Sudan’s bishops raise alarm on southern secession vote

James Roberts and Francis Njoguna

CATHOLIC BISHOPS in Sudan have issued a warning that the country is seriously under-prepared for the most important vote in its history, due in less than six months’ time.

On 9 January 2011, the people of southern Sudan are due to vote in a referendum on whether the mainly Christian south should secede from the mainly Muslim north, and so become independent of the Khartoum regime of President Omar al-Bashir. Mr Bashir was indicted this month by the International Criminal Court for alleged genocide in the northern region of Darfur, but the January referendum in the south is connected to another Sudanese conflict. It forms part of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) that ended the 19-year civil war between north and south in 2005. Two million people died in that war, mainly from starvation, and four million lost their homes. The CPA stipulated that a referendum on secession would be held next January.

The bishops have drawn attention to the main obstacles standing in the way of a fair and credible vote in January. One of the most serious has to do with voter registration. Voter eligibility has not been clarified, they point out, and registration has not even begun. Voter education has barely started, the referendum commission has hardly begun its work, and referendum procedures have not been laid down.

Without urging a vote one way or the other, in their letter issued after a 15-22 July meeting in the southern capital of Juba, the bishops point out the circumstances that might persuade southerners to seize the chance to secede. “A unity which binds and oppresses, prohibits all opposition, a unity which imposes uniformity and condemns those who differ in faith and culture must be rejected,” they insist, with obvious reference to Khartoum’s track record of torture, oppression and massive contravention of human rights. If unity is to be an option, the bishops say, “it must be a unity embracing all, in a just, free and open society, where the human dignity of every citizen is safeguarded and respected.” But they do not hold back from pointing out the dangers of a “yes” vote for secession. If self-determination is chosen, they say, “How will the precious values of honesty and integrity, tolerance and respect, compassion for the weak and poor, be upheld and guaranteed? How will good governance and the rule of law be assured? How will the dignity of the human person and the common good be respected and protected?”

Yet, because of the lack of preparation, there is a danger that southerners may lose their right to self-determination altogether. While a simple majority of 50 per cent plus one of all votes cast would ratify secession, there is also a requirement that 60 per cent of registered voters must cast their vote in order for secession to take place. If fewer than 60 per cent cast their votes, the status quo (unity) continues. “We fear that this voter turnout condition may lead to confusion and manipulation,” the bishops say.

The registration of voters residing outside southern Sudan – mainly in the north – presents real problems in establishing voter eligibility and monitoring the legitimacy of the process, they point out. Clearly here the issues surrounding the registration and voting intentions of non-resident southerners will be crucial. The many thousands of southerners currently living in squalor around Khartoum will face not only registration problems but also very serious security anxieties at the time of the referendum.

Moreover, the question of who will benefit from Sudan’s considerable oil reserves remains highly problematic. Southern Sudan produces less than 10 per cent of the country’s oil, which contributes around 70 per cent of total Sudanese exports. Khartoum is not simply going to surrender its main source of income. But precisely how oil revenues will be distributed in the event of secession remains unresolved. The fact that the demarcation of the north-south border is not complete, and the undemarcated areas include oil fields, is worrying the bishops. And the prospect of oil riches in the south is obviously already providing a predictable cause of conflict among would-be beneficiaries.

Rome to discipline priests who lead ‘double lives’

Robert Mickens

THE VICARIATE of Rome has called on gay priests who are leading “double lives” of sexual promiscuity to leave the priesthood, and has warned them that it will crack down on “any behaviour that is unworthy of priestly life”.

The strongly worded statement was issued on 23 July just hours after one of Italy’s leading current affairs magazines, Panorama, published an expose of three Rome-based priests whom it secretly filmed in gay locales in the capital and engaging in casual sex.

The vicariate is headed by Cardinal Agostino Vallini, who administers the Diocese of Rome on behalf of the Pope. In its statement, it said Panorama’s only aim was to cause scandal and discredit the Church. It said the magazine sought to “defame all priests” based on the claim made by one of those secretly filmed. “Ninety-eight per cent of all priests I know are gay,” the unwitting cleric told a Panorama reporter who pretended to be a gay man.

The vicariate said Panorama aimed to put pressure on what the men they clandestinely filmed called an “intransigent” bloc among church authorities that does not want to face the reality of homosexual priests. But the statement insisted that Rome’s diocesan clergy could not be found even “minimally behaving as those having a double life” and appeared to blame the bad behaviour on some among the “many hundreds of other priests who come from all over the world to study in the universities”. Panorama said one of the priests it tracked was from France and one from Italy. The nationality of the third was unclear.

