

COURAGEOUS AND PROPHETIC LEADER

A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ARCHBISHOP DENIS HURLEY O.M.I.

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Early years and training for the priesthood

Denis Hurley was born in Cape Town in 1915. His parents, who both came from Skibbereen in southern Ireland, had settled in South Africa. They were adventurous people: before their marriage his father had been in the Royal Navy and his mother had learned to be a seamstress in the USA. They both came from families which had some history of resisting the English oppression of the Irish.

His father became a lighthouse keeper, and as a child Denis lived at a number of lighthouses along the Cape and Natal coasts. It was this fact which led Alan Paton, the famous novelist and anti-apartheid activist, to say on the occasion of the Archbishop's seventieth birthday: "Denis Hurley was not born in a lighthouse as some people imagine. His father was the keeper of the lighthouse at Cape Point, the guardian of the light that warns the sailors of dangers and guides them away from destruction. Now the son did not follow in his father's footsteps. But he became a lighthouse keeper too; the guardian of the light that warns of dangers and saves us from destruction. The lighthouse has become a symbol of light and hope and our Archbishop has been doing this work of warning and guiding for the greater part of his life. And he has done it with great faithfulness for which today we give thanks."

Hurley attended various primary schools, the first on Robben Island. His secondary schooling was provided by the Dominican sisters at Newcastle, KwaZulu-Natal, and then by the Marist Brothers at St Charles' College in Pietermaritzburg. Two incidents during his high school years gave him a taste of hardship and poverty. He was lost in a cave for about 24 hours with two other boys. The second incident was when his father succumbed to mental illness and was away from home for a year and a half: during this time the family suffered considerable privation, but was helped by the Dominican sisters and the Oblates of Mary Immaculate.

By this time Hurley had decided that he wanted to become a priest. In January 1932, shortly after finishing matric, he was sent to Ireland to do his novitiate with the Oblates. He did not get much intellectual stimulation from the novitiate or from his brief experience of the Irish scholasticate. But he was chosen by the Oblates to do his priestly studies in Rome, at the Angelicum (now St Thomas's University) run by Dominicans and then at the Gregorian University run by Jesuits. He found much of the studies very dry, lacking in the pastoral training needed for priests, but he grew to love philosophy which trained his mind to go to the essence of problems. Being in Rome was exciting for him: he enjoyed the fact that the Oblate students came from a variety of countries and ethnic backgrounds, he was fascinated by the many ancient Roman monuments, and deeply conscious that Rome was the centre of the universal church. He loved to attend major papal liturgies.

Prominent among particular influences on Hurley at this time were Pope Pius XI, who was strongly opposed to Hitler and Mussolini and who stressed the importance of the church's social teaching. Brother Hurley was impressed too by the Young Christian Workers who, with their 'See, Judge, Act' method, were beginning to make an impact on the Church. One of the courses in his final years was

about the church's social teaching, and he steeped himself in this topic. All this proved to be valuable and significant in later years.

Interestingly Oscar Romero, who as Archbishop of El Salvador was martyred by a right-wing death squad in 1980, was also studying at the Gregorian at the same time as Hurley, and he too was greatly impressed by Pius XI. But Hurley and Romero never met, though, as Hurley said, "we might have passed each other in the corridors."

In 1938 when Hitler paid a state visit to Italy, Pius XI left Rome in order to avoid meeting him; he also ordered that the Vatican museums be closed. A fellow student urged Hurley to take the opportunity to see the 'great dictator', whose cavalcade could be observed from the roof of the Oblate Scholasticate, but he refused: he had no desire to set his eyes upon this person whom he regarded as the embodiment of evil.

Hurley was in Rome when Pius XI died. He was in St Peter's Square and saw the white smoke rising in the air to indicate that a new pope had been elected. It was Cardinal Pacelli, who became Pius XII. Hurley heard the announcement, and was present for the first blessing and the coronation.

