

Missionary work viewed in Mozambique as subversive, say White Fathers

The White Fathers, the Roman Catholic missionary order, last night issued in London a statement about their work in Mozambique and their withdrawal in 1971. In it they accused the Portuguese of brutal repression of the Africans and criticized the Church in Portugal for identifying itself with the state. The statement said in part:

In 1946 the White Fathers were invited to send some of their men to Mozambique to do missionary work in the dioceses of Beira and Tete. They founded 10 mission posts, at the rate of one every two or three years, and posted 40 missionaries there. In 1971 they withdrew from Mozambique as a public protest against the restrictions put on them by the regime.

The White Fathers have recorded 25 years of energetic missionary work, hampered by growing tensions with the Portuguese establishment, an atmosphere of increasing susceptibility on the part of the government and administration and a developing reign of fear experienced by the Africans.

Ever since they were founded, exclusively for Africa, more than a hundred years ago, the White Fathers have taken as their basic principle identification with the African peoples and the Africanization of the Church, with the aim of seeing it one day fully indigenous in exactly the same way as it is in European countries and elsewhere. This essentially includes human rights and dignity and the educational and technical upgrading necessary for achieving this. They were to find out that the out-and-out teaching and implementing of these principles was unacceptable in Portuguese provinces.

Announcing the decision to withdraw from Mozambique, Father Theodore van Asten, Superior General of the White Fathers, said: "It is an unfortunate fact that in many spheres the Church in Mozambique is hindered in its freedom of action.

"Theoretically it enjoys freedom. In practice the teaching and implementing of certain aspects of Christian duties is constantly hampered. All too frequently the missionary ministry, especially in regard to prompting genuine social justice, is considered as subversive activity and is counteracted by vexations or even imprisonment and ill-treatment of Christian leaders, especially those more closely associated with the mission as 'church workers'."

For historical reasons the Church is closely linked with the state in Portugal and, as the Portuguese overseas territories are

considered as part of Portugal, the same situation obtains there. Father van Asten said: "We earnestly begged for a definite stand to be taken to dispel this ambiguous attitude in regard to injustice [to the Africans] and police brutality. Baffled by the persistent silence we felt that in conscience we had no right to allow ourselves to be accounted the accomplices of the official support that appeared to be given to a regime which shrewdly uses the Church to consolidate and ensure in an area within the African continent an anachronistic situation from which there can be no release.

"Deprived as we are of the means of bringing about proper clarification of these matters, our presence in Mozambique can only engender a regrettable confusion in the minds of the people. In a country like Mozambique where the regime openly declares itself Catholic and the Protector of the Church and yet uses it for aims that are alien to Christian teaching, a Church which is unable to speak out is the reverse of a witness to its mission."

The principle laid down by the Portuguese Government is that missionaries must be instruments of Portuguese imperialism. Bishop Sebastião de Resende, the young Bishop of Beira who appreciated the missionary principles on which the White Fathers were working and constantly took up their defence, preached on the occasion of the celebrations for the twenty-fifth anniversary of the launching of new missionary effort in Mozambique. His sermon was censored: in particular, pertinent quotations from the Gospel were eliminated.

The panegyric at the same Bishop's funeral was censored and kept out of the press because it spoke of him as the champion of the poor against injustices. Pope John's encyclical *Pacem in Terris* was brought out in an "expurgated" edition. Pope Paul's *Message to Africa* was published in *Voz Africana*. All copies in Lourenço Marques were bought up by the police to keep it out of circulation.

Sermons on such documents, and others dealing with social justice, etc. were watched carefully by police secret agents and brought police to the door of the missions to investigate. Efforts to help the Africans to improve their lot, organized by the missionaries, met with opposition or even oppression on the part of the government. The harassment of the missionaries increased as the years went by.

It was because of the missionaries' concern for the Africans (welfare, development, rights) that they drew the unpleasant attention of the secret police on themselves. With the growing alarm of the authorities at reactions to the regime both in Portugal and in overseas territories the Africans were more and more victimized.

Father Bertulli, a White Father, who spent the whole 25 years in Mozambique and became Regional Superior, lists the battery of instruments used by the police to extract information from their victims: palmaria (wooden contraption for beating palms of hands and soles of feet); wooden rollers to be placed under kneecaps with full weight of body resting on them; suspension by fingertips with only toes touching the floor.

"Many of my mission helpers [Africans], catechists etc.", Father Bertulli reported, "have suffered in this way."

He mentions in particular a certain secret police inspector stationed at Beira and gives an instance of brutality under the "reign" of this man: "A police agent (a white man) attacked a young man, beating him over the head with a stick", he said. "He split his skull. Maddened by the screams of the poor boy, he finished him off. It fell to me to take the news to the boy's mother."

Many a missionary nun working in the hospitals has confided to our priests the poignant experience of nursing victims of torture, sometimes in the knowledge that they would be taken back for a further "interrogation".

Father Bertulli's predecessor as Regional Superior reported that Father Pille, a White Father, visiting the prison at Tete, was mistakenly admitted to the section of the prison kept for political prisoners. There he found four of his African parishioners. One was a mere skeleton; the second had his skull smashed in and only four days after having a trepanation (surgery on the skull) was back in prison lying on a sack; the third had a smashed arm which had been given no dressing; the fourth had had skin and flesh torn from his back and a bone was showing.

The withdrawal from Mozambique was the subject of several years' discussion before the final decision was taken. The key motive was to bring the authorities face to face with the impossibility for the Church to fulfil its duty to the Africans while being identified with and constrained by the Portuguese "colonialist" regime in Africa.