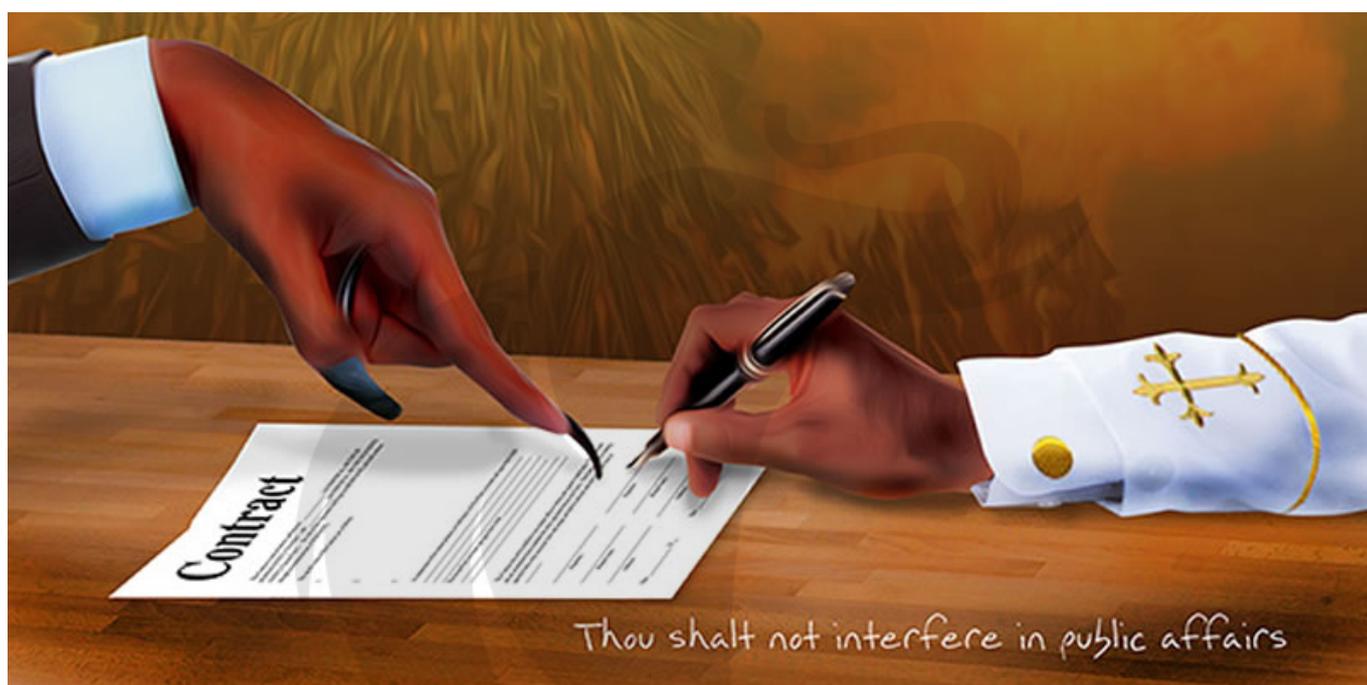




Church Fails Kenyans! Big on Charity, Small on Justice

By Gabriel Dolan



THE POPE THAT REFRESHES

There is something extremely refreshing about the leadership of Pope Francis. He is spontaneous, humble, simple, direct and at times deliberately undiplomatic. His incisive off-the-cuff comments together with his focused acts of kindness to prisoners and the homeless must make his handlers very uncomfortable, yet he touches the hearts and minds of just about everyone.

Francis offers his model of the Church in a clear and frank manner when he says, 'I prefer a Church that is bruising, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security' (Joy of the Gospel Article 49). He is in fact saying that he wants a church that is relevant in the real world rather than one that is locked up in the security and comfort of the sacristy. He wants engagement rather than caution and rejects the false security of outdated structures that prevent us from seeing the suffering in our midst.