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Priest, Bishop and Archbishop: challenging apartheid

The outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 meant that the young Father Hurley had to return to South Africa somewhat earlier than he had expected. He arrived back in Durban in July 1940 and was appointed junior curate at Emmanuel Cathedral. He soon found that the older priests in the community were not at all interested, as he was, in issues of social justice. When he described with enthusiasm a meeting he had attended at the university about starting trade unions for black workers, the older priests actively discouraged him from attending any more such meetings. He would have liked to do so but didn't feel that he could go against the strong opposition of clergy many years his senior.

Hurley had been made junior curate at the Cathedral because one of the priests on the staff wanted to become a military chaplain. This meant that Hurley missed out on the opportunity, afforded to most priests of the diocese, to learn Zulu by being immersed in the language at a rural mission station. He regretted this for the rest of his life, as he never really learned to speak Zulu properly – despite the fact that he was fluent in Italian, French and Latin, the languages he had had to cope with during his studies in Rome. Still, at the Cathedral he was distinctly at the centre of things, and his talents were seen by many; the Bishop had his office there, and Hurley was master of ceremonies for all the great occasions. This was a time when a new bishop was being sought.

From the first, and throughout his life, as a faithful Oblate he was totally committed to his daily meditation and to the recitation of the Divine Office, even at times when he had a very busy schedule. He loved praying the psalms in the Office. So often they reflected his own spiritual journey. In difficult times he would pray: "Why downcast my soul, why do you sigh within me? Put your hope in God, I will praise him yet, my Saviour and my God." (Psalm 42). At other times, they

speak of joy and happiness: “Cry out with joy to the Lord, all the earth, Serve the Lord with gladness, Come before him singing for joy” (Psalm 99). When travelling in a car with other Catholics, he often asked them to join him in saying the rosary.

After a few years at the Cathedral, in 1944 he became the second superior of the new Oblate scholasticate in Pietermaritzburg. This was something of a liberation for him, after the rather restrictive atmosphere of the Cathedral at that time. He became a member of the Pietermaritzburg Parliamentary Debating Society, which introduced him to a wide range of people and ideas and helped him to hone his public speaking and debating skills. He also introduced debating at the scholasticate. There was much discussion among the young South African priests on the staff about the injustices of South African society, but it was all on an intellectual rather than a practical or activist level.

At the end of 1946, when he was 31, Hurley was appointed bishop of the Natal Vicariate. This made him the youngest Catholic bishop in the world. He had no hesitation in accepting this high office, but later in life felt that he had been fifteen years too young. He was consecrated on 19 March 1947. His first major function, the very next day, was a reception for King George VI and Queen Elizabeth!

There were some murmurings of discontent about his appointment, particularly among the French priests, who thought that there should have been another French bishop and who were critical of the fact that Hurley could not speak Zulu and had little or no pastoral experience.

Early on in his ministry as bishop, as he went about the parishes, he heard how much suffering there was as a result of South Africa’s racial policies. He began to talk strongly about these issues in the Bishops’ Conference, though he was far younger than anyone else. It took him quite a long time to persuade the other bishops that they should jointly speak out against the many injustices prevalent in South African society. He was also opposed by the Apostolic Delegate, who chaired the bishops’ meetings and who did not want any rocking of the political boat at a time when the Roman Catholic Church was viewed in official circles as the “Roomse gevaar” (the Roman danger). One has to remember that the new white Nationalist Party, with its explicit apartheid policy and its Calvinist outlook, had come to power in 1948. There was a general fear among many leading Catholics that foreign priests and nuns would be deported if the bishops spoke out.

In his early years as bishop, Hurley became acutely aware that there was no money within the Natal Vicariate to build churches, schools and hospitals. Clearly people were looking to the new young bishop to make all these things possible. So he decided to travel to the USA, and he spent six months there, going round parishes and schools appealing for money for the missions. In this he was highly successful and managed to put in place sources of funding that are still crucial for what is now the Archdiocese of Durban. This period also did wonders for him in terms of increasing his confidence, and perhaps gave him an international perspective on South Africa’s racial situation which made him even more deeply convinced of the need to speak out against apartheid.

It was only after Hurley became an Archbishop, in 1951 – again he was the youngest in the world – and had succeeded the Apostolic Delegate as chair of the Bishops’ Conference that he was able to persuade the bishops to make their first joint statement against racial discrimination.

