

# *I Believe in the Holy Catholic Church*

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I write this article as one who has suffered the misuse of power by white people. I am a South-African pastor who lived under the apartheid that humiliated black people for years. As I grew up, there were times when I felt that God favored whites more than blacks. The worse part of my childhood journey was when white soldiers destroyed my home, and did not see us as human beings created by God. The whites justified their position of power by using scriptures. There were also times when we (the oppressed) cried to the Lord. Jeremiah articulated this cry for us by saying: "Oh Lord, we come to Thee, for Thou art our God."<sup>1</sup> We cried, and we thought God couldn't answer.

As we were crying, the world came to our rescue. It was Presbyterian women in the U.S. who started to boycott Nestlé products. The apartheid government had to begin adjusting its laws because of the pressure of the world. Then pastors in U.S. churches became our voices and prophets. In other words, they became a voice of the voiceless. They spoke on our behalf and continued pressuring the apartheid government through sanctions. As U.S. pastors addressed the issue of apartheid and its problems of violence, people around the world were sensitized to our problems through boycotts.

Today the world is experiencing another kind of violence, which escalated a lot after 9/11. Terror surrounds the world in such a way that nations no longer trust each other. Palestine and Israel are bleeding while Iraq is brought down to ashes. In those countries mothers are weeping, but no one cares to listen to their cries. Power is ruling the world instead of peace. My role is to remind U.S. pastors that yours is a powerful country and that through this power you can bring peace to the world. For example, a prophet like Martin Luther King, Jr., through his policies of non-violence, introduced peace to your country. Gandhi, Mandela, Mother Teresa, and others used non-violence to serve peace to the broken world. As preachers of the word we are called to preach the good news and bring peace among nations. As a preacher you are given authority to preach the good news in season and out of season. In short, we are called to prophetic ministry.

Over sixty years ago church leaders in Germany were seduced by the charisma of Adolph Hitler. During this difficult time the church was quiet except for a few leaders. Dietrich Bonhoeffer at that time asked the church not to take the way of cheap grace, not to be corrupted by the Nazi regime through support of their ultra nationalism and excessive bigotry. As a lonely prophet, he said in regard to cheap grace, "It is like preaching forgiveness without repentance—grace without the cross, grace without Jesus, living and incarnate."<sup>2</sup> Bonhoeffer attempted to awaken the sleeping church by reminding it that cheap grace will lead the church to a compromise.

Surely the above quotation applies to American churches as well as to churches around the world that do not challenge the evil of violence. Following 9/11, American preachers were able to minister to the sorrow and bereavement that befell America. In fact, the whole world wept with America, including Iraq. Services were held in memory of beloved ones who died such cruel deaths. The world was shocked by this kind of terror. Let me hasten to say that terrorism is evil and we need to attend to this

kind of violence. Hence the world was praying for you and for peace everywhere in the world. We had hoped that your country would not retaliate with violence. When you did, the world lost a graceful time that could have produced peace. As anger rose among you during that difficult time, we saw patriotism emerging. Your government knew that Iraq was not going to stand before your power, for it was a weak nation.

When power serves the people, it produces peace that leads to reconciliation. Bishop Tutu reminds us of the grace that is brought by reconciliation. He says: "True reconciliation occurs when you confront the demands of the gospel of Jesus Christ with issues of justice and peace, and compassion and caring."<sup>3</sup> It simply means taking sides on behalf of the weak and the downtrodden, the voiceless ones, especially in the case of war, where women and children suffer more than men. Bonhoeffer, Tutu, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa, and others, including myself, believe that we cannot be neutral in a situation of injustice, oppression, and exploitation.

