REFUGEES IN SOUTHERN AFRICA:
the Church's responsibility

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The root causes of Southern Africa's refugee problem do not differ fundamentally from those of the rest of the world. Apart from widespread religious persecution, less commonplace in Africa, economic and political oppression drive citizens from their countries, or, more often, engender wars resulting in a mass exodus of population. What has made Southern Africa unique in the past has been the inordinate contribution to the refugee problem made by wars growing out of the political economy of white minority rule. During the 1970s some 80% of refugees in the region were fleeing wars of decolonisation/liberation.

The refugee problem is not therefore a separate issue from that of fundamental human rights, rather the inevitable biproduct of various forms of disordered societies. Refugees appear as the end product of a chain of consequences that leads back to an inequitable distribution of wealth and power in society, to a fundamental absence of social justice. For a number of different reasons, not least the inheritance of colonial structures and distorted economies, such conditions are not limited to the region's white minority regimes. The new nation-states have inherited vast problems and received scandalously inadequate assistance from the western powers to overcome them. They have also made mistakes, used resources unwisely, and, at times, mistaken rhetoric for reality.

The betterment of living standards for impoverished rural communities and the goal of economic liberation are imposing tremendous strains on the new states of

Southern Africa. The autocratic and bureaucratic government apparatus of colonial times can rapidly drag new administrations into immobility, authoritarianism and serious violations of civil rights. To master this legacy, to transform state institutions in the interests of the people takes many years. Impatience and frustration in the face of poverty and immobility are the breeding ground of new forms of injustice. And the cycle of human suffering that leads ultimately to the refugee is repeated.

The flight of refugees from new nation states is no less a pressing problem than that created by the radical injustice of apartheid in South Africa. But, at root, causes are similar: deformities in economic life sustained by relationships of dependency, the domination of powerful transnational companies, and the concentration of jealously guarded power in the hands of the few, all reflected in political structures. This may either result in a monopoly of national wealth by urban elites with dissent from this monopoly branded as unpatriotic or subversive. Or it may result in a socialist reaction in which the dictatorial rule of an unwieldy bureaucracy displaces participatory forms of democracy in the name of "efficiency" and "progress". On the one hand, rural poverty is ignored or dealt with in a crumbs-from-the-table indifference. On the other, it is confronted and struggled against, with human rights the first casualty of the battle.

The Church's concern and compassion for the plight of refugees is not therefore separable from its underlying commitment to social justice and its understanding of the role of Man in development. The famines and wars that have driven Africans from their homes, either as internal refugees in their own country, or across

borders have causes. The Church is as much concerned with remedying these causes as caring for their consequences. In this sense the Church has a privileged position and a great responsibility. Unlike individual aid agencies and other international bodies the Church is concerned with the totality of the problem as well as with the concrete demands of refugee communities and individuals.

The refugee problem is not then merely the problem of refugees but mainly the context in which refugees occur in Southern Africa: civil wars and conflicts with racial or ethnic dimensions. The Church encounters the refugee in a box whose sides are host government, liberation movement or guerrilla army, government of a neighbouring state, and aid agency. In the case of the internal refugee the host government will be one of the parties to the conflict. Refugees are boxed in and the political dimension of their predicament is as important as the political dimension of all the Church's work for social justice.

There are a host of practical material difficulties that beset any Church effort to assist refugees. These are potentially soluble with normal human ingenuity and diligence. But there is no such hopeful assurance that the problem of the context of Southern African refugees is as readily soluble. To begin with, the Church has no ready-reckoner to gauge the merits of the different sides involved in conflicts arising from the treatment of refugees. No universally accepted guidelines are available for churchmen caught in the middle of civil wars, formulating policies towards national liberation movements, reacting to revolutionary situations. Indeed, it is in the realm of just war theory, liberation and black

theology, and the relationship between Kingdom and the state, where the Church is engaged in stimulating, and at times acrimonious, debate. Thinking on these matters is in a state of flux, with strongly held positions on all sides.

