

## *Archbishop Denis Eugene Hurley OMI (1915–2004)*

Archbishop Denis Hurley OMI of Durban died suddenly of cardiac arrest on 13 February 2004 at the age of 88. He had just returned from celebrating the golden jubilee mass of Fatima Convent, Durban North, a school which he had opened in 1954. He died peacefully in the car in which he had been driven back to his retirement home, Sabon House, in Congella.

In his childhood and youth Denis Hurley had profound experiences of light and darkness which were to shape his whole life.

The son of an Irish lighthouse keeper father and a pious Irish mother, he grew up at a succession of lighthouses along the South African coast: Cape Point, Robben Island, East London, Clansthal (near Umkomaas).



*Archbishop Denis Hurley*

While a pupil at St Thomas' School, Newcastle he was lost in a cave with two other boys for 20 hours. They lost their way when young Denis stumbled and dropped their torch. In the total darkness of that cave, deep underground, Denis made a promise that if they came out alive he would become a priest – a promise kept with the utmost fidelity.

Having matriculated at St Charles' College, Pietermaritzburg, he was sent to Ireland for his basic training in the missionary congregation, the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, and then to Rome where he completed licentiates in philosophy at the Angelicum and theology at the Gregorian University, and where he was ordained in 1939.

His encounters in Rome with brilliant black students from other countries were an eye-opener for the young Hurley who had grown up with typical white South African attitudes of that time. He made a special study of the Catholic Church's social teaching and keenly discussed with his fellow-students the Young Christian Workers' 'See-Judge-Act' method, perhaps the major influence of all his overseas study.

Returning to South Africa in July 1940 he was assigned to Durban's Emmanuel Cathedral, and his intellectual ability led to his being chosen at the age of 29 to head the new St Joseph's Scholasticate in Pietermaritzburg, where young Oblates were prepared for the priesthood. He honed his public speaking skills and sharpened his engagement with social issues by regularly taking part in Pietermaritzburg's parliamentary debating society.

On the retirement of Bishop Henry Delalle OMI, the 31-year old Father Hurley succeeded him as bishop in 1947, the youngest Catholic bishop in the world at that time. For his motto he selected the scripture verse 'Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom', with its relevance to the South African situation clearly in mind.

Just five years later the Vatican promoted him to the rank of archbishop, once again the youngest in the world. 'I found myself in a lift that was going up,' he said of this spectacularly rapid rise. In 1952 his brother bishops elected him to chair the Southern

African Catholic Bishops' Conference, a position he held until 1961. Under his leadership the conference began to speak out against apartheid in major joint statements drafted by Hurley in 1952 and 1957, the latter describing apartheid as 'inherently evil' many years before the World Alliance of Reformed Churches declared it a 'heresy'.

In the early 1950s, in response to Verwoerd's Bantu Education Act which deprived church schools of government subsidies, Hurley spearheaded a campaign to raise funds that would keep these schools going for a number of years – a significant act of defiance of apartheid policy which did not go unnoticed by the government or by the black majority.

Hurley became ever bolder in his opposition to apartheid, addressing protest meetings about draconian legislation, the first Catholic bishop to be seen on such platforms in South Africa.

The great highlight of Hurley's life was the Second Vatican Council, a major policy-making conference of the world's 2 500 Catholic bishops (1962–1965). Chosen by Pope John XXIII to be one of the 25-member Central Preparatory Commission for the Council, he worked closely with Europe's leading cardinals to ensure a progressive direction for this gathering.

After the Council Hurley promoted its vision with great enthusiasm in his own archdiocese and more generally in South Africa: fostering a new system of religious education for young people, making public worship more understandable and participatory, drawing laypeople into structures of consultation and decision-making. The Archdiocese of Durban became internationally known for its implementation of Vatican II documents.

The Council had broadened his vision and made him aware that many Third World bishops faced similar struggles. He began to realise that what he had been doing enjoyed the support of the overwhelming majority of the world's bishops. This gave him a new confidence to adopt a more activist role in his opposition to apartheid.

In his capacity as President of the SA Institute of Race Relations (1965, 1966) he gave major addresses, most notably 'Apartheid: Crisis of Christian Conscience', a masterly demolition of 'separate development'.

But Hurley was also moving away from a purely academic opposition. When the Limehill removal was threatened, he not only denounced the government proposal, but was present in solidarity on the day of the removal, frequently visited the people to hear their problems, and published a list of the small children who died as a result of the uprooting. The cabinet minister responsible for the forced removal was outraged.