In the early 1950s the Catholic Church started to move out of the shadows. Until then it had kept a low profile, conscious of itself as representing a minority within the country. Hurley helped the Church to become more confident, a process greatly helped by the Marian Congress held in Durban in 1952; it celebrated the centenary of the foundation of the Catholic Church in Natal with the arrival of the first Oblates and was an unashamed public display of Catholicism of a kind not previously seen in South Africa.

At about this time, after much discussion and hesitation, the first joint statement on race relations was issued. Viewed in contemporary terms, it was rather patronising, but at last there was an official response by the Catholic Church to pressing racial issues.

What really brought the Catholic Church out of the shadows was the Bantu Education Act of 1953, designed partly to get the churches to hand their schools over to the government by depriving them of subsidies. The Catholic Church decided, rather more on religious than on political grounds, that it would not go along with this because the schools were its principal evangelising instrument. It chose to keep the schools and raise a large amount of money – what would be a hundred million rands in today's terms. It managed to perform this remarkable feat, partly by using North American fundraising techniques and partly through the vigorous leadership of Hurley as President of the Bishops' Conference. In opposing every aspect of Bantu Education, which treated Africans as inferior human beings, the bishops, led by Hurley, had some confrontational meetings with Dr Hendrik Verwoerd, who was then what was called the Minister of Native Affairs.

Another major joint statement about apartheid, largely written by Hurley, was produced in 1957. For the first time it described apartheid as "intrinsicly evil", the strongest possible condemnation in Catholic moral theology.

In addition to the clash about Bantu Education, another bruising confrontation was about the so-called "church clause" which attempted to give the government powers to say who could worship where. This really aroused the ire of the churches and there was a lot of talk about civil disobedience. Interestingly it was in response to a threat to church rights rather than to general human rights. Hurley thought that more noise should have been made about other apartheid legislation which was having a devastating effect on the lives of black people.

Hurley played a leading role in the Natal Convention, a significant meeting of people of all races which produced an impressive vision for a South Africa free of racial divisions. But unfortunately he was not able to participate fully in the attempt to follow up this meeting because at about this time he began to be involved in preparations for the Second Vatican Council, and was frequently away in Rome. In the long run, however, Vatican II would have a huge impact on the way the Catholic Church in South Africa would begin to really face up to the injustice of apartheid.

The Second Vatican Council

Before the Council Hurley had been involved in a whole new approach to religious education, or catechetics, in his role as the head of the bishops' Catechetical Commission. Hurley's dynamic leadership helped to get new syllabi and texts approved throughout the region under the jurisdiction of the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference (SACBC). He attended important catechetical conferences overseas and also led a major continental conference which urged the Church to use new methods of passing on the faith.

During the 1950s he was doing a lot of reading by some of the most progressive thinkers within the Catholic Church – for example, Jacques Maritain, Clifford Howell and Francis Xavier Durwell. He said that Durwell's book *The Resurrection* gave him a new understanding of the central mystery of our faith – the saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Traditional theology emphasizes the "saving death", but Durwell spoke of the liberating news of "new life" in the Resurrection. This influenced Hurley's spirituality and his appreciation of the Good News" of the Easter message . He was also excited by the writings of Teilhard de Chardin, who he said "won my heart completely." Later on, at the Council, he made a speech in Teilhard's praise.

Hurley's initial reaction on hearing about the calling of Vatican II was to wonder why a Council was necessary. When all the bishops were invited to send suggestions for the agenda, he didn't initially reply because he was too busy with other things. But later, when the invitation was repeated, he applied his mind to the issue, and produced a set of suggestions which were remarkably similar to the main points on the agenda that eventually emerged!

Pope John XXIII appointed Hurley to serve on the 101-member Central Preparatory Commission which was to finalise the agenda and to receive position papers from 14 commissions preparing for the Council. Hurley soon discovered that there was a considerable clash between the progressives and the conservatives in the Preparatory Commission. He made useful contacts with leading cardinals from major dioceses in Europe: Alfrink of the Netherlands, Frings of Germany, Lienart of France, and Konig of Austria. Though much younger than them and from an unknown and faraway diocese, he found himself on the same wavelength and well able to discuss important issues with them.

