

A FUTURE AND A HOPE (Jeremiah 29:14)

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"There can be no true peace without respect for life." – John Paul II

Introduction

When the new South African came into being, the hope and dream of every South African was true and lasting peace. We knew that to have such peace would take hard work for justice, reconciliation, tolerance, understanding and mutual respect. In fact, this dream demands of everyone a new and all-embracing spirit of give and take. To do so successfully would make our country a true home where everyone would feel respected, accepted and loved as a brother or sister.

Life since 1994

It is an undeniable fact that since 1994 there has been great progress. There is no more inter-party or inter-group violence or killing. But, can we say there is real peace? What with all the crimes of violence that are engulfing all sectors and levels of society? So why is there no real peace even after our "miracle" elections? What became of that massive outflow of goodwill that was so evident then? Where did we go wrong?

Actions against Life

I will make bold and say that the Church began to go wrong in 1990, when the Rustenburg Conference of Churches overlooked the need to define and develop a new morality to replace the one imposed on us by both apartheid and the struggle against it, in particular the armed struggle. We failed again at Rustenburg 2, when we chose not to declare unequivocally that life is sacred, and as such it is the supreme value, to which must be given absolute respect from conception until natural death. Instead, the churches dithered and argued about the merits of "abortion on demand" as a corollary to "the woman's right over her body". Unfortunately what people needed to hear from us was that the Scriptures, especially the Gospel of Luke, are clear that human life is invested with absolute value because it is the breath of God in us.

Where democratic South Africa went wrong

As a nation, we went wrong the moment we used our democratic freedom of choice to deny the "right to life" to the most defenceless of all human beings, the baby in its mother's womb. At that moment we not only wrongly raised a woman's right over her body above her child's right to life, we also relativised the value of life. At the same time, we compromised the respect that is due to all human life, and, by so doing, undermined – or rather destroyed – the one true foundation for a hope and future of peace: our human life and dignity. So if the churches want to play a meaningful role in securing a future and a hope for our people, then they must work hard to reinstate respect for life as an absolute value for the nation.

The Catholic Church and the Moral Law

Since I can speak best for my own church, I offer you the following in the hope that it may help define our new morality. The moral teaching of the Catholic Church is built upon two pillars: the Natural Law and Divine Revelation. From these it has over the years developed a comprehensive system of moral theology, which guides it in dealing with moral problems as they arise in each age.

Natural Law

Natural law is that which human reason can discover and discern to be the good that must be done, the evil that must be avoided, the truth that must be believed and the falsehood that must be rejected. The Natural Law would suffice were it not for the sin of Adam and Eve, which has so tainted human nature that nothing we do can be relied on to be morally correct for all time. For example, not even the best structures of social organisation or governance derived from the natural law are exempt from the limitations of human frailty and sinfulness. Two of the most obvious limitations are:

a) Self-interest – A topical example is the South African Constitution. Although hailed as one of the best, its greatest weakness is that it can be amended to suit the will of the majority. Consequently the Constitution could be used to undermine the very values that give it its status as moral guide.

b) Impaired judgement – An even greater weakness is the fact in the case of a conflict of rights it is the same impaired human judgement that must decide. A case in point is that of abortion. In interpreting and applying the right of a woman over her body, parliament has wrongly given that right precedence over her unborn baby's right to life.

Revelation

We believe that in his mercy God has given us revelation as the source of certain truth. Revelation is the vehicle that God uses to communicate with us. As such, it is certain and reliable. Through it, God tells us: (a) who we are; (b) where we come from; (c) what he expects of us; (d) who he is; and, (e) what we need to do to fulfil his will and plan for us.

Life is sacred from Conception

Revelation teaches us that God is Lord of Life. He alone has the right to give life and to take it away. He alone has the right to lay down laws that we must obey if we are to fulfil our destiny. Foremost among these are the commandments to respect and value life and to refrain from taking innocent life. Indeed the Scriptures are full of passages that call on us to respect life (e.g. Psalm 139, Isaiah 6 and Jeremiah 1). But, it is the account of Mary's visit to Elizabeth that most eloquently pleads the case for respect for life.

"Mary set out at that time and went as quickly as she could into the hill country to a town in Judah. She went into Zechariah's house and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. She was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed:

"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? Look, the moment your greeting reached my ears the child in my womb leaped for joy" (Lk. 1: 39-44).

Even if Mary's visit took place just before Elizabeth gave birth, the child in her womb could not have been more than 12 weeks old, yet it is to this 12-weeks-old life that Elizabeth gives the title, "Lord"! Indeed, from Elizabeth's words we are able to deduce that from the moment of conception there is present a human life. We can go even further and affirm that what is in the womb is not simply a life but a person who can be identified and given a name. We are, therefore, on extremely safe grounds if we declare that conception is the beginning not simply of a life, but of a real and unique person! So, Elizabeth's declaration is a serious challenge to give the same respect to a baby while it is in the womb as when it has been born. We, therefore, have the weapons to challenge the popular belief – heresy is a better word – that because the baby in its mother's womb cannot exercise certain rights under the Constitution, it is therefore not entitled to the right to life, that because a pregnancy is described as "unwanted" that disqualifies the unborn baby from the right to protection and nurture!

Life is sacred to the Tomb

Building on the Scriptures, the Catechism of the Catholic Church declares: "Human life is sacred because from its beginning it involves the creative action of God and it remains forever in a special relationship with the Creator who is its sole end. God alone is the Lord of life from its beginning until its end; no one can under any circumstance claim for him/herself the right directly to destroy an innocent human being."

Creating a Culture of Life

As we are gathered here on behalf of the Church of Jesus Christ, we are conscious of the many challenges facing the people we serve, in particular spiral of grinding poverty, unemployment, Aids, crime, corruption, disintegration of family and community structures, and so on. Our President has called on us to intervene with all the resources at our disposal, especially those that will contribute to the rebuilding of the moral fibre of society.

He did not specify, but we know our main resources are spiritual, and the most effective the prophetic voice. This we must use to point out to government and Parliament which of their policies and actions are obstructing our efforts because they undermine the basic values upon which effective and lasting moral reconstruction is to be built. With St Paul we, too, must take the attitude: Woe is me if I do not proclaim to those in authority:

- That the moral norms and imperatives revealed by God whether through the Natural Law or by Revelation, namely that good must be done, truth pursued, evil avoided and falsehood rejected, apply as much to public life as to private;
- That they must stop sending out confusing messages, on the one hand condemning violence against women, while on the other condoning or even promoting violence against unborn babies via the Termination of Pregnancy Act.

It is the ultimate irony that a nation with such a highly developed Bill of Rights, is consistently excluding the unborn, and, should euthanasia be legalised, also the old and infirm, from the most basic of all rights, the right to life.

Conclusion

If the Church is serious about securing a hope and future for its people then we must take a more resolute and open stand for life. We must not shirk our duty to point out: (a) that the taking of the life of the unborn is murder; (b) that all actions which violate respect for life violate the Maker's instructions and will lead to even greater disaster than what we are experiencing at present.

If we want "a future and a hope", then we need to take up the challenging words of Pope John Paul II: "There can be no true peace without respect for life."

So let us not be false prophets, but rather let us work hard to live and teach the whole Gospel so that it may become the true foundation upon which we build our hope and future.