

A CALL TO CONCIENCE BY THE BISHOPS

ADDRESSED TO CATHOLICS IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

SACBC Plenary Session 8-11 February 1972

1. Brethren in Christ: We invite you today to share our thoughts on the life of man in our beloved country. As servants of God's people we are deeply concerned about the quality of that life; all that makes it truly human and Christian; all, too, that is dehumanising and out of harmony with the mind of Christ.
2. When a young nation begins to grow, physically and materially, its aspirations grow with it. If a nation as a whole is to taste fulfilment, those who are privileged must recognize and respond to the very basic human desire even of the under-privileged to share all the fruits of prosperity. Those who have little will always want more. And those who have must learn to share more with those who are less fortunate. It is time we in this country gave our full attention to this fundamental prerequisite of proper human advancement.
3. Only last year in Rome, the World Synod of Bishops again declared the Christian's duty to work for social justice in the public life of his community, of his nation and of the world community. We believe, with the Synod, that such commitment and action are essential to living the life of the Gospel.
4. Jesus Christ told us that we are judged by our behaviour to our brothers, whether their needs be spiritual or material, personal or social. So, wherever citizens are capable of influencing their own destiny through active participation in community and national affairs, they are bound to carry their Christianity fully into the public life. This means that, in the human situation, there must be an involvement of all Christians, and an involvement in all situations. This is a truly active and meaningful expression of brotherly love.
5. The Synod itself said of this love: "(It) implies an absolute demand for justice, namely a recognition of the dignity and rights of one's neighbour". (1) Let us also remember that Pope Paul's theme for the year is that if we want peace we must work for justice.
6. Your bishops have addressed you several times on social and interracial justice. They have also repeatedly referred to documents of the Popes and of the Second Vatican Council on these issues. Regrettably there has been little significant response. But we can try again. We can renew with greater vigour and urgency our efforts to do our share in creating a just, stable and peaceful Christian Society in our country.
7. As one step in that direction, the Justice and peace Commission of the Bishops' Conference will publish a series of discussion programmes. Parishes, Church associations, religious communities, priests' councils and pastoral groups, youth movements and schools are urged to use these programmes for study action.
8. There are many sincere Catholics of all shades of political opinion, who wish to do their best to help solve our complicated social problems. But they are uncertain of the true demands of justice and Christianity in the situation. The doubt causes indecision and even despair, while time passes and others suffer terribly. It is our earnest hope that what we say here and the discussion programmes to follow will be a help to decision. It is not our purpose to

dictate in these matters, but to enlighten and inform Christian consciences. Each decision will then be all the richer for being based on personal responsibility.

I RELIGION AND POLITICS

9. The first question we must ask ourselves, in the light of what we have said, is whether the Church is entering party politics. Our unequivocal answer is NO. We are simply showing greater concern for the demands of the Gospel in social life. To this extent we are sharing in a radical renewal of the Church and all its members – radical in a sense that what the Popes and the Vatican Council II have said immensely develops our idea of the Church and what it should be doing. It is necessary to distinguish between party political action and the concern for justice in human relations, which the Church must promote under any political system. It is our express desire to keep party politics out of our pulpits, church schools, study circles and associations. Only the insincere or mischievous could describe as political our defence of the poor in their essential rights to the family life, work, a living wage and participation in public life. These are matters of primary justice, of rights written by God into human nature from the beginning, before political parties were born.

II OUR WITNESS

10. Our witness to social justice must begin at home if it is to be credible. Unless it does we shall not speak with conviction and we risk compromising our integrity and Christian character. Nor must we be arrogant or self-righteous, but act as humble followers of Christ confessing our hope that we ourselves may be converted to the fulfilling of the divine plan (2). The Church in its institutions is liable to conform unconsciously to social convention. We must study the wages we pay, the conditions of work we offer and the distribution of personnel and funds. We must show that the Church is not content to exist in a state of privileged protection but that like Christ, it has a special commitment to the poor, the outcast, the oppressed and the unfortunate (3). Individual members of the Church must be aware of their obligation in justice to pay a living wage; and employees must not forget their duty to give an honest return of service.

III LOVE AND UNITY

11. The social situation here gives us serious misgivings. Legislation and conventions divide even those who are called to live and work with us, we must do everything in our power to stop this fragmentation of brotherhood and love.

IV WORLD PROBLEMS

12. The next point we must stress in our programme of Christian social re-education is our need to see our own problems in relation to the world community and international justice. Recent Popes and the Bishops' Synod have often referred to the following issues in particular: the existence of

influence side by side with poverty and starvation; the reluctance of any peoples to recognise the oneness of the community of man; the menace to peace where injustice prevails; materialistic attitudes that increase our desire for more possessions and status and which endanger the human race and its physical environment. Status-seeking and aggressive materialism are the cause of evils to be found under both capitalist and socialist economics: evils that have caused wars, revolutions and the rise of atheistic communism.

13. These evils affect members of all race groups and much could be said about them, but our chief concern for the moment is with interracial justice.

V CHRISTIAN SOCIAL ACTION

14. The problems we face must not make us lose hope or energy. Moral courage and a sense of human dignity and vocation are essential to Christian Witness. St. Paul has told us: "There is nothing I cannot master with the help of the One who gives me strength." (4)
15. White Christians in South Africa must use for the benefit of the whole community the broad opportunities they have to participate in local and national affairs, in trade unions, professional and cultural associations, the press and other social contacts.
16. Africans, Coloureds and Asians, though severely restricted, are learning from their very deprivation to explore what avenues are open to them to promote their own advancement. They are demonstrating new praiseworthy vigour in discovering their own dignity and identity, and in shaping their own future. It is the responsibility of Christians to ensure that the inspiration of their faith is not lacking to these new and powerful stirrings.

