

CONTEMPLATIVES IN ACTION – RIP MARK AND CATHERINE COLLIER

St John's parishioner, Ian Thompson, a veteran of the anti-apartheid freedom struggle in South Africa, exiled from the country of his birth with his wife Alison and their five children in the 1970's, and eventually settling in Musselburgh. As we live through the Ukraine War and marvel at the courage shown by so many, it is good to reflect on the courage shown in other struggles for Justice and Truth. Below, Ian laments the recent deaths of two of his friends and colleagues in that remarkable struggle, Mark and Catherine Collier.



Mark & Catharine Collier with Alison Thompson 2002

Mark and Catharine Collier were both contemplatives who were practical Christians who took an active part in the anti-Apartheid liberation struggle in South Africa. Catharine died in tragic circumstances in 2014 and Mark died peacefully last month in Cape Town. My wife Alison and I met them in the 1960s when we were involved together with others in the underground Obedience to God Movement.

In 1960 the Apartheid Regime was responsible for two massacres of Blacks protesting the Apartheid Pass Laws - first at Sharpeville near Johannesburg (March 1960) at which 69 unarmed African men, women and children were shot dead by the police and 180 wounded; and then in Langa Township in Cape Town in April 1960, when 56 protesters died and 162 wounded.

This proved a watershed in the anti-Apartheid struggle. The African National Congress changed its policy of passive resistance to take up an armed struggle against the increasingly violent Apartheid regime. Threatened with enforced Apartheid, the Churches and Universities became involved not only in protest but in a variety of forms of direct action throughout South Africa. Mark was studying for the priesthood at the Dominican Seminary located in the lovely vineyards of Stellenbosch in the Cape. Catharine was a novice in the enclosed Carmelite convent in the leafy suburbs north of Johannesburg in the Transvaal. The massacre in Langa township was close to the Dominican Seminary and that at Sharpeville just a few miles away from the Carmelite convent. Superiors of both orders decided that they should move out of their cloistered existence to get involved in the anti- Apartheid struggle.

Mark, who was not yet ordained, and who was inspired by the 2nd Vatican Council's decision to affiliate with the ecumenical World Council of Churches, moved to Johannesburg to get involved with the SA Council of Churches which was taking a lead in the Church-based opposition to the SA police state busy enforcing Apartheid in every aspect of SA Life. At the same time the Christian Institute [CI] was founded by Dr Beyers Naude and Professor Albert Geyser, two leading dissident theologians in the state Dutch Reformed Church. They established the CI as an *ecumenical association of individuals* convinced that Apartheid was incompatible with the Gospel, and support of the State by the DRC untenable. Mark got a job at the Christian Institute, and, as a former accountant, helped manage the CI while acting as a Catholic go-between with the SA Council of Churches. In the CI he met Fr Desmond Tutu a newly appointed priest in Johannesburg. They became life-long friends, collaborators and confidants. Archbishop Tutu and Primate of the Anglican Church of South Africa took a lead in the anti-Apartheid struggle and, as inspirational head of the Truth and Justice Commission, is credited with preventing a blood-bath in South Africa following the end of the Apartheid Regime. Tutu died on 26th December last year, just two months before Mark's own death on 2 March

Meanwhile, Catharine as a Carmelite novice became very close to Kay Wellstead, the charismatic Sister Superior of the convent, a notable radical theologian who later became an anti-Apartheid activist herself. Catharine, who had been a talented ballet dancer before entering the convent, developed acute rheumatoid arthritis, causing her to live in pain and to become increasingly immobile. Needing constant treatment in the Department of Rheumatology in Johannesburg, she had to move into the city and lived with the Little Sisters of Jesus near the hospital. At a time of respite she offered to help as switchboard secretary at the Christian Institute. There she met Mark. They found a common bond in their respective commitments to a continuing life of prayer and contemplation and practical action in the liberation struggle. They fell in love and later decided to get married. Mark remained a third order Dominican and Catharine a Carmelite oblate all their lives. The Dominicans and Carmelites were pacifists, not passivists, and so too Mark and Catharine Collier were peace-makers committed to a Gospel of active and practical love, combining meditation with loving care of vulnerable people in a multi-racial but painfully segregated South Africa. May they rest in peace.