Yet the problems are pressing and widespread. Host countries usually suffer from fragile economies and correspondingly insecure governments. At the most elementary level, the influx of large numbers of refugees places an intolerable strain on already poor countries, and often introduces people whose ideological, cultural and language background differentiates them sharply from the citizens of the host country. They are seen as a nuisance and not wanted. Also at a diplomatic level, the neighbouring state will look with disfavour on exiles whom they view as potentially subversive, and is likely to put pressure on the host government to handle the refugee influx in ways unconducive to their welfare. Economic pressure from a country such as South Africa may be overwhelming and unanswerable.

At its most acute, political problems arise when refugee youth actively prepare to make military incursions into their country of origin with, or without, the permission of the host country. Conversely, national liberation movements may insist on handling the refugee influx in ways that endanger civilians by attack from the Defence Forces of neighbouring states, or institutionalise the refugee community in ways apparently incompatible with Christian goals.

Refugees have been made pawns in a political chess game too often in the past for this to be an incidental aspect of the problem. The political dimension of the refugee problems appears increasingly as central and in

need of evaluation. This comes as no suprise as, in the context of civil wars, the relationship between refugees and combatants becomes very important, in itself problematic.

During the war in Zimbabwe, the huge exodus of people coming into Mozambique passed through transitional camps before moving on to guerrilla training camps and civilian camps. The Executive Committee of ZANU generally were reluctant to make any distinction between guerrillas and refugees, but did so in deference to the wishes of international aid agencies. In this they were adhering to the letter of the United Nations Convention with its 1967 protocol. Contrary to what might be expected, these provisions which have legal status in international law for signatories to the Convention, makes no allowance for any change in status of individuals attendant on their activities while in asylum. In other words, the Convention does not exclude from its definition of a refugee those who undergo guerrilla training i.e. anyone who

> owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable, or, owing to such fears, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country...
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> (Article 1 A2 UN Convention on Status of Refugees)

There is therefore strictly no legal grounds for making a distinction between externally based liberation movements and refugees. All are refugees, some combatants, others non-combatants.

However this does not mean that the UN Convention

encourages or condones the training of refugees as guerrillas. In practice, the UNHCR confined its aid effort in Zambia and Mozambique to well-defined non-combatant civilian camps with only medical supplies reaching guerrilla camps. International outrage at attacks by Rhodesian Defence Forces on camps such as Nyazonia in Mozambique, with massive loss of innocent civilian life, illustrates a de facto recognition of a firm distinction between guerrillas and refugees. by the world community. Thus, even though the status of guerrilla forces is not established in international law, the Church would wish to emphasise the distinction between combatant and non-combatant thereby safeguarding innocent life.

These distinctions were mentioned by President Julius Nyerere in a major speech on the refugee problem in Africa at Monrovia in July 1979. He listed three categories of refugees: political refugees, freedom fighters and "men, women and children fleeing from war, from racial, religious or cultural persecution or conflict, and from famine or other natural disasters". The latter have traditionally, and rightly, been the main focus of the Church's humanitarian aid and pastoral care. But pastoral responsibilities towards the other two categories cannot be excluded without calling in question the Church's universal mission and, in particular, its commitment to an integral human development of Southern Africa.

Furthermore, these two categories form respectively the "self-government" and militia of a sizeable proportion of the refugee population. Church attitudes towards the political and military wings of the liberation movements are likely to influence decisions concerning the provision of pastoral care and access to refugee camps. Indeed,

future relations with the Church at the conclusion of liberation struggles seem to have been strongly influenced in the past by the liberation movement's sense of the Church's pastoral and humanitarian involvement with their struggle.

Is the refugee being prepared to return to a transformed country of origin, or is he/she being integrated into the life of the host country ? This is a second problem on which the Church may feel obliged to speak and act. There can be no doubt that almost all refugees initially believe in their ultimate return and that this gives hope to their lives and sustains them as a particular community with a particular culture. It is in the interests of National Liberation Movements to kindle this hope. They seek to bring about the necessary transformation in the country they have left through armed struggle and hope to be the agency through which the refugee's return is assured. The difficulty arises when the date of this return comes to be measured in years rather than months, years in which the refugee community live a camp existence rather than establishing a more permanent presence in the host country. The conflicting values of national identity and individual welfare are difficult to evaluate in given instances without some consensus in disputed areas of Christian theology like black and liberation theology. The practical problem becomes more acute when de facto authority over the guerrilla community is ill-defined, spread between liberation movement, UNHCR and host government.