VI THE FAMILY AND MIGRATORY LABOUR

17. When we consider specific points in our social system needing reform, one of those most urgently demanding attention concerns the disastrous effects of migratory labour has disastrous human consequences. The dehumanising effects of prolonged migratory labour can be seen throughout the world, but they are particularly serious here, where about one and a half million men, around half of the main African male labour force of the country are obliged to live more or less permanently separated from their families. It is the common experience of mankind that such enforced separation leads to the breakdown of family life, and the increase of prostitution and homosexuality. We, therefore, welcome recent indication that more men will be allowed to bring their wives with them to their place of work.
18. A country claiming to be Christian cannot countenance the humanly destructive effects of the labour system. Nor can it remain indifferent to the life in compounds and in hostels, where men and women are denied a full human existence. There can be but one answer to this situation, and that is to work to eradicate the evils of the system. This problem should form an important subject for discussion and action among us.

VII EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY

19. Literacy is accepted as a prerequisite for modern social life. Thus there should be equal opportunity for all in this country to attain complete literacy

irrespective of race. What cogent argument can be advanced for making education compulsory and free for some and not for others? Modern states accept their duty to educate all their people by placing an equitable burden on all taxpayers in proportion to income.

20. Opportunity for higher education should not be on grounds of race or economic position. Deep frustration begins with half-education. The African in particular is continually being told that he cannot assume responsible positions without proper education and development, while the necessary opportunities are not sufficiently available to some sections of the population, while others are restricted or impeded from them, is to create artificial feelings of superiority and inferiority.

VIII WORK AND ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

21. What we have said of education applies also to opportunities in skilled work and public services. It is wrong to deny a person deserved promotion on grounds of race, religion, sex, class or political opinion. Job reservation and lack of opportunity in skilled work are forcing not only adults but more particularly energetic youths to idleness and despair, to gangsterism and violent attitudes.
22. The Church has a serious duty to champion the right of the masses to a living wage. It is urgently necessary in our country that a minimum wage enabling families to live above the poverty datum line be secured for all workers for whom it is not laid down at present. Employers can do much to improve the workers' lot. Government regulations can be helpful. But is universally recognised that the best means of securing a living wage and suitable working conditions is the registered trade union with the legally recognised right to negotiate, which unhappily is denied the African worker in particular.

IX DISABILITIES UNDER DISCRIMINATORY LEGISLATION

23. In many ways the poorest members of our mixed population are the least protected. There is no unemployment insurance required by law for those who earn least. Pensions are below the subsistence level. There is a lack of care for the aged, the deprived and the handicapped. There is a serious and critical shortage of housing. Recreational and cultural facilities that would make life more human and tolerable are inadequate. Resettlement camps have shown how people are uprooted and moved in a heartless manner. Policing in townships and hostels and on trains urgently needs improvement. The innocent and poor have little protection against violence, exaction of bribes, abuse of the hire purchase system and similar practices. In addition to all this "pass laws" inflict on them a most grave and quite unnecessary burden.
24. There is in all this a deplorable failure to protect ordinary human rights and a carelessness and indifference about the needs that conflicts with the spirit of Christianity!

X THE FRANCHISE AND THE RULE OF LAW

25. In a democratic society the franchise is indispensable to any discussion of human rights. Southern Africa depends on Africans, Asians and Coloureds for 75% of its labour force, yet it denies full citizenship and franchise to them.

26. Whatever may happen in the Homelands, common justice requires that South Africa face up to the question of granting citizen rights to all who in practise reside permanently in the Republic and have no other country.
27. We are deeply troubled by the memory of many people who have been detained, banned, silenced or restricted, without public trial, or who have become the object of suspicion and harassment because of their Christian concern for neighbours of a different race. All that we know of many of them is their struggle and protest on behalf of the voiceless who suffer under discriminatory legislation and way of life, and this deserves our sympathy and praise. It is also our duty to express our concern for the welfare of political detainees. We support those who believe a judge to be the proper authority to determine the humanity of detention conditions.

CONCLUSION

28. The problem of South Africa has many dimensions and many faces. It runs through our history and threatens our future. The record shows that we have failed to cope with racialism and reduce discrimination. But a bold and sustained effort is not yet beyond us, even at this stage. While the evil exists no one may rest. The greatest of all would be to disregard its existence. When justice demands it, a Christian must have the courage to act, though what he hopes to achieve may change his whole way of living.
29. We must seek this courage in joint action with all people of goodwill. We must welcome the efforts of other Churches and organisations and work with them as far as we can. We must do our best to support programmes or reflection and action supplied by agencies of our own Church, bearing in mind the importance of the programmes that will be made available shortly. But ultimately the source of strength in these difficult and tangled situations is Christ alone – Christ who gave Himself in word and example, in love and self-sacrifice, that all men might share with Him the life that He shares with the Father in the Spirit. To receive this life and strength from Christ we need prayer; the prayer of the community and of the individual; the prayer of the Mass and the Sacraments; the prayer of the humble heart-to-heart communication; the prayer that expands into fraternal concern for our brothers and eager collaboration with them. Let us seek in such prayer a formation of conscience that will make us aware of our Christian vocation and capable of following it without fear in the name of Christ.

REFERENCES:

- (1) Justice in the world; 11.
- (2) Justice in the World: Introduction
- (3) Justice in the World, Part III – The Church's Witness
- (4) Phil. 4:13 (Jerusalem Bible)