

**Bobby Godsell**

Bobby Godsell is a distinguished South African businessman. He is currently the chairman of Business Leadership South Africa, and a member of the National Planning Commission.

**BOOK REVIEW**

**Denis Hurley**  
*Truth to Power*

*The American sociologist Peter Berger has produced, more or less, in every decade of his adult life an important book about religion. On the cover of one of these he put a picture of the place of great Italian beauty, Lake Como. Berger asserted that this place of beauty was reason enough to accept that our world had a creator whose design for our universe and our lives was good.*

I would argue that the lives of some people – saints in the broadest, oldest and most inclusive sense – is reason enough to believe that this creator continues to love our crazy, troubled world and inspire those who love him to act in it.

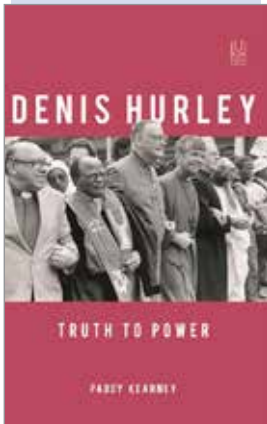
One such saintly person is Denis Hurley. Paddy Kearney’s abridged story of his life tells a remarkable story of: where this man of God began his journey, what he became, his achievements, his failures and most, of all, of that deep and abiding love which inhabited his heart and character until the moment of his death.

Hurley began his journey in South Africa as the son of a pretty poor immigrant family (from Ireland). His father was a lighthouse keeper leading therefore, a life that was itinerant, isolated and lonely.

Hurley’s family circumstances required an active search for quality schooling, leading to time spent first in Ireland and Rome in preparation for ordination as a priest.

Hurley’s achievements in terms of both office and activity are huge. According to Kearney, at the age of 32 he became Bishop, and just 3 years later the then youngest Archbishop of the Church globally. He played critical roles in the great twentieth century Council of the Catholic Church, Vatican II. Hurley led the Catholic Bishop’s Conference from its earliest years until 1987, making this body one of the foremost Church structures campaigning against racism and Apartheid and for inclusive political change in South Africa. He was equally energetically involved in congregational activities within the church in helping to develop new forms of worship and witness, with a particular focus on the role of the lay Christian.

If these achievements are impressive so is the list of failures. Hurley, time and again, found himself on the wrong side of issues within the Church. This was true of individual issues such as contraception, the ordination of women and the celibacy of the priesthood. It was perhaps more true of his lifelong commitment to a spirit of collegiality in both the use of power and the pattern of decision making within the Church. Vatican II began with the promise of the search for collective wisdom amongst those called to the Council, and ended with a reaffirmation of the authority of the Pope. Hurley remained candid in his areas of disagreement. Perhaps this candor is one reason why this young Bishop and young Archbishop was never to be made Cardinal.



**DENIS HURLEY:**  
**TRUTH TO POWER**  
By Paddy Kearney  
ISBN: 978 1 86914 219 3  
Publisher: UKZN PRESS

In his witness for social, political and economic justice, in his country of birth, Hurley had to contend with a Church hierarchy very conscious of both its minority status in South Africa, as well as its dependence on non-South African clergy. A contest between prophetic courage and cautious diplomacy continued in the debates, words and actions of the Bishops' conference throughout his leadership. Perhaps of even greater import his efforts to persuade white Catholics to embrace what Hurley's faith demanded of Hurley were largely unsuccessful. His most passionate and faithful disciples within the Catholic Church were to be found, perhaps quite predictably, amongst South Africa's excluded majority. It must be noted that the Catholic Church shared this failure to achieve adherence to its social policies amongst the majority of its white members with other denominations of the Christian Faith.

This last failure is well illustrated by two personal encounters that I had with the Archbishop. The first was an extended Black Sash initiated lunchtime protest against the death in detention of Achmed Timol. This protest took place every lunchtime for a period of several weeks outside the Cenotaph Gardens in front of the Durban City Hall. This location exposed the protest to a high volume of pedestrian traffic. It drew on the Second World War sacrifices of South African Citizens. It also faced the then offices of the Security Branch of the South African police, making their surveillance much easier. A cohort of both local and national leaders, including the then President of the Methodist Church, took their stance each lunchtime in silent, dignified and impressive protest. However if we were to measure the protest in terms of white opinions changed it was clearly a failure.

The second illustration is from a more indirect yet more extended engagement with this man Hurley. In 1977, whilst he was President of the South African Institute of Race Relations, Hurley called for the establishment of a programme that would work expressly to help white South Africans prepare for the changes in their country which justice required and history made inevitable. The Human Awareness Programme was the result of this call. For a number of years I worked with the Joburg based director of the programme, Marion Nell, both helping to raise some funds and also support the activities of this small and noble group of social activists. Though much good work was done, an objective assessment of white attitudes throughout the life of this organisation

would have to judge it a failure on the grand stage of history.

The "South African" and "white" failures of Hurley are the common experience of many. They attest to challenges which remain to be addressed. Many white South Africans are yet to become root and branch citizens of our new non-racial republic.

In the end a human being's life is much more than the peak events of his journey, both successes and failures. One of the best definitions I know of education is contact with significant adults. From my contact with Denis Hurley, three of his ways of being in this world have shaped me.

The first is the way in which he saw his world. Seeing is the first step on the Young Christian Workers mantra for responsible life. Hurley saw in a way which simply combined faith and reason. A huge heart and a very sharp mind connected this man to a world which he delighted to discover with each new day.

The second was the way in which he judged the world. His fearlessness in pursuit for justice and truth was combined with a deep and unbounded compassion for the people who are history. This profound inclusiveness enabled him to escape the racism of his white working class background. It ensured his faith was as catholic in the same sense as it was with the capital C. My deepest visual memories of this man are of him participating in an all-faith political protest in his Cathedral, which combined Christians of all types, with Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and Zoroastrianism. A second vivid memory is of Hurley co-presiding at Rick Turner's Hindu rites funeral. This man lived the ecumene.

The third was his capacity to act. Neither despair nor doubt undermined his constant capacity to 'go out', to be at and with and for his fellow man. This in turn was fueled by a hope that not even the absurd cruelty of Apartheid could douse.

How much we need these qualities now.

Paddy Kearney, in this shortened version of the definitive Guardian of Light has made available the life and light of this very fine human being.