If the church is silent during *this* time of violence, then it has already taken sides with empire against the oppressed. This is a time where the church must not lose the opportunity of bridge building and reconciliation. Our effort at weaving relationships together in times of conflict needs to be interwoven with opportunities for dialogue, which will free both the oppressor and oppressed people. Dialogue challenges preachers to bring the community together to work for peace with other religions. As preachers we need to confront the assertion of civil religion, especially when leaders who promote violence invoke it. A good example is when the U.S. president speaks about the "axis of evil" with a mixture of religious language in order to justify violence. The church cannot tolerate the misuse of scriptural passages in order justify violence.

Let me ask this question to you as preachers of the Word: If Iraq was selling oranges, do you think your country or another superpower could wage war against it? The answer is no. Because Iraq has oil, a commodity that is important to the U.S., your country waged war and used its power in order to get this resource. Preachers are supposed to condemn such acts of violence.

I am aware that if you follow prophetic ministry, your congregation will reject you. I am aware that those who challenge the status quo will be isolated and rejected by the nation. Dissidents are treated badly, especially when they challenge the Empire. They are often regarded as zealots. But this war challenges us to reexamine our faith. Bonhoeffer helps us focus on actions Christians must undertake during violent situations. He raises the issue that is most important to the Christian Church: "costly grace." He challenges us to seek and understand our role with regard to costly grace as we confront conflicts:

Costly grace is the gospel, which must be *sought* again and again, the gift, which must be *asked* for, the door at which a man [*sic*] must *knock*.

Such grace is *costly* because it calls us to follow, and it is *grace* because it calls us to follow *Jesus Christ*. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life... Above all, it is *costly* because it costs God the life of his Son: 'ye were bought at a price', and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is *grace* because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for life, but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the incarnation of God.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, through Christ, the Son of God, every human being is special because we were bought with a high price. Bonhoeffer reminds us that “what has cost God much cannot be cheap to us,” therefore preachers are forced by the gospel to come back to the basic concept of the image of God in every human being. The African concept of “Ubuntu” (human dignity) comes to mind.

The Bible again and again reminds us about the image and likeness of God that is in every human being. This concept is important because it comes from God. As shepherds of the flock, we should not allow others to destroy this divine image and likeness of God in human beings. If U.S. preachers and all Christians throughout the world will honor the above quotation closely we will find ourselves on holy ground, charged to respect this image of God in us and in other people. That is why the gospel compels us to address injustices anywhere where they seek to destroy human beings who are created in God’s image.

Preachers are to remind people (congregations) to follow the ministry of Christ, which respects human beings and is full of compassion, love, and peace—a ministry that addresses injustices in the world. As followers of Christ we will then be able to promote harmony and peace, which may be enjoyed by later generations. The Bible and Bonhoeffer had this to say about justice: “But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an overflowing stream.”<sup>5</sup> American preachers cannot afford to be silent at this time when people are being destroyed by violent acts justified by scriptures.

As prophets of God we are called to challenge the misuse of God’s Word, especially when leaders use civil religion in order to justify war, violence, and conflict. We are called to be guides to the right use of faith and scripture. Our call is to be true to the living Word of God. The reader should remember that our Lord ministered in a violent world. He challenged the powers that were oppressing the poor and introduced peace. Today the world and the people are hungry for peace. The message of peace must be communicated to members of the churches in the U.S. and the rest of the world. As an outsider I am challenging you: peacemaking must be part of the Christian practice. We are all challenge through violent acts of war to promote peace among nations. This is our primary task.

Peacemaking can occur when we open ourselves to God, open ourselves to dialogue with other religions, and finally, when we respect human dignity. Preachers are to champion this course of peace and reconciliation. Schreiter reminds us that

Cheap peace and reconciliation is like unity without responsibility, forgiveness without repentance, equal treatment without restitution, harmony without liberation, conflict resolution without relational healing and peace without God.<sup>6</sup>

As people continue to experience violence in the world ruled by superpowers, I hope that the American churches will learn from the mistake of the German churches, especially their failure to address injustice toward the Jews. Our call is to address injustices and create the atmosphere of peace and interfaith dialogue among nations and religions.