It has become clear from the Mozambican and Zimbabwean

experience that the Church is much aided in influencing events in favour of the poor and innocent from a position of mutual understanding with national liberation movements. To safeguard the interests of the individual, of refugees with specific needs, has demanded in the past a high degree of sensitivity to political realities. This sensitivity will be no less in demand in the coming decade as the guerrilla war in South Africa and Namibia grows. Though the volume of refugees from these conflicts may be less, the political context in which they must be served will be no less fraught. Given the military strength of the Republic, a high degree of permanence must be assumed for South African refugees, while the phenomenon of "internal refugees" is likely to be repeated and confused by the presence of "independent" homelands.

Permanence has also characterised the refugee populations of Zaire and Angola, though for different reasons: a low level of identification with their nation-state of origin and fear of physical or economic danger as a consequence of return. Mr. Andrew Kishindo, Refugee Secretary of the All African Council of Churches reported in March 1980 that, one year after a peaceful co-existence agreement between Angola and Zaire had been signed, there were still 250,000 Zairois in Angola and 500,000 Angolans in Zaire.

Refugees of this type represent in many ways no new development for Africa. The movement of agricultural communities in response to war and soil exhaustion is not a radically new departure. Failures of regional integration and the breakdown of state systems produced wars and refugees in the past. What makes the Angolan and Zairois refugees different, is, of course, the existence of borders carved out in colonial times that now define nation-state identities. What makes their fate different is that traditional methods of assimilating immigrant

populations are short-circuited by national and international intervention. During the Zimbabwean conflict, for example, Manyika speaking people informally moved across the border according to the vicissitudes of the conflict and were known as "free livers". For the vast majority of refugees, the initial crisis, the need for emergency food and shelter, may be relatively easily overcome by aid agencies. A facsimile of their old village community may then be re-created and there is no a priori reason why they should not assume the citizenship of the host nation-state if they so wish. The UN Convention recognises a firm right not to be forced to return to a country from which flight has occurred, no refoulement, but this right might also extend to a right to seek citizenship of the host country on a privileged basis. At the least, the Church will want to work for the widest possible number of options for the refugee and to turn residence in a refugee camp to their maximum possible advantage.

Provided refugees are entering countries with relative land surplus, the Church should find no fundamental barrier to an amelioration of their material conditions. Sufficient input from voluntary agencies and Church bodies into communities made more open to change by disruption or flight may also create prosperous nuclei of agricultural development in the host country. The Christian community provides a suitable vehicle through which the permanently settled person can overcome ethnic, cultural and linguistic problems likely to lead to isolation or to create tensions. The option of permanent settlement is one that the Church must foster without encouraging an exaggerated individualism inimicable to liberation movements or unduly provocative to reluctant host governments. But whatever the concrete possibilities, Church work for the refugee is best undertaken within the perspective of permanence rather

than as ad hoc responses to an "emergency situation".

The challenge to the Church comes not so much from the material needs of farmers moving from one rural environment to another, but from their spiritual needs in the broadest sense. To quote from the Zambia Episcopal Conference Commission for Relief and Development: "The greatest loss is not their physical requirments which can be met quickly, but their loss of security and identity... We have to be aware of the psychological and spiritual needs, and if we are not, we will omit this only at peril, and the consequence will be massive social trauma".

A good example of a Church response to needs of this kind is the Rehabilitation Retreats of Brother Canisius Chishiri in the Catholic Social Centre at Zengesa, Zimbabwe. Though these courses are designed for those who have lost relatives in tragic circumstances during the war, their rhythmn and technique would be equally applicable to those suffering loss and shock of displacement. "During the weekends when I am holding these courses I must have no sense of time, if I am in a hurry it could add to the wounds these people already have". The hurried round of pastoral life forced on the mission Church is not a suitable pattern for this type of care. The possibility for people to express their emotions, often misunderstood since they bottle up their feelings, is an important element in Brother Canisius' approach and demands far more than weekly visits to supply refugee communities with the sacraments.