The Pope is just reminding everyone what it means to be light and salt to the world (Mt 6) in the 21st century. However, one suspects that his style of leadership is not welcomed or appreciated by the vast majority of prelates around the world. He visited Kenya in November 2015 and spoke boldly in

Kangemi about the dreadful injustice of urban exclusion and the wounds that are caused by 'minorities who cling to power and wealth, who selfishly squander while a growing majority is forced to flee to abandoned, filthy and rundown peripheries.' There are hundreds of Kangemis all over Kenya.

Francis's brave words in the Kangemi slum made little or no impact on the civil and religious authorities. His advice and challenges had been forgotten before he got back to Rome. The city of Nairobi did not pursue an urban renewal plan and the Catholic Church did not pressurise them to respond appropriately either

His brave words, however, made little or no impact on the civil and religious authorities. His advice and challenges had been forgotten before he got back to Rome. The city of Nairobi did not pursue an urban renewal plan and the Catholic Church did not pressurise them to respond appropriately either. The chance was gone. The pastoral visit may have encouraged the faithful but did not bring the transformational change that Francis would have hoped for.

Kenya is regarded as one of the most corrupt and unequal societies on the planet and most accept that almost as a badge of honour without demonstrating any outrage or shame. The churches provide services to the victims of inequality but are generally silent on questioning a system that allows such injustices to emerge and develop. Churches are big on charity but weak on confronting the root causes of injustice.

The churches in Kenya are well established professional outfits; however, that same level of professionalism may limit their ability to confront the authorities. They are in fact regarded as part of the establishment and so are hesitant to demand an overhaul or even a review of the status quo. For a number of reasons, church and state are cosy partners in the management of this nation.

Regretfully, the same problems that haunt society in general are also found within the churches and that limits their ability to speak prophetically on the issues that bedevil citizens. Most churches have proved unable to confront the twin evils of ethnicity and corruption because they too are plagued with these problems. This may disappoint us but should not be surprising, as they are human institutions even if they claim to be divine in origin.

It is not unreasonable to expect churches to transcend their ethnic differences and to witness to something bigger than the morass that is found in the political sphere. Weak, generalised statements on matters of national importance indicate a lack of collegiality in their leadership

However, it is not unreasonable to expect churches to transcend their ethnic differences and to witness to something bigger than the morass that is found in the political sphere. Weak, generalised statements on matters of national importance indicate a lack of collegiality in the leadership of the churches. They demonstrate an absence of common ground for the common good on the issues that bedevil the nation.

GENERALISED, VAGUE STATEMENTS THAT ARE FORGOTTEN IN 24 HOURS

Again, there is a great reluctance by churches to identify and speak out on specific instances of theft of public funds. These are never named by the churches nor are the perpetrators challenged to resign and face prosecution. So we get generalised, vague statements that are forgotten in 24 hours.

Despite the mega corruption scandals of the past three decades, the churches have not made any significant contribution towards confronting the rot even though they meet the victims of grand corruption on a daily basis in their congregations.

Corruption is rife in every sector of society and the churches too have issues of looting and accountability that they have not addressed in an open and transparent manner. Travel around the country and Christians of all denominations will relate horrific stories of theft of funds with the only penalty being the transfer of the offender to another area where most likely they will commit similar offences. Of course, religion is also a growth industry and a good business venture for those who failed in other spheres.

This is not to suggest that religious leaders as a whole are just as corrupt as the political class. However, their unwillingness to address internal issues of corruption when they do arise means that they lack the dependability and respect to speak consistently and with conviction when the public coffers are looted. Of course the political class are equally aware of religious leaders' inconsistency so they know they are not a real threat to them and that that weakness can even be converted into a resource for the politicians at critical moments.

Many speak of a golden era when the church leadership spoke frequently, consistently and with a single voice on the issues of the day. That, of course, was during the Moi era when the injustices and abuses were more blatant and the state more belligerent

Politicians know that many church leaders have bank debts, skeletons in the cupboard and recurring expenditure needs in their jurisdiction. That is the reason they come for prayers together with a bevy of media and why their large contributions towards church fundraisers buy silence and support. Because overseas funding for church activities is drying up, many religious cannot resist the political handouts even when they have grave suspicions about the origin of these funds. But that is the trap and they lose their integrity even when they use the hand-outs for a legitimate cause.

