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Anniversary of a Catholic victory over a dictator

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

Perhaps the boldest Easter message in the world this year came from the Catholic bishops of Zimbabwe, who unambiguously told their country's aging dictator, Robert Mugabe, that he either has to go, or face "open revolt." The warning came in a pastoral letter posted in Catholic churches across the country, improbably transforming parish bulletin boards into popular gathering places.

Roughly 10 percent of the people of Zimbabwe are Roman Catholic, and Mugabe himself was raised a Catholic, attending Marist and Jesuit schools.

What impact the letter may have is anyone's guess, since Mugabe is notoriously tone-deaf to calls for reform. Whatever its fate, however, the gesture provides an occasion to mark the 15th anniversary of another pastoral letter from the bishops of an African nation, who likewise flung down a gauntlet before their ruler. The release of that letter on March 8, 1992, by seven courageous Catholic bishops in the small neighboring state of Malawi, amounted to one of the most remarkable, if largely untold, political interventions of the Catholic church in the 20th century.

If you don't know the story, you should. What happened in Malawi deserves to rank alongside the Solidarity movement in Poland, and the "People Power" movement in the Philippines, as a victory for the Catholic church in its late 20th century confrontations with totalitarian regimes.

In the early 1990s, Malawi was still under the thrall of its dictator-for-life, an eccentric British- and American-educated strongman named Hastings Kamuzu Banda, who had ruled the country since

independence from the United Kingdom in 1964. Though he's largely forgotten today, Banda was the quintessential African dictator of his era. He sashayed around in elegant three-piece English suits, with matching handkerchiefs and a homburg hat, along with a fly-whisk that symbolized his absolute authority over life and death. His unofficial motto was, "My word is the law."

Western journalists styled Banda as "colorful" because of the idiosyncrasies of his rule. For example, every business in Malawi was required to have an official picture of Banda on the wall, and no poster, clock or other picture could be mounted higher than his own. Before every movie, a video of Banda waving while the national anthem played had to be shown. Moreover, Banda was strangely obsessed with dress codes. He forbade women from wearing trousers, and banned long hair and beards for men. As late as the 1980s, the official visa policy of Malawi stated that entrance would be denied to "hippies."

All that might seem comic, but there was little amusing about Banda's iron-fisted rule. His "Malawi Congress Party" was the only political organization allowed under the law, and all adults were required to be members. Foreigners critical of the regime were deported; locals were arrested, tortured, and sometimes killed. Opposition leader Attai Mpakati, for example, was assassinated in 1983 by a letter bomb while in exile in Zimbabwe. Malawi was a classic police state, with mail systematically opened and edited, telephones tapped, and all media heavily censored. Political prisoners were routinely tortured to extract intelligence and confessions, and no one was immune. According to a United Nations report, at one point the inmates of Mikuyu Prison, the main detention center, included the country's leading poet, its only neurosurgeon, several officials of state corporations, leading civil servants, and a teacher thought to have been disrespectful to Banda during an anatomy lesson.

Over 30 years in power, Banda amassed a large private fortune, estimated at \$320 million at the time of his death in 1997 -- this in a country where the mean per capita income is less than \$1 a day, life expectancy is 36.5 years, and one-quarter of the population is thought to be undernourished.

One reason that Banda never achieved the renown of other African leaders is that he was ostracized inside Africa itself. Under his rule, Malawi recognized apartheid-era South Africa and exchanged ambassadors with Pretoria, something no other African nation did. Yet he was well-liked in Britain and the United States, in part for his pro-South Africa stance, in part because of his commitment to Thatcher-esque free market economics. During the Cold War era, when he was seen as a reliable Western ally, his government never came under substantial Western pressure related to human rights abuses.

By 1992, Banda was officially said to be in his 80s and widely believed to be much older, yet no serious challenge to his rule was on anyone's radar screen. That it should come from the Catholic church was, to most observers, surprising. Catholics are thought to be the country's largest Christian denomination, representing some 22 percent of the population, but the Catholic bishops had not been major players in cultural and political affairs. In general, their priority seemed to be to keep the church out of harm's way.

Nor was there any indication from Rome that a change of course was desired. John Paul II had visited Malawi May 4-6, 1989, as part of a four-nation African swing, and while he called upon African Christians and Muslims to embrace one another, he did not address internal human rights issues. Given that the Vatican was preoccupied at the time with dramatic events in Europe, which in just seven months

would lead to the fall of the Berlin Wall, this reticence was understandable, but it hardly seemed to augur a historic outburst from the Catholic church in Malawi.

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Hence it took the country by storm when the seven bishops of Malawi, led by Archbishop James Chiona of Blantyre, issued a dramatic pastoral letter on March 8, titled "Living Our Faith," instructing that it be read aloud in all 130 parishes. They denounced the vast disparity between rich and poor, as well as human rights abuses by both the party and the government. They called for an end to injustice, corruption, and nepotism, and demanded recognition of free expression and political opposition. They also criticized substandard education and health systems. While none of this was new, it was the first time Malawians had said it out loud and signed their names.

"Every human being, as a child of God, must be free and respected," the letter began.

"We cannot turn a blind eye to our people's experiences of unfairness or injustice," the bishops continued. "These are our brothers and sisters who are in prison without knowing what they are charged with, or when their case will be heard."

In a direct challenge to Banda's assertion that his word was law, the bishops said: "No one person can claim to have a monopoly on truth or wisdom."