They “have not understood it what it means to be a ‘Catholic priest’ and should never have become priests,” the vicariate said. It added that no one was “forcing them to remain priests” and that by doing so they were “abusing” the system. “We wish them no ill, but we cannot accept that because of their behaviour the honour of all the others is being besmirched,” the statement said.

Most of the Italian media failed to distinguish between sexual orientation and activity, and reported that the vicariate wanted all gay priests to leave the priesthood. Cardinal Vallini appeared to correct that misperception by extending the warning to all priests. “Whoever is a priest – either homosexual or heterosexual – and wants to have sexual relationships, should take a step back,” he told the Rome daily Il Messaggero on Tuesday.

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CUBA

‘All’ dissidents to be freed

Jon Stibbs

THE CUBAN Government wants to release all its political prisoners following negotiations with the Catholic Church, according to Ricardo Alarcon, president of the Parliament. “It was very clear from the discussions that the Government’s wish is to free all the people,” Mr Alarcon said, speaking on the sidelines of a conference in Geneva. He said the only exception was prisoners accused of murder.

According to the Cuban Human Rights and National Reconciliation Commission, there are 167 political prisoners remaining in Cuba. Using different criteria, Amnesty International calculates the Communist Government holds 53 prisoners of conscience. These figures include the 52 political prisoners that the Church has already announced will be released. Fifteen of the initial group were released on 16 July. Mr Alarcon stressed that the political prisoners would have the option of staying on the island.

Spain, Chile and the United States among others have offered to take in the dissidents. Since a political prisoner, Orlando Zapata Tamayo, died on hunger strike in February, Cardinal Jaime Ortega, Archbishop of Havana, has led the Church in talks with the Government of President Raul Castro. These negotiations, brokered by the Spanish Government, culminated in the recent agreement to release the dissidents still imprisoned following a 2003 crackdown. This represents the largest prisoner release since 300 were given their freedom in the wake of a visit to Cuba by Pope John Paul II.

The latest announcement was followed by a public appearance by former president Fidel Castro, who attended a ceremony in Havana honouring comrades killed at the outset of his revolution over half a century ago. His return to the public eye has coincided with the recent prisoner releases.

Western diplomats in Havana said authorities were taking positive, pragmatic steps. Spain has urged the European Union to reward Havana with diplomatic and economic concessions.

UNITED STATES

Convent will not become mosque

ST MARGARET MARY parish on Staten Island, a borough of New York City, has declined to sell a disused convent to a local Muslim organisation which had hoped to use it as a mosque, writes Michael Sean Winters.

The vote by the church’s board of trustees followed the recommendation of the parish priest, Fr Keith Fennessey, who noted the opposition of many neighbours to the sale.

For three months, the mostly residential neighbourhood was engulfed in controversy over the proposed mosque, with opponents voicing concerns about terrorism and local Muslim leaders expressing their resentment at such accusations. Additionally, the debate comes against the backdrop of an even more contentious struggle about plans for a mosque next to the site of the terrorist attack of 11 September 2001 on the World Trade Center.

New York’s Archbishop, Timothy Dolan, is an ex-officio member of the St Margaret Mary board, but a spokesman for the archdiocese, Joseph Zwilling, declined to say whether the archbishop had been present at the meeting or if he had voted. Mr Zwilling did tell The New York Times that “The Archdiocese of New York has enjoyed a good relationship, with the Islamic community in the past, and looks forward to continued dialogue, friendship and understanding in the future.”

Baton Rouge: The Catholic bishops of Louisiana have decided not to permit the carrying of concealed weapons in local churches, writes Michael Sean Winters. The announcement came in response to a newly passed law, signed on 6 July by Governor Bobby Jindal, that allows citizens to carry concealed weapons into places of worship provided they have valid permits for the guns and have been trained in the weapons’ use.

The law is the first of its kind in the United States and it contained a provision allowing ecclesiastical, but not civil, authorities to forbid the carrying of concealed weapons. It is expected there will be a constitutional challenge to the law: the First Amendment to the US Constitution restricts government entanglement with religious organisations, and the provision allowing churches to forbid weapons within their walls is unlikely to survive a court challenge.

