

EXCURSUS I

The Pope, Amin, and Human Rights

Why would Pope Paul VI receive in audience, as he did, General Idi Amin of Uganda, one of the most erratic, cruel, and bloody rulers of our time? The question is especially troubling when put into the context of the admirable study paper on the Church and Human Rights that the Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace issued not long before that audience.

Thomas Patrick Melady, the last U.S. Ambassador to Uganda, wrote of Amin in the May issue of *Worldview*: "Amin will rank near to Hitler in terms of his crimes against humanity. This classification will probably not upset him, since he has publicly stated his fondness for the butcher of Europe." Amin is a ruler who has presided over many tortures and killings (with a preference for the sledgehammer), who sent a telegram to Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim endorsing Hitler's policy of genocide against the Jews, and who brutally expelled many thousands of Asians from Uganda. He has violated almost every human right his imagination and power could encompass.

And yet on September 10 of this year Pope Paul met with Amin. Is there anything in the document on the Church and Human Rights that provides a context within which that meeting makes sense?

The study paper is extensive; it covers a lot of territory: theological, ecclesiastical, social, and political. It acknowledges that the Church itself must be kept under constant scrutiny, and also that, given the various conditions to which it speaks, it becomes increasingly difficult for the Church to issue a single statement that has universal validity. Nevertheless the rights of the person must be asserted by members of the Church, acting both individually and communally. "Human rights, deriving from man's human and intrinsically social nature, are not merely humanitarian rights or, as some people believe, nonpolitical rights, but rather have a content and political implications."

Ways in which members of the Church can work positively and constructively to promote human rights within their own communities are outlined. This is the most important and necessary work, but the document also stresses the need for political protest. "The defense of human rights to which the Church is committed implies protest against any violation of these rights, past or present, temporary or permanent. This is all the more necessary when the victims of such injustice cannot defend themselves." Surely this applies to Amin and the eleven million people under his harsh control.

But, recalling that no single formulation will

apply to all situations, the document also says that denunciation is not the only way to set things right. "...where local political conditions are unfavorable and where open protest would expose individuals to further repression by governments, some way must be found of expressing the universal church's concern for intolerable conditions of this sort."

And we are back to making the hard discriminatory judgment about this act, this meeting, at this time. What are the dangers avoided and what are the benefits gained by the meeting of Paul VI and Amin? Much of the answer here must be speculative. For the public meeting was formal and polite. But one must assume that Amin was told in definite terms that the Church was concerned for what was happening in a country that was mostly Christian, that it was, in fact, concerned for all Ugandans, who are all equally children of God. That the Church would continue to observe, and counsel, and comment. That the Church would do what it could to promote human rights in Uganda and denounce their violation.

And the disadvantages of the meeting? All too apparent. For the meeting supports an anarchical view of world affairs, the view that a ruler can, with impunity, commit within his own country whatever barbarous acts his power will allow without hindrance from the outside. That not even the spiritual leader of vast numbers of Christians will publicly protest well-documented atrocities. That human rights can be trampled on with little political reaction.

Or so it looks from this distance. In Rome it may look different, and there may be specific benefits that are not apparent. But then, most people view the meeting from some distance, and the benefits can hardly be more apparent to them. The meeting between Pope Paul and Amin would seem to be a mistake. And while the Pope has elsewhere said that "Mere denunciation, often too late or ineffective, is not sufficient," it would seem to be appropriate in the case of Amin.

Another noted Catholic leader, President Julius K. Nyerere of Tanzania, publicly rebuked Amin and the Organization of African Unity (OAU) before the twelfth annual meeting of that group early in August. Refusing to go to Uganda where the meeting was held, Nyerere undoubtedly had a hand in a governmental statement which said that "We are convinced the OAU will deserve the condemnation of the world and the peoples of Africa as an organization of hypocrites, if it acquiesces, or appears to acquiesce, in the murders and massacres which have been perpetuated by the present Ugandan government." More recently, in early October, the chief U.S. representatives at the U.N., including Ambassador Patrick Moynihan, absented themselves from formal U.N. occasions at which Amin was to be honored.

These instances show it is not too late to protest his atrocities, not too late to protest them in Rome, in the councils of the Third World countries, and in the U.N. The document on the Church and Human Rights offers pertinent suggestions about paths that one could well follow.

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EXCURSUS II

The World Council at Nairobi

As this issue of *Worldview* comes from the press, delegates to the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches are packing their bags to go to Nairobi. But longer than the journey that most of the 750 representatives of 241 member churches must make to the Kenyan capital is the journey the Council itself has made since its inauguration in Amsterdam in 1948.

The mostly North Atlantic founding fathers, establishment to the core, met in solemnity to celebrate the tenuous, fragile, yet joyous sense of oneness in faith they had discerned beyond the national, cultural, and racial barriers that divided and often ravaged the quarrelsome family of man. Yet like the Americans of 1776 and 1781, and the delegates to San Francisco in 1945, they seem to have planned more wisely than they knew. Along with the American Republic and the United Nations, ecumenism as exemplified in the World Council not only survived but thrived. The Second Assembly in Evanston, Illinois, in 1956 expanded and solidified the Council as a major counterforce to the religious rancor and scandalous disunity that had persisted so tragically long.

New Delhi, 1961, brought the integration of the International Missionary Council and the massive accession of the principal Orthodox churches, including the Russian. This pale harbinger of détente earned the Council the permanent enmity of religious cold warriors, mostly American, who proceeded to parlay their paranoia into fame and fortune as professional Council-baiters. Unfortunately, they managed to snare numbers of sincere and simple Christians along with their full quota of the gullible, the unstable, and the natural-born chauvinists who leaped to seize their bait.

Sometimes irritated, but not deterred, the WCC made its way to the Fourth Assembly in Uppsala, Sweden, 1968, by way of the Geneva conference on Church and Society. There the voices of Third World Christians sounded loud and clear, and a plea for the much greater involvement of the churches in helping to meet the real physical and

social needs of real persons was heeded. "Development" was the watchword. But development in the context of the knowledge that all human systems are imperfect and tend to embody and perpetuate injustice. And there was the wise reminder of the former General Secretary Willem A. Visser 't Hooft at Uppsala that the vertical, transcendent dimension of Christianity must always accompany (and judge) the horizontal, social dimension that was being stressed both as a corrective to past neglect and as a response to the vast needs of humanity.

It is intriguing to compare the development of the World Council of Churches with that of the United Nations, its slightly older sibling on the international scene. Both represent at least the partial incarnation of large dreams, both began with a high degree of Western sponsorship and control, both in essence and in program tried to counteract the harmful effect of centuries of rivalry, suspicion, and unilateralism among their members. Both fostered the independence of the previously dependent (colonies or "missions"), and both, despite the fears and warnings of their more timid supporters, survived the tensions and traumas related to their rapid growth in numbers and diversity.



Now both are facing an aroused world for which they themselves have been alarm clocks. The legitimate, indeed essential, demands of the world's poorer peoples have coalesced under the banner of a new international economic order in the one case and in the cry for liberation in the other.

Perhaps particularly significant just now, both have suffered from massive public inattention to the 90 per cent or more of their work in relieving suffering and advancing the general welfare while the spotlight has played nervously on geographical and ideological confrontations in the political arena. There is no doubt that some of the confrontations were and are genuine and deep, but it is equally true that some of them have been grossly exaggerated for whatever open or devious reasons of the exaggerators.