

S.Africa bishops respond to Bishop Dowling

Dennis Coday | Aug. 12, 2010 NCR Today

On July 8, NCR posted to its Web site the text of talk by Bishop Kevin Dowling of Rustenburg, South Africa. We run the talk under the title [Catholic social teaching finds church leadership lacking](#) [1]. Now his fellow bishops have responded.

Dowling told *NCR* in a telephone interview July 8 that he gave the talk June 1 to a group of "influential lay Catholics" who meet periodically for lunch in Cape Town. The group, Dowling said, had asked him to speak "on how I view the current state of the church."

Unbeknownst to Dowling, a reporter was present for the talk and what Dowling meant as an "off the record" conversation with lay leaders became local news. Dowling subsequently sent copies of his talk to his fellow South African bishops.

After the asterisks is a copy of a release I received today in my e-mail.

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Below is a communiqué issued by the Plenary Session of the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference in answer to a widely reported talk given by Bishop Kevin Dowling of Rustenburg.

For immediate release.

A response to Bishop Dowling

The presentation of Bishop Kevin Dowling at the Cape Town Club Lunch warrants a response by his fellow bishops. As the Bishops' Conference we want to make some general statements rather than to answer in detail each particular issue raised by Bishop Dowling.

Exercising the authority to teach

Forty-five years ago when the Second Vatican Council ended the Church was enthused by the many positive changes that came into its life. Among these we particularly mention the participation of the laity in the Church, collegiality among the bishops throughout the world and the reforms of the liturgy notably the use of the vernacular in worship.

In recent years some have expressed concern that there is an attempt to turn the clock back and undo the changes of the Vatican Council. Others within the Catholic community feel that the changes brought about went too far. It is important to recognise that the changes cannot be undone. It is nonetheless true that the council itself must be interpreted and applied in the light of the history of the Church's teaching and cannot be divorced from it.

There are tensions that exist in the life of the Church. The teaching authority strives to build unity in the midst of these tensions. This authority rests with the College of Bishops as the successors of the apostles in communion with and under the leadership of the Pope who is the successor of St. Peter.

Even between councils the successor of Peter in collaboration with his immediate consultors, the Cardinals, and the college of bishops exercises teaching authority and governs the church. Synods of bishops are one means of consultation and listening to one another. Indeed, the Curia appreciates and requests the advice of local bishops' conferences. Likewise we as local bishops consult in dialogue with the faithful in our own territories. So for example in Southern Africa we are already engaged in the first phase of a widespread Inter-diocesan Consultation which will have its climax in 2012.

In his own diocese the local bishop is the teaching authority in concordance with the teaching of the Church. He exercises this role in collaboration with the priests, deacons, religious and the laity through such structures as the Presbyteral Council, Diocesan Pastoral Council and Parish Pastoral Councils.

Dialogue in the Church

When interpreting the signs of the times and discerning God's will under the guidance of the Holy Spirit tensions and disagreements can arise even among bishops. This calls for tolerance and sensitivity.

Above all care should be taken not to label bishops e.g. as 'restorationists?', conservatives or progressives but rather to address the issues. We are confident that the leaders of the Church, whether the Curia in Rome or the local bishops of a country, are people of integrity who are striving to be faithful to the Gospel, despite human frailty and in some exceptional cases great human failure. The bishops' conferences of the various countries are the forum for open, sincere and honest dialogue as we discern what discipleship to Jesus means in our world.

An important part of this dialogue is the consultation of the bishops with various experts, other Episcopal conferences and most especially the priests, deacons religious and laity as noted above. It is most important that the Church is a listening Church being aware and empathetic to the struggles and choices that people have to make in their everyday life. It is the responsibility of the Church's authority to call continually all its members to live the Gospel values and virtues in our times, especially in the face of powerful forces such as secularism, materialism and other forces with their vested interests which lure and lead people away from the Gospel.

It is precisely through such dialogue that the Church is not inward looking as sometimes claimed. It sincerely seeks guidance and solutions to questions of morality, economic justice, poverty and the many other crises that people face in their lives. We are deeply concerned by all these issues as is evident from the matters that regularly come up for discussion at bishops' plenary sessions. It is clear that the higher church authority is equally concerned as the Papal encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* (Charity in Truth) shows which has solicited widespread response from people in the political and economic fields.

The principle of subsidiarity

This principle is an asset of the social teaching of the Church. It holds that 'those things which can be done or decided on the lower level of society should not be taken over by a higher level?'. The very structure of the church beginning with parishes, leading to deaneries, dioceses, episcopal conferences and culminating in the office of the Supreme Pontiff is evidence of the principle of subsidiarity in the Church.

Conscience

Subsidiarity must be counterbalanced with our faithfulness to discipleship. Through our baptism we have given our lives to Christ and therefore subject our individual choices to the Gospel and the always developing teaching of the Church. While everybody is bound to their conscience it is important to remember that "an upright and true moral conscience is formed by education and by assimilating the Word of God and teaching of the Church" (Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church # 374). Certainly at times tensions can arise. In such a case it is essential that humble discourse continues.

In conclusion: Evangelization needs bold witness

The radical nature of the teaching of Christ often causes us to go against the main stream of human thinking as it did in biblical times and throughout Church history. Nonetheless we your bishops must be bold in our fidelity to the Gospel. We call upon all Catholics to be equally bold in standing up for the doctrinal, social and the moral teaching of the Church. Doing so is a crucial part of the evangelizing mission of the Church for transforming society.

Fr Chris Townsend
Information Officer
Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference (SACBC)
Office for Communication and Media.
Khanya House - 399 Paul Kruger Street, Pretoria 0001
P.O.Box 941 Pretoria 0001
www.sacbc.org.za or www.churchontheball.com

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[1] <http://ncronline.org/node/19093>