Hurley was highly frustrated by the way in which the conservatives were handling the preparations: they had no systematic approach, and the papers that they put forward were dull and reactionary. Many of these would later be rejected by overwhelming majority votes in the Council.

When the Council at last convened, in 1962, the conservatives tried to rush through the election of members for the various commissions which were to work on documents and decrees. But the delegates refused to be steamrolled into choosing without having a better knowledge of suitable candidates. Under the leadership of the powerful progressive cardinals mentioned earlier, the assembled bishops voted for a delay of a few days in order to get to know their fellow bishops. This was a crucial moment in the Council because it gave a clear sign that the bishops from around the

world were not going to allow themselves to be dictated to by a relatively small number of conservatives from the Curia. These curial officials thought that they would be able to dominate proceedings and that the bishops would simply accept the documents they had prepared and the commission members they favoured.

This was an aspect of the Council in which Hurley revelled – that the bishops discovered their power in this large assembly. He was also excited by the informal meetings that bishops had in the afternoons, when they were addressed by theologians, some of whom had previously been disciplined by the Vatican but who now had the bishops at their feet! He regarded this as a wonderful experiment in adult education. The reading he had been doing in the 1950s now all made much more sense and he was able to see how the Church could change. He became one of a relatively small group who were responsible for shaping what happened in the Council. He was chosen by Notre Dame Press as one of 24 Cardinals, Archbishops and Bishops who “made the Council”, each of whom had a booklet published about their life, ministry, ideas and role in the Council.

Hurley was excited, too, about meetings with journalists where the bishops present helped them to understand what was happening, and were in turn challenged by the questions journalists posed. One of these gatherings took place regularly on Sunday evenings in the apartment of the *Time* correspondent, Bob Kaiser. Hurley called it the “Bob Kaiser Academy”.

He also enjoyed the informal discussions that took place in the two coffee bars established in St Peter’s, popularly known as “Bar Jonah” and “Bar Abbas”. It was here that the real feelings and thoughts of the bishops could be heard, rather than in the long series of prepared speeches in Latin in the formal sessions. Nevertheless Hurley spoke a number of times in those sessions and it seems that he always made an impact.

He noticed that Pope John XXIII intervened on a few occasions to assist the progressives in the Council, whereas later on Pope Paul VI, who succeeded him in 1963, intervened on behalf of the conservatives, for example in keeping questions of clerical celibacy and birth control off the Council agenda.

Once it became clear to Hurley that the liturgy would soon be in vernacular languages, he thought it would be important to use the opportunity of having all the bishops of the English-speaking world in one place, to get people talking about the structures needed to take responsibility for the translation of Latin texts. He thus became one of a group of four or five English-speaking bishops and liturgical experts who were responsible for founding ICEL, the International Commission on English in the Liturgy. This body he would later chair for 16 years, and thus preside over some of the first translations of the missal and the sacramentary as well as the revised translation of 1998.

Once the Council formally came to an end, it became Hurley’s life-task to make sure that its decisions would be fully implemented, particularly in the Archdiocese of Durban, but more generally throughout the countries for which the SACBC was responsible, as well as throughout the Church as far as he was able to influence events.

Implementing Vatican II

But first he had to confront a situation in which one of his brother bishops, William Patrick Whelan, a fellow Oblate who was Archbishop of Bloemfontein, publicly crossed swords with him about whether the policy of apartheid (or “separate development” as the Nationalist government liked to call it) could be regarded as Christian. Whelan thought it could, while Hurley was adamant that it could not, and had recently said as much in one of his presidential addresses to a South African Institute of Race Relations conference. Whelan issued a statement of his own, and for a while there was considerable confusion as to the position of the Catholic Church in these matters. Behind closed doors at the bishops’ conference, the Apostolic Delegate engineered a resolution that ended the public squabble. The bishops’ conference did not back down on their rejection of apartheid, but Hurley was pained to discover in private conversations that many of his brother bishops were fairly lukewarm in their support of the stand that he had taken on this matter.

