

Comment

Last month we mentioned those unfortunate priests who are hired by the ruling class to give their military machines a 'Christian' gloss; it is pleasant this time to be able to turn to a case of the institutional Church playing exactly the opposite role. The recent statement from an official commission of the Rhodesian Catholic hierarchy must be heartening to any Christian who is not actually John Biggs Davison. Not that it makes exhilarating reading; on the contrary, it is a sickening catalogue of brutalities practised by the forces of Law and Order upon what a Judge described as harmless people 'whose only wish, for the most part, is to be left in peace'. The Report, subtitled 'Torture, Resettlement and Eviction' describes the savageries, the electric shocks, beatings, the water-torture, that have become so hideously commonplace wherever capitalism has resorted to violence to preserve its collapsing structures, whether in Paraguay, Northern Ireland or South Korea, but it also illuminates special features of Rhodesian repression. The 'Protected Villages' into which (following the example of the British during the repression of the Boers and later in Malaya) thousands of perfectly innocent Africans are crowded with total disregard for customary social structures (to say nothing of food, sanitation and sheer living space) are described with sufficient elementary anthropological information to help us to understand the psychological and moral torments involved.

It is explained that the life of the rural African 'is completely bound up with their deep need to observe . . . norms of privacy, relationships and customary structures which make up the everyday pattern of their lives. Anything disruptive of this structure . . . may be fatal to their psychological well-being, even if every material need is satisfied'. (The difference is emphasised between 'normal' urbanisation, which itself presents enough problems but which 'takes place voluntarily, gradually and for the most part individually' and this violent wrenching of whole peoples from their ancestral territory and their social and religious structures.) As to material needs: 'In some areas villagers having been compelled to leave their homes and property, have simply given up hope and no longer take part in their traditional agricultural activities. In those areas where the Government was prepared to provide food, supplies have been reduced', and to quote some of the witnesses: 'Here we have to eat our food in the sight of our own defecation . . .'. 'Women when they got pregnant from the District Assistants, they are using medicine to remove the pregnancy before the husband knows it. . . . Victims of the removal of pregnancy are found put in plastic bags and thrown in the river or in toilets . . .'. 'Conditions at Nyachuru Protected Village where 200-300 people are behind wire are appalling. There

was no sanitation or running water, and apart from one asbestos shelter people were living in the open’.

These are the places that the Rhodesian Government describes as ‘growth points for the future’ with ‘a tremendous potential for development’. Maybe they are right; the refugee camps of Palestine, Long Kesh, the slave-labour camps of Nazi Germany have all been places with potential for development—for the growth of political understanding. People who enter ‘whose only wish is to be left in peace’ may become dedicated men and women who understand that peace is not something that is ‘left’ to us, it is something we purchase through the struggle for justice. As the psalmist puts it :

Justice shall march *before* him
and peace shall *follow* his steps.

The Report also details the barely credible story of the Tangwena people, who had to be evicted quite simply because Europeans decided they wanted their land (it was ‘designated a white area’). In spite of years of armed attacks by the police, beatings, burning of villages, destruction of the school and the co-operative farm, the Tangwena people have stood firm in their ancestral home. Eventually men from the ‘Department of Social Welfare’ simply kidnapped 115 of the Tangwena children aged between 4 and 13 and took them to another territory in army trucks. As the Bishops’ Report says of the Tangwena : ‘Their feelings about this action concerning their children can scarcely be expressed in words, but their resolve to continue as before did not change and indeed they further resolved that anyone who declared himself to the authorities for the purpose of being reunited with his child without the express consent of the elders would disqualify himself from continuing the struggle . . .’. Feelings which can hardly be expressed in words have, of course, a natural tendency to be expressed in other ways.

The document which has been excellently and very speedily produced in Britain by the Catholic Institute for International Relations¹ (needless to say it could not be published in Rhodesia itself) is the work of the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Rhodesia and it proves that not all genuine Christianity need be ‘underground’. But when are we likely to hear anything remotely similar from our own Justice and Peace Commission? If (as Dr Antony Spencer seems to have shown for Britain) the Catholic Church is speedily dying in those countries where she has passively accepted the role of guardian of respectability and the status quo, but flourishes in places like Rhodesia and Poland where she presents a challenge to the established powers, is this not simply because no amount of wealth or organisation or social status or political acceptability is a substitute for the gospel?

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¹*The Man in the Middle: Torture, Resettlement and Eviction*. Available from 41 Holland Park Road, London W11 3RP. Price 50p.