The pastoral care of refugees appears increasingly to demand that priests, nuns or suitably trained lay people live in the refugee community, for it to touch the individual. Father Nigel Johnson S.J. who has been living in a boys' camp in Zambia for the past few months gives some idea of

> ambitious, the optimist, the pessimist, the honest hard-working men and the sly delinquent; the persons who will make the best of things, and the man who will grumble about everything.

In short, the Church faces in Southern Africa a multiplicity of problems relating to a wide variety of different categories of refugees, without ready-made answers. This is a healthy situation. At a theoretical level, it demands a careful scrutiny of the current debate about liberation theology in order to clarify relationships between the Church and national liberation movements. This relationship is likely to be critical in the Namibia conflict and, even more so, in the coming war in South Africa. At a practical level, it requires the creation of structures capable of acting effectively while reaching across national frontiers. This, in turn, demands a less territorial and more problem-orientated ministry in the Church. Diocesan boundaries and the pre-occupations of National Catholic Bishops' Conferences may be no less constraining in relation to effective pastoral action than the carefully guarded borders of the nation-states. Just as the "internal refugee" needs inter-diocesan and national consideration so the majority of refugees in Southern Africa represent, by definition, an inter-territorial problem, a problem that IMBISA is uniquely suited to tackling in the 1980s.

the possibilities and limitations.

> The official policy is freedom of religion. However there are no religious services, meetings or groups, while there is every other kind of club conceivable in the normal way for schools in Zimbabwe...One of the older boys told me that a lot of the boys pray alone at night in their tents, "like you do", he said, but would be afraid to do anything openly.

The challenge to the Church is thus essentially a pastoral one, devising appropriate forms of ministry to answer to the variety of needs experienced by refugees.

Refugee needs will differ considerably for the educated urban person and the illiterate farmer. The former is another area in which some creative response is urgently needed. The high level of friction, for example, in Gaberones between urban South African refugees and local inhabitants has on a number of occasions reached boiling point during the past two years. Rural farming life is as alien to such individuals as to a Johannesburg stockbroker, and camp life likely to be intolerable and prison-like. Since many educated urban refugees are young people with intellectual affinities to the liberation movements, they are likely to represent a particularly sensitive area of the Church's ministry. This category includes, of course, not only South African political exiles and involves many of the countries of Southern Africa.

The variety of refugee needs is an obvious corollary to the variety of types of refugee. In the words of President Nyerere in his Monrovia speech:

> All refugees are certainly victims, but they do not consequently lose their individual ideas about life and their own purpose. They will include the

SOME TENTATIVE PROPOSALS

1. The pastoral needs of refugees, given a total of some four million in Africa as a whole, and about one million in the region covered by IMBISA, are not peripheral demands made on the Church. The refugee problem is a central one for the Church requiring a co-ordinated pastoral strategy with specific training and commitment of manpower equipped with the requisite linguistic and psychological skills.

2. The IMBISA Bishops acknowledge the variety of refugee needs and the complex political context in which the Church will minister to these needs in the 1980s. They therefore require up-to-date data on the refugee problem in the region with relevant political analyses of factors influencing aid and pastoral care to refugee communities. A model in this respect would be the work of the Zimbabwe project that attempted to co-ordinate Church efforts for refugees in three countries during the period 1978-1980 when the Zimbabwe conflict was at its most intense. Now that the Zimbabwean war has ended the Zimbabwe project might consider broadening its area of concern to continue providing a similar service for the IMBISA Bishops.

3. The IMBISA Bishops will seek to formulate a public document designed to clarify the Church's mandate in relation to the refugee problem in the region to avoid future misunderstandings between nation-state governments and national hierarchies on this issue.

4. The IMBISA Bishops will seek to clarify the relationship between local Church, Church of the incoming refugee and aid agencies in the First World. This cooperation will have as its goal a consistent and development orientated strategy towards refugee communities, and will aim at long-term projects of a self-help type funded by aid agencies.

5. The IMBISA Bishops will commit themselves to ecumenical

approaches to the refugee problem in the future making maximum use possible of existing structures set up by other Churches in the region and working in the closest possible cooperation. with them.