He faced a much bigger challenge when Pope Paul VI published *Humanae Vitae*, an encyclical which reiterated the Church’s traditional teaching on artificial birth control, despite the fact that it was widely known that most members of the Papal commission on this topic had voted in favour of the Church changing its teaching. Hurley made a press statement saying that he couldn’t honestly support the Pope’s view: this was a very serious step for an archbishop and it is one that he found it difficult to make. Many people feel that this was why he was never made a cardinal, a role for which he was eminently qualified. He too felt for the rest of his life that he had permanently excluded himself from this high office as a result of publicly expressing his disagreement with the Pope.

But he continued to be one of the most enthusiastic implementers of Vatican II decisions, especially in his own archdiocese and more generally throughout the territory of the SACBC, and even further afield through his leadership of ICEL. Some of the innovations for which he was responsible were the theological winter schools, his own extensive talks on Vatican II especially to nuns and priests, and promoting vernacular liturgy. He made many efforts to ensure that good liturgical music and appropriate hymns were available in English. One of his most striking contributions was being the first Catholic bishop in Southern Africa – maybe in the whole of Africa – to hold a diocesan synod, in 1968, just three years after the end of the Council.

The theme of that Synod was the importance of formation – more especially adult faith formation. Hitherto Christian formation was practically limited to catechising children. Hurley himself had undergone a process of adult formation during the years of the Council. Now he realised the importance of adult faith formation. Later he saw this formation taking place in small faith sharing groups so that the Church could become “a community of communities serving humanity.”

The way in which he began to respond to forced removals in South Africa showed a new activism. At Limehill in northern Natal, for example, he was present on the day of a forced removal and later helped the victims to erect shelters in the place to which they had been removed. He also challenged the minister responsible for the removals: “Before God, how can you bear the responsibility?” – a statement that infuriated the government.

He was also active in IMBISA (the Inter-Territorial Meeting of Bishops in Southern Africa), the new structure created to bring together all the bishops of Southern Africa, including those of Angola and Mozambique. He was widely praised for helping this body to remain united in spite of big differences especially between the Portuguese- and English-speaking blocs.

He was a concerned and challenging figure, too, at a succession of World Synods held in Rome. He found these events disappointing by comparison with the Council because they were tightly controlled by the Vatican. Listening to an endless series of unrelated eight-minute speeches he found unproductive: he, and others, had hoped for something much more creative and collegial and interestingly this may now become possible under the changes being made by Pope Francis.

In his leadership of ICEL with its various committees and its extensive use of liturgical experts Hurley was able to recreate something much more like the spirit of Vatican II. No wonder that in the last year of his 16 years as chair of this body it was given an award “as a model of collegiality for the universal church.” But there was a steadily increasing unhappiness in Vatican circles about the freedom of ICEL and its influence not only on English liturgy but on the liturgical translations of many other “smaller” languages, which tended to rely on ICEL’s English translations rather than the original Latin. Because of its American connections (that’s where the secretariat was based) ICEL had access to more funding and staffing than the Vatican’s own Congregation for Divine Worship; this may have been another source of their unhappiness.

Hurley was himself critical of some of the early translations which had been rushed in order to make vernacular liturgy available as early as possible, and he presided over the production of a modified new translation of the whole missal and sacramentary. But now, after an immense amount of work and financial investment, all this has been cast aside in favour of a completely new translation – one based on the theory of “formal equivalence” in which each phrase or word in the original Latin has to be matched by a phrase or word in English. This kind of translation is very different from those produced by ICEL in Hurley’s time, which aimed to capture the meaning in good contemporary English. A further difficulty with the latest translation is that, in its attempt to devise a formal “sacred” language, it makes use of words like “bestow” and “deign” which are no longer in common use.