"Nobody should have to suffer for living up to their convictions. We can only regret that this has not always been the case in our country," they said.

Almost as stunning as the letter itself was the fact that the bishops managed to get 16,000 copies printed and distributed without Banda's intelligence services catching on. On the Sunday the letter was read out, attendance at Catholic Masses across the country swelled to several times normal size. Reportedly, people wept, shouted gratitude, and danced in the aisles.

Reaction from the Banda government calls to mind the scene in "Becket" in which King Henry roars, "Will no one rid me of this meddlesome priest?" A government-controlled newspaper called the pastoral letter "poisonous and seditious," and possession of a copy was made a crime. Chiona was denounced as a "known illiterate." Because a key adviser to the bishops at the time was an Irish monsignor by the name of John Roche, Banda's supporters charged that "Satanic Catholics" were attempting to "import IRA terrorism" into the country. (Roche was expelled from Malawi on Good Friday.)

On March 23, two weeks after the publication of the letter, Banda's Malawi Congress Party organized demonstrations against the bishops, with banners and chants calling for their murder. On March 24, the printing house where the pastoral letter had been run off was firebombed. (The printing press was operated by the Montfort Missionaries, whose work would later be known as "the typography of liberty.")

Several bishops privately said they expected to be killed. In April, one month after the letter appeared, Chiona celebrated a public Mass in which he announced that he was "surprised to be alive." Those were not mere fantasies. Tapes smuggled out of the country and broadcast by the BBC exposed a secret meeting of the Malawi Congress Party in which the murder of the bishops was discussed. International reaction probably saved the bishops' lives. In 1995, four former Banda ministers were formally charged with conspiracy to assassinate the bishops.

In the meantime, emboldened by the pastoral letter, grassroots opposition to Banda found its voice. In the country's largest city, Blantyre, poor squatters in illegal shantytowns -- where cholera was rampant, and sewage flowed openly in the streets -- stood up when security forces tried to run them out. Student protests broke out on university campuses. Opposition figures began returning, sensing an opening for the first time in almost 30 years.

As news of the uprising began to circulate internationally, pressure grew for the United States and Great Britain to take a stand. After the Cold War, the Americans and the British no longer saw a compelling logic in propping up Banda, and instead imposed sanctions. In 1994, several donors froze all foreign aid to Malawi, forcing Banda to call free elections.

In stirring up this hornet's nest, the bishops were alone. Initially, the Vatican seemed afraid of what they had unleashed. After the pastoral letter appeared, Banda asked the Vatican to send someone to mediate between his government and the church, in a time-honored attempt to divide the local bishops from Rome. Possibly fearing a violent backlash, the Vatican sent one of its senior diplomats, Italian Archbishop Giovanni de Andrea, who had earlier served in East Timor. A conciliatory meeting involving de Andrea, a top Banda aide, and the bishops took place. Afterwards, Banda announced to a startled nation that the bishops had "apologized" for their affront. On April 10, Vatican spokesperson Joaquin Navarro-Valls, asked in Rome about what Banda had said, replied that "the difficulties ? have been overcome," which Banda's people spun as a confirmation that the church had backed down.

Privately, some bishops complained that they were out on a limb which was being sawed off from Rome. Speaking from exile in London, Roche called the Vatican stance "disappointing," and insisted that there had been no retreat from the challenge laid down in the March 8 pastoral letter.

In the end, however, these machinations proved beside the point. Before de Andrea had even arrived, the genie was out of the bottle, as a social movement involving NGOs, churches, trade unions, the urban poor, students, and other forces had jelled which would prove impossible to resist. Within two years, Banda was out of power, soundly trounced in free elections in 1994. The new president, a Muslim named Bakili Muluzi, released all remaining political prisoners and shut down the three prisons most notorious for use of torture.

Muluzi then addressed the nation, publicly thanking the Catholic bishops for "starting Malawi's democratization process." Among his first official acts was a visit to the Montfort Media printing center which ran off the pastoral letter, and which had been attacked by Banda loyalists in retribution.

"This is a historic site," Muluzi wrote in a guest book, "which procured for us the democracy we now enjoy."

Why is such a dramatic story basically unknown outside southern Africa?

In part, it's because Malawi is a small country, with a population of just 13 million; in part, it's due to the sad reality that anything happening in Africa attracts less attention; in part, too, it's because there was no towering leader of the Catholic resistance in Malawi, such as Cardinal Jaime Sin in the Philippines or John Paul II in the case of Poland. In part, too, obscurity has enveloped the story because the 1992 pastoral letter hardly ushered in a new golden age. Fifteen years later, Malawi remains stuck on the United Nations list of "Least Developed Countries." More than 15 percent of the population is HIV-positive, and famine is a periodic feature of life. The country's post-Banda leadership has not been inspired. In 2006, Malawi finished 105 out of 163 on Transparency International's annual index of corruption. The two governments that followed Banda have proven almost as dysfunctional as the police state they replaced.

Despite all that, what happened in Malawi 15 years ago nevertheless deserves a pride of place in 20th century Catholic history. Quite literally, these seven bishops took their lives in their hands, concluding in a critical moment that defending the common good was more important than protecting their own safety or the institutional interests of the church. Their action, and its aftermath, offers a striking example of the power that can be unleashed when the moral and spiritual resources of Catholicism are in symphony with the aspirations of an entire people.

Finally, the Malawi story also illustrates that an aroused church can be fatal for dictators -- Robert Mugabe, take note.

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