

A BISHOP SPEAKS HIS MIND

Report about

Bishop J. P. Murphy of P.E.

By Keith Bryer

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Although some people, the statement made by the Roman Catholic Bishop of Port Elizabeth this week will be seen as yet another anti-apartheid priest's protest, to those who know the bishop, such as opinion is simply ridiculous.

For bishop John P. Murphy cannot, by any stretch of imagination, be described as a political priest. He is no Huddleston. He does not behave in any way like a French-Beytagh.

He is shy, unassuming and much younger looking than his 67 years. Stripped of his clerical garb and dressed in country tweeds, he could easily be mistaken for an English gentleman farmer.

He is a man who, despite his position as head of a multiracial community of 60 000 people, does not welcome the spotlight. A perusal of newspaper files suggests that he actually shuns the public eye. Since his ordination in June 1972 the bishop's name appears more often in the papers as an opener of fetes and schools. He seldom, if ever, features as a social and political critic.

Why then the sudden issuing of a public protest (delivered by hand in person to the newspaper offices)?

Surprisingly, Bishop Murphy denies that the statement necessarily coincided with the present wave of unrest throughout the country. "I did make some strong statements at a Pentecost service", he said. "And at my ordination, there was a multiracial congregation of 3 000 people and I said then that I hoped all races could live in harmony without losing their identity and I dedicated myself to achieving this in the Church."

Despite this, it does seem clear that Bishop Murphy felt that he could no longer keep silent. The arrests of Coloured school-children from a Roman Catholic school and their appearance in court moved him deeply.

His appearance at the Law Courts to comfort the parents was "completely automatic", he says. "I felt for the children who had been arrested but I also felt for the parents. I felt my place should be among the people."

It says a lot for his realism that the bishop also tried to use influence at official level, having interviews with senior police officers and the Security Police chief, Col. Goosen.

Speaking to Bishop Murphy, one is struck by his calm, steady logic and strong conscience. It emerges most obviously in his answers to questions concerning South African issues. His opposition to discrimination is unwavering, but he does not believe that everything the Government does is wrong.

"Of course, you do have to take the cultural background of people into account, but that does not mean to say that the cultures could not be made to blend into a national whole", he says.

"I do not say any culture should be subservient. But seeing as we all live in the same country and have our roots here, there should be some effort on the part of Government to bring people together, not keep them rigidly apart.

"I do believe that an effort is being made by the authorities to assist the less fortunate members of the community, most of whom are Blacks but, then again, there is still discrimination and that I cannot agree with", he says.

Bishop Murphy believes that there should be a fairer distribution of wealth in South Africa, not only from the richer Whites to the poorer Blacks, but from the richer Blacks to the poor Blacks.

Asked if he saw any signs of a White backlash among his White congregation, as a result of the riots of recent weeks, Bishop Murphy replied: "I would not really say that there has been. There has been a much greater desire among Whites to get to know more of the other sections of society. And this, I think is a good and positive thing."

As he sees it, black aspirations are no different to White aspirations. "They want security in their homes and stability at work. They want the right to acquire a home and the opportunity to make it decent. They want sports amenities, a decent education for their children, greater job opportunities and freedom to move about, without having to explain their presence every time they go into a different street."

What about those who would overthrow the Government by force of arms? "Well", said the bishop, "the Church has always warned against the use of violence and the temptation of seeking revenge".

"It is unwise to look upon those with different views from the authorities as communists."

It was the one subject that clearly had the bishop slightly flustered. He himself is no stranger to civil war and violence, having, as a boy in Ireland, seen the Black and Tans threaten his father with violence. His father was suspected of being an IRA (Irish Republican Army) sympathiser. "Was he?" I asked. "Yes, I think he probably was", replied the bishop.

Was the situation in South Africa today anything like that in Ireland in the 1920's? "No", he replied, "not yet".

Did he see the police here, as the equivalent of the Black and Tans? "Good heavens, no!" he said. "The Black and Tans. They were a race apart."

Often, the most revealing part of an interview comes at the end.