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The fight against apartheid intensifies

Hurley is perhaps best known for his opposition to apartheid and his stand for justice. This was initially a rather academic and cerebral rejection of what he called the inherently evil policy of apartheid, but during the late 1960s, and throughout the 1970s, and even more so in the 1980s, he became known for his prophetic and often also very practical leadership, especially in relation to worker rights, trade unions, consumer boycotts, the active promotion of the open schools policy, and support for detainees and their families as well as for conscientious objectors. He also played a leading role in the establishment in Durban of Diakonia (now known as the Diakonia Council of Churches) and a significant supportive role in that of PACSA (the Pietermaritzburg Agency for

Christian Social Awareness); both bodies are among the most widely known civil society organisations in KwaZulu-Natal.

Hurley sprang to particular prominence when he was elected President of the SACBC in 1981, 30 years after his first spell as President. It was a time when powerful leadership was needed as resistance to apartheid intensified and a last-ditch attempt was made by the Nationalist Party to assert its power and cling to a policy that was clearly leading to disaster. Hurley was in many respects the right person at the right time. (There were other strong church leaders at the time, most notably Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984.) Hurley led the Catholic bishops in their opposition to celebrating the 20th anniversary of South Africa's becoming a republic. He also gave crucial support to the 1983 Lenten campaign of Misereor, the German Catholic Bishops' Organisation for Development Co-operation, which exposed German Catholics to the political crisis in South Africa as well as raising funds for South African justice and development projects.

He led a delegation of bishops to Namibia and ensured that their report pulled no punches in its rejection of the way South Africa was administering this territory. His public comments on the role of the "Koevoet" counter-insurgency unit was what finally caused the government to do something that they must have long wanted to do, namely to bring him to court and make him answer charges. However the massive local and international support for Hurley that these charges galvanised, as well as fears concerning the evidence assembled by Hurley's defence team particularly about a number of gruesome murders in Ovamboland, led the government to withdraw the charges just three days before the trial was due to commence. Of course there was relief that the Archbishop did not have to face a gruelling and probably drawn-out trial, but it was also recognised that if the trial had gone ahead it could have wonderfully showcased the Church's prophetic role, and Hurley would have been a superb witness.

From his earliest years of priestly ministry, as we saw earlier when he attended a meeting concerned with founding black trade unions while he was still a junior curate, Hurley had a particular sympathy for the plight of workers. In this he mirrored the concern for the under-privileged shown by Bishop Eugene de Mazenod, founder of the Oblate congregation. During his time as President of the SACBC this came to full flower when he declared that the bishops wanted "to throw the moral weight of the Church behind their struggle". He set up the "St Joseph the Worker Fund" to assist those who were penalised for their union activities, and made sure that no bureaucracy delayed the distribution of relief. He got the support of the bishops for making church facilities available for worker meetings. When hundreds of workers were dismissed for striking at the Dunlop factory in Howick he championed their cause and even made church land available to them for farming so that they could find a way to survive through a lengthy court battle in which they were eventually vindicated. A trade union leader said of him: "He put himself squarely into the shoes of the workers and walked along with all of us."

At this time there were some sharp disagreements among Catholics. Those of a conservative bent who believed that a bishop should have nothing to do with politics – such people were mainly whites – were very critical of Hurley. His stance was misunderstood, and he was accused of being more of a politician than a churchman. It was a difficult situation for him, but he endured the attacks with great patience and charity. He bore no malice in spite of unfair criticisms, and was always ready for

reconciliation: for example when some years later the Dutch Reformed Church admitted that apartheid had been a heresy, Hurley welcomed this without bearing any grudge about their previous attitudes.

His profound spiritual life was manifested in other ways. He would often be found in an attitude of prayer, at his desk, when there were major decisions to be made. He never asked for or demanded of others what he was not prepared to give or do himself. He was always tolerant of the faults and failings of his priests – and ever ready to forgive. He showed great generosity of spirit to opponents and critics. This rejection by many of his fellow white Catholics caused him much personal suffering. He found spiritual consolation in the writings of St Paul for whom he had great admiration: “We are in difficulties on all sides, but never cornered, we see no answer to our problems but never despair ... always wherever we might be, we carry with us in our body the death of Jesus ... so that death is at work in us, but life in you.” (2 Cor. 4:8-12)