Danny Loar, the executive director of the Louisiana Catholic bishops’ conference, which tracks public policy in the state, said: “We don’t think it is appropriate to have guns in churches.”

The principal sponsor of the new law, Republican Henry Burns, indicated that he had no difficulty with the Catholic bishops’ decision. “It is a freedom of choice thing,” he said. The law passed the Louisiana House of Representatives on a 65-26 vote and cleared the state Senate by a margin of 22-9.

Catholic Latinos ‘more tolerant’, says survey

LATINO CATHOLICS are more than twice as likely to support same-sex marriage as their Protestant counterparts, according to a survey of voters in California, writes Michael Sean Winters. It found that 57 per cent of Latino Catholics support the legalisation of same-sex marriage compared to only 22 per cent of Latino Protestants.

The survey was conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute, a left-leaning organisation in Washington, DC.

Same-sex marriage has been hugely controversial in California after the State Supreme Court ruled in favour of it only to have voters amend the state Constitution in a referendum, thereby making it illegal again. The state Supreme Court subsequently ruled that voters had the right to amend the Constitution and forbid same-sex marriages. In California, Catholics constitute an estimated 31 per cent of the population – more than half of them Latinos. Their views will shape state politics and culture for decades. Their emphasis on the role of the family as a mediating institution, not just of society but of the Church, was highlighted by experts as one of the reasons for the divergent views of Latino Catholics from others. According to the survey, only 25 per cent of Latino Catholics said they trust their religious leaders “a lot” regarding information on same-sex unions.
A GERMAN bishop has said it is essential to give women in the Church greater decision-making powers and blamed the scandal of clerical sexual abuse in part on a closed male society.

Bishop Franz-Josef Bode of Osnabrück said an all-male priesthood “promoted abnormalities”, and to prevent this happening it was crucial to give women more power in the Church and, in time, to ordain them deacons.

In a discussion with Marianne Heimbach-Steins, a Catholic woman theologian, in the German daily Frankfurter Rundschau on 21 July, Bishop Bode said he was fully aware that Catholic women from a broad spectrum of society had recently warned of a “meltdown” if the Church did not alter its attitude to women. “I see the Roman ‘No’ to women’s ordination as binding, but I would like to recall the Church’s experience with controversies which are not settled for a long period of time. They acquire their own theological status and character,” he pointed out. Bishop Bode, who has pastoral responsibility for young people on the German bishops’ conference, said it was obvious that in future church leadership could not be confined to ordained men alone. “Who knows what new, undreamed of possibilities will come our way?” he asked. “Look at the office of deacon. It was revived 50 years ago at the Second Vatican Council and today it has its own particular significance in the Church.” A deacon was not “merely a priest’s assistant” or a stage of priestly ordination, Bishop Bode said. The diaconate was an office with its own particular function, a function which women often “exactly fulfil”.

Women in Europe should not expect the Church to open the diaconate for women in the near future, he said, as it had to consider the world Church where many were against such a step. But his own diocese welcomed open discussion of these issues. “I realise what we are missing in the Church by not including women more often in leading positions and decision-making”, Bishop Bode said.

THE OUTGOING President of the Lutheran World Federation, Bishop Mark S. Hanson, has warned the Lutheran Churches not to let different views on homosexuality and women’s ordination lead to schism, writes Christa Pongratz-Lippitt.

The conflict between the shrinking liberal Churches in the Northern Hemisphere and the growing conservative Churches in the Southern Hemisphere, although not on the official agenda, caused unrest and concern at the eleventh plenary of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) at Stuttgart in the third week of July. Fears were expressed that the Lutheran Church could face a similar conflict over the ordination of women and homosexuals to the one the Anglican Church was currently experiencing.

While the Lutheran Churches in Africa and Eastern Europe vehemently opposed the ordination of homosexuals or women, the Lutheran Church in Sweden had recently ordained the Church’s first lesbian bishop.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, who gave the keynote address to the assembly, warned Lutherans of the need to forgive and not cling to a sense of “righteousness or righteousness”. Of the 140 Churches in the LWF, 30 still reject women’s ordination.

Bishop Munib A. Younan of the Lutheran Church of Jordan and the Holy Land, was elected as the new LWF president.

A SENIOR Caritas expert has said that it was regrettable that more Christian speakers had not been invited to address the international HIV/AIDS conference in Vienna earlier this month, writes Christa Pongratz-Lippitt.

