

COMMISSION FOR THE LAITY

The 110 elected representatives of 3,4 million Catholic laity in Southern Africa met in conference at Marianhill from October 8 to 10 1988. Several important decisions were taken at the conference. The decision to merge the Commission for the Laity and the South African Council for the Laity into the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference Commission for the Laity will ensure a wider elected membership and promote greater lay participation in the work of the church.

Emphasised was the need to empower the people to take on the urgent work of transformation. Lay representatives resolved to build democratic, grassroot structures and to examine pastoral and diocesan councils at local and parish level. They also resolved to improve communication at all levels. All Catholic institutions were called on to support the church in its efforts to open its doors to South Africans of all races. It urged greater active church involvement with secular and democratic organisations working for a just South Africa. To move forward in this direction, and to provide this new vision of church unity in action, it is vital that training and developing programmes focus on the formation of people.

Active involvement

In the light of the present system of apartheid, with its restrictions on people and organisations and its crushing of civil liberties, the laity views as urgent the church's need to be actively involved in all political, social, economic and cultural aspects of South African society to help achieve a non-racial, democratic and unified nation.

The commission for the Laity supported the bishops' Pastoral Letter on Municipal Elections where the consequences of living in an apartheid society were pointed out and people were counselled to approach the elections with an informed conscience. It was left to individuals to decide whether to vote or not. In response to the bishops' call to act in conscience the Commission for the Laity urged Catholics not to vote in municipal elections and to reject all structures which entrench oppression, exploitation and misery of the majority of the people in South Africa.

Shock and rejection

The Commission of the Laity noted that in August, 26 church leaders issued a call to boycott the municipal elections and that Minister Adriaan Vlok had stated in a television programme "that the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference has circulated a certain document...(and) the content of the document is scandalously misleading and contains shocking half truths..." Similarly, the bishops had been the target of scathing attacks from a group claiming to represent Catholic opinion, the so-called South African Catholic Defence League.

"We, the official lay organisation of the Catholic Church in Southern Africa, express our shock at these outbursts. We reject Minister Vlok's suggestion that our bishops are liars. We also reject the notion that our bishops should have no say in the social life of the Catholic faithful".

The commission for the Laity said of the so-called South African Catholic Defence league that:

“The League has no standing in the Catholic Church in South Africa and has shown itself to be distressingly silent on the real truth about South African politics, which is that apartheid is the cause of grave injustice, that it is an evil system, and that church leaders are called by God to speak against an immoral system of government. It is not the bishops who are meddling in politics, but apartheid, which has created a situation of meddling destructively in everyday life.”