Appreciation

Mourners pay their respects to the late Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu outside St. Georg

Mourners pay their respects to the late Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu outside St. George's Anglican Cathedral in Cape Town, South Africa. The Nobel Peace Prize-winning Anglican cleric whose good humor, inspiring message and conscientious work for civil and human rights made him a revered leader during the struggle to end apartheid in South Africa, died Dec. 26 at age 90. (CNS/Reuters/Mike Hutchings)



by Patricia Lefevere

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"God rest ye merry, gentleman," the Christian world, the South African world, the human rights world, and the justice and peace world could all intone while farewelling one of the world's moral giants.

Desmond Tutu, retired Anglican archbishop of Cape Town, South Africa and Nobel Peace Prize laureate died Dec. 26 at age 90 at a care facility in his home city, Cape Town. He had been struggling with prostate cancer and infections associated with its treatments some 20 years and sought health care in the U.S. as well as in London and South Africa.

Decades ago, he had defied the South African apartheid government's ban on Black people using the country's beaches by leading a group of protesters along Cape Town's Atlantic shore with several of them carrying signs asking "Whose beach is

this?" Others marched with the answer: "These are God's beaches."

This was one of the stories Tutu shared with this reporter in response to a question about how does one protest peacefully in the midst of violent opposition. The interview took place in early August 1983 on the campus of the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, where the World Council of Churches was holding its Sixth World Assembly.

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Tutu, who was to be a keynote speaker, was forbidden to travel to the meeting by South African authorities. After all, he had directed the WCC's controversial Programme to Combat Racism in the mid-1970s before becoming general secretary in 1978 of the South African Council of Churches, regarded as one of the most powerful opponents of the racist regime.

When news of Tutu's banning spread via the global press, Pretoria loosened its restraints, allowing Tutu to come to Vancouver for 72 hours. He arrived shortly after midnight on an August night. I was one of a thousand or more assembly-goers who stayed up to welcome him under the vast WCC tent.

Tutu assured his late-night well-wishers that he would have but two things to say before sending them to bed. The first was an extended thank you to all — Christians from six continents representing more than 300 churches — for their prayers. Tutu said that during interrogations and while under house arrest, "I have been physically buoyed by your prayers." Some of us watching and listening sensed that he was levitating as he made this declaration.

I, for one, was surprised by his stature. He looked to be no more than 5 feet, 5 inches tall and appeared to be standing on his tiptoes — as if to extend the hand of thanks to the hundreds sitting and standing in the tent. For years while living in Britain and Belgium, I had heard him often on the BBC's Radio 4 program. His high-pitched, sonorous and at times prophetic voice convinced me he was at least 6 feet tall.

The voice rang out once more, cradling the Vancouver audience with its proclamation: "If God be for us … " Every person in the crowd shouted: "Who can be against us?" and then filed to their campus dormitory rooms.

The short bishop sat down with me two days later for an extensive interview but not before asking: "Do you always interview with frozen veg on your foot?" Between Tutu's possible levitation and our meeting, I had fallen, damaged my ankle and was limping.

"Only bishops," I assured him, replacing one bag of frozen peas with another. The serious talk began only after an acceleration of laughter for which the petite cleric was famous. Much of our talk concerned nonviolence and the need to reduce military outlays and strive toward disarmament during what I recall Tutu calling "this obscene arms race."

Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu of Cape Town shows solidarity with Catholic Archbishop D

Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu of Cape Town shows solidarity with Catholic Archbishop Denis Hurley of Durban in a 1985 photo. Hurley was charged with revealing atrocities committed by the apartheid regime in what is now Namibia, but the charges were dropped before the trial could begin. (CNS/Courtesy of the Denis Hurley Centre, Durban, South Africa)

I asked what gave him hope amid so much violence and repression in his homeland. His answer again surprised me. He mentioned the portraits of Black baseball legend Jackie Robinson on the covers of Life and Time magazines in the late 1940s. Born in 1931, Tutu was a teenager in secondary school when he first read these articles. They told him anything was possible, "it just might take a long time," he said.

In 1984 the Nobel committee awarded Tutu its peace prize, citing his courage and commitment in standing up to racism and being a voice for justice and inclusion. White South African critics were not impressed, seeing the award as an act of foreign influence in their nation.