Mgr Robert Vitillo, an HIV/AIDS expert for Caritas Internationalis, told the Austrian Catholic Press Agency Kathpress: “The Churches and church communities took part in many of the workshops. But more church representatives should have been invited to address the conference as we have so much experience in treating AIDS sufferers.”

Christoph Petrik-Schweifer, head of foreign aid for Caritas Austria, agreed that in view of the fact that the Catholic Church and Catholic institutions were responsible for around 25 per cent worldwide of aid for HIV/AIDS sufferers, the Church was under-represented.

An Austrian bishops’ conference spokesman said it was “almost surprising” how little the church stance on condoms had been criticised.

AMID RENEWED violence against Christians in Pakistan, a bishop has led calls for justice in the case of two brothers gunned down in front of a crowded law court while being guarded by police.

Allegations that the two murdered Christians – Rashid Emmanuel, 32, and his 30-year-old brother, Sajid – were guilty of a gross insult to the Prophet Muhammad were dismissed this week by Bishop Joseph Coutts of Faisalabad, who linked the claims to extremists bent on fomenting violence and anti-Christian hatred. The two men were shot dead on Monday 19 July at a law court in Faisalabad, sparking a wave of violence and tension across the Punjab city and beyond. Police used tear gas to disperse angry crowds in the brothers’ home of Waris Pura, Faisalabad, where Christians fled for their lives as both Protestant and Catholic churches came under attack from youths throwing stones.

In an interview with Aid to the Church in Need (ACN), the Catholic charity for persecuted and other suffering Christians, Bishop Coutts underlined that justice must be brought for the grieving families of the two brothers who were killed in “clear defiance of the law”. The two men were shot dead as three police officers led them across the crowded precincts of a courthouse, where they were under investigation for allegedly having insulted Islam – a crime punishable by death or life imprisonment according to the country’s draconian blasphemy laws.

Speaking from Faisalabad, Bishop Coutts told ACN: “We are demanding justice – the arrest of the killer. The men were killed in public with a lot of people present as witnesses as well as three police officers in attendance ... It should not be difficult to apprehend the person who killed them. The authorities would be quite happy to close the whole thing and let the matter drop.”

The bishop said a police officer guarding the two men at the court had been suspended, and a judicial inquiry into their deaths had been promised.

Bishop Coutts went on to implicate an increasingly active militant movement for having stirred up anti-Christian hatred. He linked the extremists to an allegation that the Emmanuel brothers had written a pamphlet denigrating the Prophet Muhammad and praising Christianity. The pamphlet included contact details for the brothers. The bishop said: “It would have been suicide for them to write a document of that kind. The document was produced to get them into trouble.”

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Kenyan constitution ‘flawed’
Kenya’s bishops insist that contentious clauses in the country’s proposed new “flawed” constitution must be removed before this week’s referendum on it or they will urge Catholics to reject it. The key stumbling block is a clause allowing abortion on medical grounds, but others include the retention of Muslim Cadi courts. Kenyans will vote in a referendum on their new constitution on 4 August.

Nuns at large
Two octogenarian French nuns have gone into hiding after refusing to accept an order by their mother superior, Odile Gaillard, to go to a nuns’ retirement home 250 miles away after decades at their convent. Sr Marie-Daniel, 86, and Sr Saint-Denis, 82, vanished from the Sisters of Saint-Joseph Convent in Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, on the French Riviera, on 12 July. A third nun, Sr Maurice-Marie, 89, has revealed she also wanted to flee but broke her leg on 8 July.

Tutu to retire
Former anti-apartheid campaigner and Nobel Peace Laureate Desmond Tutu is to retire from public life. The Anglican Archbishop Emeritus of Cape Town said this week that he would cut his workload to one day a week when he turned 79 on 7 October, before retiring completely in February 2011. Last week, Archbishop Tutu fronted an appeal urging Senegal to try Chadian dictator Hissène Habré for mass murder and torture. Habré has spent 10 years exiled in Dakar.

Theologians honoured
Two internationally recognised Australian theologians, Jesuit Fr Gerald O’Collins and Redemptorist Fr Anthony Kelly, have been named inaugural fellows of the Australian Catholic Theological Association. The two priests, both prolific authors, were recognised for their outstanding contributions to theological education over a sustained period.

Kasper’s regret
Cardinal Walter Kasper, retired senior Vatican official responsible for ecumenical affairs, in an interview with ENI news, said that his biggest regret during his tenure in Rome was that he did not achieve an agreement on a common communion with Protestants.