In addition to the famous Namibian report that led to his being charged, another highly significant report coming from the bishops during Hurley’s presidency of the SACBC concerned police conduct in the Vaal Triangle. Hurley presented to the media the “Report on Police Conduct during Township Protests: August to November 1984.” He also led the bishops in a special visit to Sebokeng (one of the townships where police atrocities had been committed): the bishops processed through the streets on the way to celebrate a solidarity Mass with the local community. Sarah Crowe, a journalist working for the bishops’ conference, who had played an important role in producing the report on police conduct on the basis of numerous affidavits, said that she deeply admired Hurley’s courage in these actions. She added: “I think in another life he would have been a ... brilliant politician. He had very ... clear qualities of leadership and great oratorical skills.”

There was an important policy shift during Hurley’s presidency in the 1980s. The Church decided to move away from trying to influence white South Africans and persuade the government to change its ways: instead it came to accept that the external liberation movements and the internal UDF (the United Democratic Front) were the major force for change, and that the Church had to begin relating to them directly. Accordingly a delegation of bishops met the ANC in Lusaka, and the bishops adopted a policy in support of sanctions (though Hurley was ambivalent about this as he feared that the poor would be the worst hit as a result). He also devoted much effort to helping to mobilise the Church to a greater involvement in social justice issues. Many Christians, particularly whites, who had previously been largely indifferent to such issues, began to recognise their importance as the balance of power began to swing away from the government and towards the forces of change.

At the same time he lent his name to a significant court action calling for the release of a detainee on the basis that the police must have “reason to believe” that a person should be detained. If they had such a reason they should be able to make it known in a court of law. When the police refused to make known their reasons, the judge ordered that the detainee should be released. This was the first occasion on which a court ordered the release of a person detained under the country’s stringent security legislation. The “Hurley Case” is still studied by law students.

Hurley’s daring prophetic stance led to a number of actions being taken against him. Besides the charges brought against him as a result of the report on Namibia, he was frequently attacked by the government and by prominent right-wingers. He was also one of four church leaders (the others being Desmond Tutu, Allan Boesak and Wolfram Kistner) who were specially targeted for their “anti-

government” activities, as was revealed during the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. On one occasion his home was petrol-bombed, and it is said that Minister Jimmy Kruger had recommended to the cabinet that he be banned. In meetings with the ill-tempered State President, P W Botha, Hurley would regularly be dressed down by an irate finger-waving “Groot Krokodil” (big crocodile).

6

An active old age

Hurley’s last few years in office as Archbishop of Durban saw him devote much attention to the Bishops’ Pastoral Plan for the whole of South Africa. He chaired the special committee set up to lead this campaign and gave the plan the title “Community serving humanity”. He chose to use the “Renew Process” as the most effective way to introduce the pastoral plan to his own archdiocese, and was highly enthusiastic to see his people developing a new vision of what it meant to be the “People of God”, a favourite designation of Vatican II.

During this time, he also pioneered an HIV/AIDS ministry in the Archdiocese – the first Catholic bishop in South Africa to involve himself in this issue.

According to the Catholic Church’s policy he had to offer his resignation as Archbishop of Durban when he reached the age of 75, on 9 November 1990. He was asked to remain in office until his successor was appointed; this happened only in June 1992. Hurley continued even after that as administrator of the Archdiocese until Wilfrid Napier OFM, who had been Bishop of Kokstad, was installed as Archbishop on 4 October 1992.

Hurley’s farewell Mass was attended by about 10,000 people at Durban’s Exhibition Centre. The huge congregation gave him a rousing welcome as he arrived in procession with seventy priests, six bishops and Cardinal McCann of Cape Town for a three-hour service. Hurley had been the youngest Catholic bishop in the world at the time of his appointment. Now he was the longest serving of all 4.000 bishops. (Pope John Paul had recommended him as an example to the whole Oblate congregation for his courageous stand against apartheid.)

