments on the way forward, just to raise a number of concerns or issues that puzzled us.

There's certainly a concern with the political expediency that gave rise to this process of the Truth and Reconciliation. We admit that we cannot undo history or the political compromises that were made in order to achieve a settlement. There is, however, a concern that the victims may have been asked to sacrifice individual justice for truth. We see that many victims not only had to sacrifice justice in that sense but also the truth, for example there are people who still don't know who killed their loved ones, where the body of their loved one is, or who is responsible. Justice and truth, in a sense one can argue, have been sacrificed for reconciliation. We are concerned that some of the perpetrators of gross human rights violations do not take personal responsibility for their actions, but keep on referring to their superiors. We can legitimately say that we are angry that some political parties and leaders of the day have not taken responsibility for the abuses which took place.

Finally, we are concerned that the perpetrators, upon receiving amnesty, are not always willing to make reparations personally. Indeed while the commission might have a short life span, we are also concerned as to how this process will evolve after this. The Catholic Church is committed to promoting the principle of mutual acceptance and mutual recognition. Political arrangements by the State may cater for this, but the State is not necessarily in a position to enforce mutual acceptance and the respect for persons. And so faith communities could cultivate the need to actively, visibly and consistently promote the spirit of reconciliation.

At the same time, we do ask ourselves about the very word we use: reconciliation. In our Catholic understanding of our own history, we rather call for a confession and forgiveness and restitution. The Catholic Church is committed to promoting rituals of reconciliation and to celebrate in those rituals publicly and in so doing will seek the collaboration of the other faith communities. It seems as a practical level there will be a need to identify appropriate public holidays, religious and cultural events, during which these rituals can be celebrated. There is need to bring people from diverse cultural backgrounds together if we are going to achieve this goal of nation building. Furthermore, reconciliation is not only between the victims and perpetrators, but also between the communities. In this regard it seems desirable that there ought to be a body after the demise of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that will co-ordinate the work of promoting reconciliation and perhaps solicit funding from interested parties such as the business sector.

Such a process, we think, could then evolve a national calendar dedicated to promoting peace and reconciliation. The Catholic Church is committed to supporting efforts by government local authorities, non-governmental organisations and community initiatives to promoting peaceful co-existence and good neighbourliness. The Catholic Church on its part will urge and encourage leaders of different faith communities and work together with them. And leaders of the various communities who will be seen to be publicly working together for the common goal.

There's fear that activities with regard to reconciliation in the post TRC era might be left to chance. And therefore the church suggests that indeed there ought to be a process put in place that will take care of this. ...[inaudible] lobby the national government, business sector, unions and communities for symbolic gestures of reconciliation. In particular, the Catholic Church recommends the building of a memorial in the name of all those, all who lost their lives in the struggle for freedom. We are aware that the reparation committee might have a long list of these suggestions, but we think that the erection of a national shrine to the unknown comrades, for example, or public event that will draw people from diverse backgrounds together to celebrate this reconciliation will go a long way towards creating a peaceful atmosphere. We further recommend that in a symbolic fashion, it is still a desirable activity to have symbolic re-burials of some of the people in South Africa who died or who were killed in exile.

Finally, while we recognise that these will contribute towards the spirit of reconciliation, we firmly believe that the crux of true reconciliation can only come about through the creation of a fair and just economic system in which ordinary people can live without fear in their homes, enjoy employment opportunities and take care of their families. This has been the desire of the majority of the oppressed people. We also believe that in attending to these, we will be attending to a component of the kingdom of God on earth.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you very much. Would you please switch off your... Thank you. Thomas?