Bishop Abouna of Baghdad, 67, who died in Erbil on Tuesday, after a lifetime of ministry to Abouna of Baghdad, 67, who died in Erbil on Tuesday, after a lifetime of ministry to

When Pope Benedict XVI issued his motu proprio in July 2007 and allowed for unrestricted use of the Tridentine Mass, Giovanni Avena – editor of the left-wing Catholic weekly, Adiasta – exclaimed: “Ratzinger has been slowly lining up the railway carriages and the train has headed back to Trent” (see Letter from Rome, 14 July 2007). It was obviously a reference to that great church council which sought to heal the sixteenth-century split in Western Christianity but which led, instead, to the gradual falsification of ecclesial life and practice until the dawn of the Second Vatican Council. Today the adjective “Tridentine” is most commonly associated with anything less than the full and enthusiastic embrace of Vatican II. So it seemed just a little ironic that some 600 forward-thinking Catholic theological ethicists and moral theologians from 70 countries would choose Trent as the venue for an international conference. It followed a similar, slightly smaller gathering that was held in 2006 in Padua.

This year’s conference that ran from Saturday to Tuesday this week was entitled: “In the Currents of History: from Trent to the Future”. The chief organiser was Fr James Keenan, an energetic and witty Jesuit who teaches moral theology at Boston College. He noted that the more than 100 overlapping sessions covered a vast array of moral and ethical issues in the light of Catholic tradition, including “sexuality, authority, conscience, sin, gender, sustainability, health, economy, the natural law, history, the right to food, the need to love, family, the emotions, the will of God, and yes, even the traditions themselves”.

After the first full day, one well-known Catholic moral theologian quipped: “With the amount of work we are doing, it is more like a Protestant convention.”

Fr Keenan invited participants to look at Trent with “fresh eyes and new promise”. He said some people may view the Council of Trent as “the beginning of a counter-revolution, of an intransigent institutionalisation of the Catholic Church and as a definitive repudiation of the Reformation”. But he stressed that it also defined “a great deal of modern theology” and did so with the help of theologians who held “sustained disputations” near the council hall. Trent not only mandated the establishment of seminaries and the printing of textbooks but, in a sense, it gave birth to moral theology by classifying it as a proper science. The Jesuit moral theologian calls theological ethics and morals “the pragmatic side of theology” and he thought Trent would be the perfect place for himself and his colleagues to gather together, dispute the burning issues of the day and form networks to help them continue to “reflectively and respectfully consider the needs of today within the context of a world Church and its evolving and constantly emerging traditions”.

The world Church was clearly visible. Many more African women were present than at the 2006 conference. Some were among the 200 members of men’s and women’s religious orders who attended. Others were among the more than 300 lay people who made up over half the participants. There were also 75 diocesan priests and eight bishops. These included Bishops Kevin Dowling (South Africa) and Karl Golser (Italy), and Archbishops Bruno Forte (Italy) and Reinhard Marx (Munich-Freising). For those who follow this discipline, the list of participants read like a who’s who in the field, with names like Charles Curran, Cathleen Kaveny, Klaus Demmer, Kevin Kelly, Lisa Sowle Cahill, Peter Henriot, Margaret Farley and Brian Johnstone, just to cite a few.

The theological ethics conference in Trent could be classified as a gathering of so-called “Vatican II Catholics”, or believers who tend to have a more progressive view of the Church. Usually, the most striking and worrying feature of this type of audience is that it tends to be dominated by people who are already in their late sixties or older. The conference certainly had its “grey heads”, but perhaps the most encouraging mark was the full and active participation of nearly 150 “young scholars”. These were defined as people currently working on doctoral degrees or who are in their initial six years of university professorships. They actually made up 25 per cent of the total number at the Trent conference. There appeared to be dozens of others who just slipped outside the category because they have been teaching slightly longer than six or seven years. The most amazing thing is that the majority of these “young scholars” and their slightly older colleagues were lay people – and decisively not of the clericalist variety that can often be found among some of their more fervent Catholic peers, especially in seminaries. The young scholars offered fresh and creative energy to the sessions at Trent, and even led some of the discussions. But, more importantly, they are a sign of hope for the future: namely, that not all young Catholics in the theological mainstream or even in more progressive circles are abandoning the Church. No doubt, we will be hearing more from them in the years to come.

Robert Mickens