



**THE POPE, PALESTINE, IRAN AND AUGUSTINE OF AFRICA:  
BEYOND SELECTIVE MORALITY AND BETRAYALS OF SILENCE**

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

ONE OF THE GREATEST CHALLENGES of our times in the small and larger circles of our lives is to be self-consciously consistent in our moral concerns and practice. This means not practicing a selective morality of concern for some humans and not for others, and of supporting rules and laws for the many and exceptions and dismissals for the so-called chosen few. And it means having the courage to reject and resist betrayals of silence which are counselled by others and coerced by the dominant society in spite of the awesome suffering, oppression and mass murder of vulnerable others clearly visible and witnessed by the world.

The recent engagement of the new pope, Pope Leo XIV, with the issues of international lawlessness, unjust war, immigrant mistreatment, and the massive killing of innocents, and his trip to Africa offers us an opportunity not only to register appreciation of his moral stance. It also provides an equal opportunity for us to engage another aspect of our history and reaffirm the wide arc of our moral concern, its inclusive and consistent character and its honoring the ancient African moral imperative to bear witness to truth and set the scales of justice in their proper place, especially among the vulnerable and oppressed.

In reflecting on the pope's message and the meaning of his trip to Africa, I thought of Father Gus Taylor, a brother in community and struggle and activist intel-

lectual, who co-founded the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus and was a faithful servant of his faith and his people. Father Gus would visit the African American Cultural Center often for Soul Sessions and the Black and World News Forums and discuss with us and ask our thoughts and share his on critical issues facing African peoples and the world. And like my minister father, he too always stressed the spiritual aspect of our struggle and needed resistance to powers of wickedness in low and high places.

The pope's visit to Algeria, Angola, Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea was framed around paying homage to Augustine of Africa, St. Augustine of Hippo, now Annaba, Algeria, where he first stopped, the town in which Augustine lived, worked and wrote his masterpieces for Christian theology and ethics. Indeed, the pope said, "I am a son of Augustine". I read this as a sign and signal of his drawing from Augustine's teachings, especially in his emphasis on love and peace and his criticism of empire which he had begun to do in his criticism of Trump and U.S. imperialist policies and practices, unjust war and injustice to immigrants.

The pope's decision to visit Africa at this time is important evidence of the centrality of Africa to the strength, growth and future of Catholicism and global Christianity. Indeed, currently 1 out of every 5 Catholics is African, and the projections are that by 2050, Africans will be 1/3 of the Catholics of the world. This

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clearly points to an emerging fountain of new leadership and service from Africans who will not only lead and serve in Africa, but will also go to lead and serve all over the world. And they will take and bring with them, not only the Catholic faith, but also their cultural practices, ideas and interpretations which will reflect the diversity of the Catholic global community and enrich its discourse and practices. But only if they remain conscious and respectful of their Africanness and avoid the worst of conservative Eurocentric tendencies, views and values offered in the clothes and camouflage of religion.

Pope Leo also brought added attention to the African roots of Catholicism and Christianity by foregrounding Augustine of Africa and the rich and unsurpassed intellectual legacy he left. Indeed, the pope began to criticize international lawlessness and bloodletting by borrowing from Augustine's critique of empire, the Roman empire. Pope Leo, criticizing tyrants and their "desire for domination", draws from Augustine's critique of empires' "lust for domination (*libido domnandi*)".

In his classic work, *The City of God*, Augustine argues that empires are informed and driven by the lust for domination and are sites and sources of moral corruption, injustice, and extensive robbery camouflaged under imperial propaganda claiming its virtues. Indeed, he says that empires which lack justice are little more than large scale criminal enterprises, and he tells the story of a pirate who tells Alexander, the Macedonian Greek, that

the difference between his criminal activity and Alexander's is only a matter of scale, that he seizes goods of a ship but Alexander is busy "seizing the world". And he says that because he acts with a small ship, he is called a robber, but Alexander, acting with a large fleet is called an emperor.

Additionally, in an era in which war-making, warmongering and genocide are cynically and sinisterly clothed and camouflaged in religious language, Augustine's foundational concept of just war is also an important alternative resource. For he doesn't claim war is holy or God's will or way, but poses it as a regrettable last resort after moral failure in pursuing and maintaining peace. Seeking to restrain and limit war, he offers a moral framework for going to war and waging war including that it should be a real necessity, proportional and consciously engaged with a reservation and revulsion against violence.

He thus poses a moral and theological alternative to the U.S's and Israel's aggressive and imperialist wars of choice, their genocidal wars - proposed in Iran and carried out in Gaza, and their lust for domination, destruction and bloodletting. Here, we are rightly reminded of the moral teaching of revolutionary theorist and freedom fighter, Nana Amilcar Cabral, who taught that even in the struggle to regain our freedom and end the violence of colonial empire, we must be "reluctant soldiers", seeing the liberation armed struggle as a regrettable and tragic necessity.

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**M**OREOVER, WE SEE THE GENOCIDAL war continuing in Gaza and West Bank Palestine and an attempt to duplicate these genocidal practices in Lebanon. And it is good that the pope and journalists and intellectuals, regaining a measure of moral consciousness, speak out against Trump's aggressive war against Iran. But the real measure of moral consistency and commitment for the pope and us all is to end the betrayal of silence and speak out also against the

heinous crimes Netanyahu and Israel have committed and continue to commit in Palestine, Lebanon and Iran. Here we move beyond selective morality and betrayals of silence and speak truth to the people and to power as a compelling moral obligation and a self-conscious act of righteous resistance to evil, injustice and oppression everywhere and at all times, times convenient and times inconvenient, difficult, demanding and clearly dangerous.▲

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