MR T MANTHATA: I don't know to what extent does the Catholic Church admit that there could be perpetrators within its ranks, and therefore offered to urge and support these perpetrators to tell it all, as you put it. And of course even to support their families to enable these people do exactly that, that is rather than to tell it with the impunity of reserving some of the facts, just to give it as it is and as they took part themselves in the whole murders and abductions. You know, right through the process of TRC we have been meeting the English speaking communities, assuming that the Catholic Church is largely English speaking, who have always given a front that they were not the oppressors. They were not the perpetrators. So I don't know when you refer to the perpetrators who have not told it all, are you saying that perpetrators from other churches or even perpetrators from within the Catholic Church, even after the Catholic Church itself has given them the healing, the counselling, the support that they should do so?

FATHER BUTI THLAGALE: I am not sure whether I have understood the question well, but I think we see this as part of the public exercise in the first instance. In other words there is a perception apart from singling out whether in the Catholic community there are perpetrators or not. Yes there are perpetrators within the Catholic community, but we are here talking about a perception which therefore applies to everybody that somehow the perpetrators ought to take responsibility for their acts and to be seen to be making reparation. So this would therefore be irrespective of what community in particular you belong to. What we are really saying ought to be addressed is the perception that perpetrators do not, apart from perhaps some individuals, that in fact this is not why they have spoken the truth as they see it, as they experience it, that is enough. And there seems to be an unhappy state of affairs.

MR T MANTHATA: I am sorry to have sounded like I am singling out. That is not the issue. I am just saying that as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and for the process of reconciliation we are requesting all concerned bodies to assist in that direction. I don't know whether this is even necessary because at least with hindsight the Catholic Church has been able to make for what it could have omitted or couldn't see at certain stages. For example the support it gave to the Archbishop Hurley when he came to trial. To Father Mkatshwa when he was detained in the Ciskei. That support was wanting at a very early age when the Catholic Bishops' General Secretary,

Colin Collins, was involved in the UCM and he had to end up fleeing the country and at that time he never got the support of the church. I don't know whether there could be any enlightenment along that line.

FATHER BUTI THLAGALE: I do not know about the circumstances of Father Colin Collins and how he left but I think this probably simply reflects the attitudes that were existing within the Catholic Church where probably the leadership of the Catholic Church then was divided and certainly not always sympathetic towards those who opposed the apartheid system and a leadership that merely saw trouble makers within its own community.

MR T MANTHATA: Finally, I see a lot of work having to come out of the church where we have communities as divided as those of the Portuguese speaking community and of the black communities, having to be brought together. I just wonder what at the Catholic Church the efforts are in that direction?

BISHOP KEVIN DOWLING: I think we recognise that we have a long road to go in this direction. Certainly as I hinted at in my part of the submission what require for the ...[indistinct] group in terms of the realities of South Africa is a true conversion process and that takes time and not only that, but it also takes ongoing and really deep exposure to the realities of the oppressed majority of this country.

For example even in terms of myself as a white South African, and this would explain the kind of reality that I am talking about. I grew up in Pretoria. Even as part of our Catholic Church community I used to visit the townships as a young church worker, but that did not impinge on my heart and spirit in terms of shocking me into the harsh reality of what apartheid was doing. I left the country at the age of 17 to go to England to study, then I came back and at the age of 26 I was posted to the townships in Cape Town. And it was then that for the first time in my journey as a christian that I came to experience firsthand in sense of it touching my being, what was happening, what was being done to people. I began to at least partially appreciate the realities of the apartheid system as it affected the oppressed majority by seeing through the eyes of oppressed people and listening through their ears and therefore taking on a whole other perspective. That was a conversion process which brought me, in terms of joining the christian institute in those days in Cape Town, and an increasing stance for justice. That was a whole conversion process that I went through simply because I as a white South African was exposed and experienced firsthand reality, not cut off from it, but with the people and it was they who evangelised me and therefore brought about that.

Now how one translates a conversion process like that (this is my personal view) in terms of whole communities or sections of communities if precisely the challenge facing us. As we said, and as Father Buti has already said, we are committed as a church to find a way to reconcile ourselves as a community and to go a lot further than where we are at the moment. We've got to find creative ways to bring people together in terms of understanding each other and above all, understanding what the

past has done and how we were involved in that past, especially through our silence and especially through not standing. But the whole church community requires reconciliation as part of the wider community in South Africa and we've got to find the ways to that conversion process.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you very much. Khoza?