When in 1974 the government made it illegal to call for conscientious objection to military service, despite the threat of severe penalties, Hurley openly supported the South African Council of Churches' resolution on the subject, identified himself with conscientious objectors, and gave evidence in court on their behalf.

Hurley frequently called for church campaigns to end apartheid, but was often disappointed by a poor response. He learnt that for an effective response, the church needed to be organised. This meant structures, budget and fulltime staff for justice and peace work. Thus he founded Diakonia in 1976 to help Durban churches pool their efforts.

Having publicly backed the integration of church schools from the early fifties, Hurley was delighted when in 1976 some nuns began to admit black pupils to white schools,

despite the law. His vigorous defence of their action helped prevent the government from closing the schools.

Elected president of the SA Catholic Bishops' Conference for two further terms (1981–1987), Hurley was scathing in his criticism of police and army misconduct in the Vaal Triangle and in Namibia. Remarks he made about the Koevoet special police unit led to his appearing in the dock for defamation, the first time in 30 years that any archbishop had been charged. The charges were dropped when it became clear the state would be severely embarrassed by the evidence Hurley's legal team had assembled.

With the backing of Durban's Legal Resource Centre in 1985 he successfully applied for the release of a Section 29 detainee, the first-ever court ordered release of this kind. Law students still study the ground-breaking case of 'Hurley and Another vs the Minister of Law and Order'.

Workers too enjoyed Hurley's powerful support. He let them meet in church premises to keep united during the Frame Group strikes of 1980 and donated church land to the dismissed Sarmcol workers for income generation in 1985. 'We want to throw the moral weight of the church behind their struggle' he said of the unions.

There has been a price for Hurley's high-profile stand for justice – much criticism from inside and outside the church. KwaZulu-Natal MPC Brian Edwards called him an 'ecclesiastical Che Guevara', Minister of Justice, Jimmy Kruger, seriously considered banning him, President PW Botha angrily wagged his finger at him during a meeting with a delegation of bishops, and Hurley's house was petrol-bombed. Truth and Reconciliation Commission investigations revealed that along with four other church leaders, including Desmond Tutu, he was regarded as one of the state's 'most wanted' political opponents – against whom the security police had to resort to smears and dirty tactics because banning and detentions were not an option for such high level clerics.

Hurley was also criticised by the left, for declining to endorse the Kairos Document (1985) and the Road to Damascus (1989), statements of liberation theology which he felt were too soft on the use of violence. Some were also disappointed about his reluctance to be associated with 'red flags' in Durban's Freedom March on 22 September 1989.

One of Hurley's last efforts while in office as archbishop was to inspire and lead a major church programme, entitled 'Community Serving Humanity'. This draws on Latin American models of small groups meeting regularly all over South Africa for Bible sharing, prayer, reflection and social action.

Having completed 45 years as bishop of Durban, almost the whole period of Nationalist Party rule, Hurley was succeeded by Bishop (now Cardinal) Wilfrid Napier OFM in 1992. Hurley chose to become parish priest of Emmanuel Cathedral, one of Durban's poorest and most difficult inner-city parishes where he remained until 2002. Thereafter he moved to Sabon House, a retirement home for priests where he began to devote more time to his memoirs.

From 1993 to 1998 Hurley was Chancellor of Natal University, one of ten universities which had given him honorary doctorates. The cities of Durban and Pietermaritzburg honoured him as a freeman. He was also decorated by the governments of France, Italy and South Africa, receiving the Order of Meritorious Service (1st Class) from President Nelson Mandela.

Many have asked why Hurley was not made a Cardinal. The reason isn't hard to find. Just as he openly criticised apartheid, so he took positions, for example on birth control and the ordination of women, which were not popular with the Vatican. His opposition to apartheid was also regarded by the Vatican as too political.

For the first 14 years of his life, Denis Hurley watched his highly disciplined and responsible father work at lighthouses along the South African coast, ensuring that they never failed to warn and guide passing ships. At the age of 13 Denis was himself lost in the total darkness of an underground cave. He was absorbing lessons that were to last a lifetime – courageously, consistently and with the utmost clarity to let his own light shine. And with this light he helped guide the Catholic Church into the modern world, and helped bring South Africa safely to our new democracy.

Arise, be enlightened, O Jerusalem,  
for your light has come,  
and the glory of the Lord is risen upon you.  
For behold, darkness shall cover the earth,  
and thick darkness the people;  
but the Lord will rise upon you,  
and his glory will be seen upon you.

*(Composed by DE Hurley)*