In his retirement Hurley became, at his own request, “Acting Parish Priest” of Emmanuel Cathedral, one of the most taxing jobs in the Archdiocese: the cathedral is besieged by the poor and the vulnerable. This was a remarkable task for the retired Archbishop to take on. It was the first time that he had been a parish priest, even though he had been a bishop for 45 years. Many stories are told of his kindness. He frequently gave to needy people out of his own pocket. He regularly went to visit a sick Cathedral parishioner in a block of flats where the lift was out of order. At his advanced age he did not shrink from climbing six flights of steps to reach the sick man.

He continued to serve on the SACBC as the liaison bishop for the Justice and Peace Commission, and later also for the Church and Work Commission. He remained active, too, on the KwaZulu-Natal’s Church Leaders’ Group, and enjoyed taking part in a number of their ecumenical attempts to bring about peace between the Inkatha Freedom Party and the UDF/ANC. By this time very much an “elder statesman” he was appointed joint chair of the Peace Accord structure for KwaZulu-Natal.

Another major tribute to his reputation as a unifying figure, respected by all communities at a difficult moment of social transition, was his selection as Chancellor of what was then the University of Natal, a role he fulfilled with distinction. The then Vice-Chancellor, Professor Brenda Gourley, described him as “the perfect Chancellor.”

The years after his retirement as Archbishop had their sadness too. He was troubled by seeing within the Church a retreat from the spirit of Vatican II, which he so cherished and to which he had made such a great contribution. He was especially disappointed by what he saw as the failure to implement the policy of collegiality, which would have given the bishops and ultimately all the people a greater role within the thinking and the actions of the Church. He was dismayed by the destruction of ICEL as he had known it and as he had helped to build it up from its inception during the Council. With Hurley no longer in office as archbishop and no longer Chair of ICEL, it was much easier for the Vatican to take action against a structure which they felt had gotten “out of hand”. He was appalled by the way staff members were treated after a lifetime of distinguished service to ICEL, and could not understand why the style of translation known as “dynamic equivalence”, which was what ICEL had used, in keeping with the official policy of the Church at that time, was being replaced by “formal equivalence”, which takes no account of the profound differences between languages.

Hurley was very articulate, and wrote many articles and gave many addresses, a number of which have been published. He has also been the subject of a full-length biography, published in the US, and a book of tributes by a wide range of people, edited by a Presbyterian pastor.

He was a saintly man, but not in any merely pious sense. He was warm-hearted, alert, thoughtful, sensitive, and often full of wit and humour. But, as we have said and as many of those who were close to him have testified, he was a man of prayer, with a deep spiritual life. He lived frugally, was always humble, and had a constant awareness of those in need. Shortly before he died he said to the Oblate Superior General: “You know, more and more I realise that love is the only thing that matters.”

In his final years Hurley grew very close to the Community of Sant’Egidio and greatly enjoyed invitations to attend their major gatherings in Rome and other European venues, and continued to do this right until the age of 88. He was delighted by the way in which, as a community founded in the spirit of Vatican II, they expressed and embodied the values of the Council. The Sant’Egidio members in turn revered him for the living link that he provided with the Council.

After nearly ten years as parish priest of Emmanuel Cathedral, Hurley retired to Sabon House, a retirement home for Oblate priests, and lived there with great humility and simplicity; he could have requested to have his own house and staff. At last he was able to give more time to writing his memoirs, a task which unfortunately he was able to complete only up to the end of Vatican II in 1965.

Just a few days after his return from a Sant’Egidio event in February 2004, having attended the golden jubilee of a Durban school that he had opened fifty years earlier, he died suddenly on 13 February. After several days in which his body lay in state in Emmanuel Cathedral and thousands came to pay their last respects, his requiem Mass was held at the Absa Stadium, attended by 5,000

people. The burial took place in the Lady Chapel of Emmanuel Cathedral, a church with which he had been closely associated since 1940.

Archbishop Hurley's tomb is visited by many local and overseas people, especially during the celebration of his life and witness held each year by Emmanuel Cathedral on the weekend closest to the anniversary of his death. Alongside the Cathedral, the "Denis Hurley Centre" is being built to focus on "Care, Education & Training, and Building Community" – aims dear to the late Archbishop – in one of the most challenging and diverse communities of the archdiocese that he served for 45 years.

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