Many speak of a golden era when the church leadership spoke frequently, consistently and with a single voice on the issues of the day. That, of course, was during the Moi era. Times were different then. The injustices and abuses were more blatant and the state more belligerent. When we recall the political assassinations, illegal detentions, torture chambers, rigged polls, a one-party state, a partisan judiciary and a mute legislature, we realise it took courage to speak as a group and with consistency. However, it was easy to find unity on those horrific crimes and injustices. The outrage and desire for change united the churches and pasted over the many differences that existed within their own ranks.

KIBAKI WINS, THE CLERGY LET DOWN THEIR GUARD

The churches relaxed and let down their guard when Mwai Kibaki came to power in 2002. They felt their job was done and they could return to their houses of worship and do what they were ordained to do. However, their job was only half done as the new Constitution was not in place and corruption and negative ethnicity - the twin legacy of the Moi era - were as rampant as ever, with cartels driving both vices.

Prophetic leadership not only demands that one transcend the issues that prevent development but that the majority are included in the new vision. A pro-poor agenda would unite Kenyans of all faiths and none

Since 2002, the churches have never quite recovered, nor found a voice again in the public arena. Partly, that was because the church leadership had passed on to new, inexperienced and occasionally authoritarian, ambitious hands that were quite comfortable with the way Kibaki led the country. A further reason was that the failure to implement the MOU between Mwai Kibaki and Raila Odinga divided many religious groupings along ethnic and political lines. Just as the politicians could not hold together, neither could the religious bodies and it has been well-nigh impossible to put Humpty Dumpty together again.

So what is the way forward, particularly around this election period? Of course, the churches will be active in civic education and election observation. However, such activities are often just side shows not impacting on the campaign agenda and lacking the strength and professionalism to give them a credible, independent standpoint if the presidential ballot is contested. So they may appear to be busy but their impact will be limited.

Perhaps a much greater role could be played by churches if they together with other faiths present a pro-poor agenda that impacts on the campaign debates. They can act to offer hope that the masses can receive a proper share of the nation's wealth and in the process reduce poverty drastically

This, of course, would require a well-resourced think tank on social and economic affairs that offers solutions and programmes with regard to employment, taxation, investment, housing, land use etc. An urgent realistic agenda that would be binding on the political parties is required. In the process, issues of ethnicity and hate speech would be cast aside as politicians find themselves compelled to respond to an agenda that has been set outside their circles of influence. Of course such an attractive agenda would also reduce tension and assist in creating national dialogue around the matters that are of everyday concern to citizens.

The corruption agenda is another ever-present elephant in the room. Yet even if faiths cannot fight this malignant cancer alone, they have such large constituencies that they can at least confront the apathy that exists with regards to mega graft

Prophetic leadership not only demands that one transcend the issues that prevent development but that the majority are included in the new vision. A pro-poor agenda would unite Kenyans of all faiths and none.

There are several other issues that churches should address that would bring transformational change. Extrajudicial killings have become a hallmark of the current regime. Its elaborate propaganda machine has also won over public opinion on this subject. The message relayed is that suspects, criminals and terrorists deserve to die and that the rule of law does not apply to them. However, if Muslim and Christian leaders spoke on the right to life of all suspects they could force the security machinery to be accountable and law-abiding and thus enhance the safety of citizens.

The corruption agenda is another ever-present elephant in the room. Yet even if faiths cannot fight this malignant cancer alone, they have such large constituencies that they can at least confront the apathy that exists with regards to mega graft. They must enlighten their faithful on the destruction that corruption visits on the economy and public services and indeed the soul of the nation.

BYSTANDERS OFFERING MERCY WHEN CALAMITY OCCURS?

So will the faiths be faithful to their mission and calling or will they be left sitting on the fence ready to host those displaced by a disputed election outcome? In other words, will they be proactive in giving leadership and setting the agenda or will they be bystanders offering mercy when calamity

occurs? Time will tell.

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