It can be done because South Africa has led the way of peace and reconciliation by seeking the truth instead of punishment. People are capable of going beyond hatred

to embrace forgiveness, which bears the fruit of love, peace, and reconciliation. The South-African churches dealt with evil powers by confronting the power of evil. Let me remind you that evil is not defeated by the power of another evil. The power of evil is defeated when confronted with the truth of the gospel. The greatest biblical mandate for us today is found in the letter to Corinthians: "All this is from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation."<sup>7</sup> Ministry of reconciliation is a costly proclamation, because the agenda is from God, who loved the world so much he made the costly sacrifice of giving his only Son. American preachers, citizens, and Christians throughout the whole world, I ask you to take responsibility for seeking forgiveness, repairing the wrong, healing the soul, and creating a world full of peace.

Let me draw my plea against violence to a close with the story of Nebuchadnezzar, who at the peak of his ruling power forgot God. He was drunk with the evils of power. He misused his power and destroyed Israel in such a way that God, through Daniel, had to intervene. He forgot that even Israel, though the people had sinned as a nation, were still God's children.

During the apartheid regime, I attended church at Pimville (Soweto). In our worship service we always reminded ourselves about the universal church. Whenever we affirmed our faith with the Apostle's Creed, especially when we came to that part which says "I believe in the holy catholic church," we stopped and called out names of other countries in the world to remind us of the catholicity of the universal church—Chile, Jamaica, Canada, Botswana, U.K., America, Samoa, etc. Then we concluded the Creed. You and other American churches are also part of the universal. When you affirm your faith in worship, please remember that part of the catholic Church is in the global village. The catholicity of the church also exists in Iraq. My challenge to you is this: you should not participate in destroying that part of the catholic Church.

Another task is to learn not to listen to what you hear in the mass media. Learn from partner *churches* around the world. These churches are your source of information about the pain experienced by common people. Your call is to establish dialogue and a new movement of working for peace. We need to be engaged in interdenominational prayer meetings. Let us not allow the empire to set an agenda of destroying the world given to us by God.

Finally, you are a powerful country in the world. There is no country that can challenge your power right now. Have mercy on weaker countries. You have recently voted. Remember that the developing countries reap the fruits of your voting. If you elect a leader who does not respect humanity, we will suffer from what you have chosen. You are the only country that can promote peace. You are also capable of destroying the whole world. The decisions made by your leaders affect the whole world. Be sensitive to human life, the creation of God, injustice, the dignity of humankind, and all God's children who are poor. Christ reminds us "if you have done it to the least of these my brothers and sisters, you have ministered to me."

We are placed on this earth to be coworkers with God. I charge you to love the world and your neighbors. Remember that God gave God's only son to die for all God's children. Let us learn to live with each other. Let us encourage dialogue with Muslims, and let us encourage partnership with other countries, and join the peace movement, so that our children may enjoy peace and harmony. This is our call and our mission in the age of religious violence.

In conclusion, we need to remind each other that we worship one God, who is the Creator of the whole world. The main aim of Christians is to love each other as God loved us. The last commandment that Christ gave us was “to love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind and soul, and to love your neighbor as yourself.” Following this commandment will introduce peace and harmony. Let us unite in fighting evil in the name of the one who created us. We cannot afford to continue killing other people through wars. The problem is that men create war and women and children suffer from the results of war, which is created by men. If you believe in the holy Catholic Church, join this Church and promote peace. This movement of peace will promote hope, which is in our Lord Jesus Christ.

### Notes

1. Jeremiah 3:22b.
2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (1937; reprint, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 44.
3. D.M. Tutu, “Allies of God,” *Weavings* vol. 5, no. 1 (January/February 1990): 41-42.
4. Bonhoeffer, 45.
5. Amos 5:24.
6. R. J. Schreiter, *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1992), 18-27.
7. 2 Corinthians 5:18.