

## 'The best cardinal Africa never had'

Robert Blair Kaiser | Aug. 19, 2009

### **Guardian of the Light: Archbishop Denis Hurley: Renewing the Church, Opposing Apartheid**

By Paddy Kearney

Published by Continuum, \$34.95

When I write my novel about Vatican II, one of its main characters will look a lot like Denis Hurley. He will be a bishop -- no, an archbishop. A very tall, very handsome, very well-spoken archbishop from South Africa. But he won't be a cardinal, because he will be the rarest kind of prelate, a man who tells the truth to power, even to the pope.

My imagination got running along these lines when I was racing this week through a new biography of the real Archbishop Hurley, one of my closest friends among the fathers of Vatican II. This magisterial work was written with loving care by Paddy Kearney. For three decades, Kearney headed a social action team in Durban, South Africa, called Diakonia, which Hurley founded.

In 1951, as chairman of the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference, Hurley drafted the first of a series of pastoral letters denouncing apartheid as "blasphemy" and "intrinsically evil." And then he put himself, body and soul, into a frankly political campaign to walk those ideas around the country. He marched in demonstrations alongside Desmond Tutu and Alan Paton. He encouraged Catholic schools to start admitting nonwhite students. He confronted Koevoet, the state security police, over its atrocities in Namibia, and found himself brought up on charges of sedition. (He beat the charges and won 25,000 rand from the state for malicious prosecution.)

At the age of 16, Hurley had been "very much a white boy," heading off in 1932 from his native Pietermaritzburg to priestly training in Ireland and then for seven years in Rome. There, he was captured by the social encyclicals of Popes Leo XIII and Pius XI. "We ate and slept and pondered over *Quadragesimo Anno*," Hurley recalled, side by side with dusky seminarians from Sri Lanka whom he accepted as equals. He did his graduate thesis on the banks and big mining companies of South Africa, skewering them for their oppression of the poor and working classes.

Back in Durban, in his first assignment as a curate in the cathedral, Hurley was puzzled to find the ruling party moving Durban's 69,000 Africans, 8,000 people of mixed ethnic descent, 87,000 Indians, and 92,000 whites toward a strict separation of the races. Hurley saw the policy (with his new Roman eyes) as an abomination, but he found that white congregations didn't want to hear his ideas.

Then Rome made him a bishop. He was just 31, the youngest bishop in the Catholic universe, and shortly after that an archbishop. He spoke four languages, he was zealous, and, at 6 feet 4 inches, he had a presence. All he needed was a postgraduate course in Catholicism, which he soon received as a delegate to the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). There, he learned from the church's greatest theologians, and he hobnobbed with bishops like Hélder Câmara of Recife, Brazil, who were speaking on the need for a church to encourage Catholics everywhere to seek justice for the poor.

After the council, Hurley added a confident new voice to the struggle of Nelson Mandela and others in their long fight for racial equality. Much of this book details Hurley's efforts to help create a more just society in South Africa.

*NCR* readers may also be fascinated with Hurley's attempt to make Pope Paul VI a listening pope. Kearney prints an exchange of letters between Hurley and the pope shortly after *Humanae Vitae*. Hurley writes that the pope "should not be laying down laws for the community without a good knowledge of the needs and conditions of the community." Paul VI reacts defensively and falls back on his own authority. "We took upon Ourselves," he writes to Hurley, "the responsibility, which pertains to Our supreme ministry, of declaring on the point at issue, what is the law of God."

Jesuit Fr. Walter Burghardt wasn't sure that when it came to marital questions, the pope had any special information about "the law of God." In 1974, he asked Hurley to write a piece for his quarterly *Theological Studies* on "Population Control and the Catholic Conscience." In that article, Hurley said the magisterium should "move heaven and earth" to change a social situation where white exploitation results in illegitimate births for 60 percent of the blacks in his own nation. Otherwise, the church would have no right to teach. When word about the impending piece reached Rome, the Vatican's secretary of state asked Burghardt to kill it. Burghardt had to tell him his request was a day late: The issue had just gone to press.

The Vatican's No. 2 man told Hurley that because of what he had written in *Theological Studies*, he would cancel his membership in the bishops' synod of 1974. If you do that, Hurley replied, he would tell the world why. The Vatican backed off, and Hurley went to that synod -- and to a number of other synods where he kept affirming the need for Rome to listen to the bishops in the boondocks.

Toward the end of his life, on Dec. 15, 2002, Hurley attended the ordination of two women (a priest and a deacon) at St. Thomas's Anglican Church in Durban, participated in the liturgical procession, sat in the sanctuary for the service, addressed the congregation, and, in the sanctuary after the ceremony, kissed the new deacon and the new priest. "Don't tell the pope," he wrote, reporting the event to a friend. Another friend asked him when such an event might happen in the Catholic church. He replied, "When I get to heaven, I shall do my best to promote the idea."

Kearney's account of Hurley's struggle with Rome over the International Commission for English in the Liturgy is worth the price of the whole book. As chairman, Hurley fought the commission's battles with Rome for more than three decades, mainly over the rights of English-speaking Catholics to pray in their own language and their own idiom. In July 2001, the Congregation for Divine Worship declared an end to that battle with *Liturgiam Authenticam*. That document not only put aside the commission's work, it replaced its collegial structure with two Vatican-appointed commissions of English-speaking cardinals and bishops who knew how to take orders from Rome. Soon, Hurley resigned as the South African bishops' representative on the commission.

Hurley never did get a red hat nor did he expect one. He didn't need a red hat to shepherd his flock in Durban for 41 years, lead in the fight against apartheid, and bring the lessons of Vatican II home to his fellow Catholics.

Which is why Julian Filochowski, director of Catholic Agency for Overseas Development, a hunger-fighting organization in the United Kingdom, called Hurley "the best cardinal Africa never had."

[Robert Blair Kaiser, the author of *Cardinal Mahony: A Novel*, covered Vatican II for *TIME* magazine.]

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