MR K MOJO: Thank you Sir. I am asking this question. I know that I am sticking out my neck, but I feel that I must do it. During the time of apartheid, there have been many voices coming from different macedonians. One of the macedonians which I want to put here before you is that one of the gender issues. How far has your church made a journey as far as the gender issue is concerned? Because there have been some people within our community who have been feeling that they are oppressed by certain sections of our churches and our communities, and those are women.

FATHER BUTI THLAGALE: The Catholic Church on the question of, for example, the ordination of women maintains what is generally referred to and described as an extremely conservative position. I think that is still the position. You certainly are aware, Sir, that the Catholic structure as it exists, some of these things are decided not so much at a local level but they are part of the entire Catholic Church in the world. And at present with regard to specifically again the ordination of women, the Catholic Church has reiterated its position that according to its tradition, ordination will only be offered to males and not to women. That is the position of the Catholic Church. However, I think where we, the church, also fails with regard to women is simply the development of leadership or the provision of leadership opportunities for women within the Catholic Church, if for a moment we are to forget the question of ordination. For women to play a more meaningful role, for women to become deacons in the church, for women to run parishes or institutions within the church. Certainly there is a wide area of possibilities and this is where the Catholic Church still falls short.

CHAIRPERSON: Yes, Virginia?

MS V GCABASHE: Thank you your Grace. Dr Mgojo just took the question which I was thinking of putting to our two brothers there. Especially in light of what they have said, or what the Catholic Church has done to face other forms of discrimination right on. Already there is a voice of women in the Catholic Church who are concerned about this very issue of ordination of women. Now I would like to hear whether now that there is a voice, is the church beginning also to take seriously these voices. I take the point that some of your policies have to be decided elsewhere, but I think even in your struggle within injustices in this country, you knew that some of the policies were coming from elsewhere. I would like to bring the question nearer home because we have sisters already here in South Africa who are raising questions about the ordination of women. Is the church going to support the local churches who are prepared to support the women on that?

BISHOP KEVIN DOWLING: Again, that is a very difficult question for us to answer fully in the sense that the process of coming to decisions like that is an international one. It is not left just to a local church community and the policy as Father Buti has already said, has been decided upon at the moment from our structures in Rome, because that is the way our particular structures in terms of decision making and coming to policy directions, that is the way it is done.

We recognise, we have heard the voices you refer to. This is part of our ongoing struggle to try and be faithful to the gospel. How, within the structures in terms of dialogue and coming to positions, how we can actually face these issues constructively and head-on, as we have tried to do with other issues in the past in terms of the apartheid struggle. We recognise that for some people in our community this is an issue of justice. We have heard that voice being spoken to us. How we take it forward is part of the ongoing debate within the international Catholic Church community. The present way, as I said, this will be resolved is through that international community coming through discernment to a position where either the Pope with the Bishops, or the Pope himself in terms of a decision will make such a decision for the universal church. We do not, in the way we operate, take specific major decisions which affect the whole church simply on the basis of a local church, like in South Africa, coming to its own position. Obviously we recognise it well that this causes pain. We recognise that, it is part of a situation which we are grappling with and we will have to continue grappling with this in faith and in terms of how we will resolve this in the end. We still do not know how we can approach this in terms of our international structure from the perspective of what we are hearing here. But the whole community out here obviously is not yet totally involved in that question. However, it is very important for us that we do listen to voices from the community, from whatever quarter they come and try to see whether God is saying something to us and what God is calling forth from us. And we will just have to proceed with that process.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you very, very much. We are enormously grateful to both of you for your succinct presentation and we value enormously the witness that the church has shown in this country over the years and we are glad as it were, you are "on our side". Thank you. You may stand down.

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