Ten years after Vancouver, I talked to Tutu again at the WCC's Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order in Santiago de Compostela, Spain, where he addressed the forum, which included a large group of young theologians.

Raised a Methodist and later converting to Anglicanism, Tutu believed Christian unity was never optional. Rather, it was indispensable for the salvation of God's world. "It is one of the most wonderful things to belong to the Church of God," he said with a gleam in his eyes and a smile that seemed to be reaching up from the

depth of his soul.

In 2008, he would tell an ecumenical gathering at the WCC headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland: "We can be prosperous only together. We can survive only together. We can be human only together." He believed that God calls all persons to fellowship, to togetherness, without destroying their cultural identity or distinctiveness.

He often credited his calling to the priesthood to a white South African priest who was a hospital chaplain when Tutu was confined for months with tuberculosis at age 14. At one time he contemplated becoming a doctor, but felt he was not smart enough, he told this reporter. Later he became a teacher, like his father, before going to seminary in South Africa, being ordained in 1961 and then getting a Master of Divinity at King's College in London in the mid-1960s.

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While gaining global recognition for his fight against apartheid, Tutu was also a severe critic of the ANC (African National Congress) government that came to power after the apartheid regime ended. He railed against the corruption and lavish lifestyles of some of the party's leaders while keeping his own eyes and voice focused on the millions of South Africans who lived in "dehumanizing poverty," lacking electricity, clean water and sanitation. He challenged government leaders to deliver the "new dawn" they had promised to all South Africans.

In April 1994 Tutu joyfully danced around the ballot box as voters elected Nelson Mandela the nation's first Black president. Tutu and Mandela knew each other over a half century and Tutu had worked with both the governments of P.W. Botha and F.W. de Klerk. for Mandela's release from 27 years in prison

Early in his presidency, Mandela asked Tutu to head the new government's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, assigned to investigate the worse abuses of human rights committed during apartheid. Who can forget how, after months of hearing stories by victims of violence and confessions by perpetrators of these crimes, Tutu lowered his head and publicly wept, his back shaking with sobs? Composing himself

he sat upright and asked how it was possible for human beings to treat other human beings in such a manner.

Over the years Tutu spared no nation that he felt was violating human rights. His condemnations extended to the Soviets for their invasion of Afghanistan, the Americans for their support of the Contras in Nicaragua and their invasion of Iraq, the Israelis for their massacre in Lebanon and for discrimination against Palestinians, and even the ruling multi-racial ANC-led government under Jacob Zuma. The latter he accused of corruption and cronyism with China when it thrice refused, at trade partner China's behest, to issue a visa to the Dalai Lama. Later he would rail against alleged crimes committed by Zuma, which helped lead to Zuma's resignation.



Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu addresses the Catholic Charities USA conference in Rochester, N.Y., in 1999. (CNS/Catholic Courier/Mike Mergen)

Infamous for his off-the-clerical-cuff remarks and bold accusations, Tutu always believed in the power of forgiveness and in the role of mediation in conflicts. He traveled extensively, trying to resolve disputes in Cyprus, Darfur, Kenya, Lebanon, Northern Ireland and Sierra Leone.

He also became a strong campaigner on behalf of human rights for the LGBTQ community and for an end to violence toward Planet Earth.

His gift for preaching was often accompanied by his leaving the pulpit — as I watched him do at a large downtown church in Johannesburg in January 1994 — then descending into the congregation. Putting those assembled at ease with his lively walk, he lifted the hands and arms of the bemused onlookers.

Both Catholics and Anglicans might take comfort in the fact that Tutu died on Dec. 26, this year's Feast of the Holy Family. He had often spoken out against the homestead policies of the apartheid regime that removed men from their families, sending them to work in mines, fields and factories far from their families, a policy that led to sexual and other abuses.

Tutu and his wife of 66 years renewed their marriage vows in 2015, on their 60th anniversary. His wife Nomalizo Leah survives him, as do his four children and seven grandchildren. Once when interviewing Leah in New York, I asked if I could take her photo.

"Just a minute," she responded, reaching into her briefcase. I expected her to get out a hair brush or lipstick. Instead, she removed a large license plate that read: "Don't mess with my Tutu."

The world did not — at least not for long.

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