

## **PASTORAL LETTER OF THE BETHLEHEM DIOCESE CELEBRATING ITS 40<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY (28/4/91)**

Dear Fathers, Deacons, Sisters, and the people of God in the Diocese of Bethlehem,

Forty years ago, on the 11<sup>th</sup> January 1951, Pope Pius XII decreed the creation of our diocese. Up until then, the whole of our country had the status of a mission territory, in which existing ecclesiastical boundaries could be freely changed by Rome, and were in fact frequently redrawn. Thus, for instance, what is now the diocese of Bethlehem, until 1948 had formed part of the Apostolic Vicariate of Kroonstad. The erection of dioceses, each with their own bishop, set the Church in South Africa on the road to becoming an equal partner with other local churches throughout the world, and less dependent on outside help.

Forty years is not a very long time in the life of a diocese, yet it is more than half of most people's life expectancy. Priests and married couples usually celebrate their 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary in the priesthood and married life respectively, not being sure whether they will live to see their Golden Jubilee. It is therefore justified to keep the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our diocese as a minor jubilee, if only to make all of us a little better aware of our forming part of it.

I have decided to write this pastoral letter in order to share with you a few thoughts on how we could fittingly observe the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the diocese's existence. I wish this letter not to be read just once from the pulpit, but to be studied and implemented in the Pastoral Assemblies and Councils of parishes, in the houses of Religious, and in the executives of all Sodalities recognised in the diocese, both on diocesan and parish level.

Any jubilee is kept with two aims in mind: to look back in gratitude, and to look forward in hope.

I shall not waste time by drawing up a long list we ought to be grateful for, when celebrating our diocese's 40-year jubilee. In every parish there are people who are able to witness to the many improvements this diocese has experienced since 1951. Let them speak, and lead the different congregations in praising the Lord for His mercies and kindness towards His People! During 25 of these 40 years, Bishop Peter Kelleter, whom we recently laid to his last rest, was the shepherd of this diocese, as its first bishop. May he convey our thanks to God the Father for 40 years of blessings and progress, and continue to pray with us and for us!

Looking ahead, we wish to unite ourselves deeply with the Holy Father's frequently mentioned desire that the whole Church gear herself for a new missionary outreach, as we stand at the threshold of the third millennium since the birth of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. From now on each year, as we progress towards the year 2 000, we shall endeavour to accomplish certain tasks, so that when the 2 000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our Lord's birth in Bethlehem arrives, we shall be like that 'beautiful bride all dressed for her husband' mentioned in the Book of Revelation (21:2,9).

Here then are the tasks I wish to put before you for this jubilee year. However, it is obvious that some of them are of an ongoing nature. They will therefore be before us for some years to come:

1. Let us continue to implement the Pastoral Plan. As a diocese, as a parish, in each of our Sodalities and in small Christian Communities, we wish to become evermore a true community, which serves humanity.
2. Let us enable our Diocesan Pastoral Council to become increasingly effective as a channel of information and a tool for overall diocesan planning, with the widest possible participation.
3. Let us take the recently re-established deaneries seriously, and use their potential to the full.
4. Let us observe the feast day of our diocesan patron, the Immaculate Heart of Mary, with special solemnity in this jubilee year. To make this possible for everybody, I transfer the feast to Sunday, 9<sup>th</sup> June.
5. Let us make a diocesan pilgrimage of thanksgiving to our Marian Shrine at Tsheseng on the feast of Mary Immaculate, on Sunday, 8<sup>th</sup> December.
6. Let us storm heaven for an increase of vocations to the priesthood and the consecrated life:
  - 6.1 Prayer groups for vocations are to be established in all parishes, under the guidance of the Diocesan Commission for Vocations.
  - 6.2 Parishes must realise that it is in their sacred duty to do all in their power in order to deserve to be blessed with vocations.
  - 6.3 The 4<sup>th</sup> day of the week, Thursday, is particular apt to pray for priests and vocations to the priesthood, as it is the day on which our Lord instituted the priesthood of the New Testament.
    - 6.3.1 Mothers, this is the day on which you assemble for prayer meetings in your different sodalities:  
Attend these prayer meetings faithfully, and pray for the Sons of Africa! May the Lord be pleased to call many of them into His service as priests!
    - 6.3.2 People of God, accept and support Thursday as special day of prayer for priests:  
Attend Holy Mass and offer if up for their sanctification;  
Make a visitation to your church or chapel and pray for priests and vocations to the priesthood;  
Pray the rosary for the same intention: in your family or with a group of friends, in your Small Christian Community, or alone.  
Throughout the diocese, in as many places as possible, let there be held on Thursday a Holy Hour of prayer before the Blessed Sacrament: to honour Christ the High Priest, and to pray with Him: 'Father, send workers to your harvest!' (Mt 9:38). I appeal to all religious houses in the diocese to include this holy hour on Thursday in their weekly timetable.
7. Let us take up with faith the holy father's call to holiness contained in his latest Encyclical Letter, entitled *Redemptoris Missio*, where he says:  
'I address myself to the recently baptised members of the young communities and young churches. Today, you are the hope of this two thousand-year-old Church of ours: being young in faith, you must be like the first Christians and

radiate enthusiasm and courage, in generous devotion to God and neighbour. In a word, you must set yourselves on the path of holiness. Only thus can you be a sign of God in the world and re-live in your own countries the missionary epic of the early Church...I see the dawning of a new missionary age, which will become a radiant day bearing an abundant harvest, if all Christians, and missionaries and young churches in particular, respond with generosity and holiness to the calls and challenges of our time.' (91f)

No one will deny that this call to holiness is of special urgency in our country, where we face a culture of death and violence, which will have to be transformed into a readiness to listen to each other, to forgive, and to build, if we want to see a New South Africa rise from the ashes of apartheid.

8. Let us support fully our diocese's determination to become less and less dependent on financial support from overseas. Remember the recommendation by our Diocesan Pastoral Council five years ago, that each adult Catholic give 1 percent of his/her monthly income towards the upkeep of our priests and the maintenance of pastoral institutions in our diocese. By comparison, Catholics in Germany give an average 3 percent of their monthly income to the Church, and still donate each year huge sums of money to special collections in aid of various needs. Some of these have also benefited us, in the building of churches and necessary institutions in our diocese. I appeal especially to the increasing number of well-to-do people among our Black Catholics, to support the Church with generosity and an honest conscience.
9. Another timely reminder concerns the fact that in each parish there ought to be a building committee within the Pastoral Council. It can consist of a single person, as long as he/she has a clue about the maintenance of buildings belonging to the parish. Thousands of Rands can be saved by looking after buildings in an ongoing way thereby preventing the occurrence of major repairs resulting from neglect.
10. Finally, I wish to encourage all congregations in our diocese to learn to give responses in the liturgy also in the languages, which they do not normally use in their daily life. This will greatly enhance our occasional communal celebrations, and facilitate your visiting each other's celebrations of the Eucharist, as we break out of the ghetto mentality which apartheid has forced on us for so long. The same applies to the singing of hymns. Already Sotho and Zulu hymns are quite freely exchanged between congregations of these two language groups. But the same cannot be said of congregations on both sides of the great divide between Black and White Catholics.

It is time to wake up!

God bless each one of you as we set out on our journey towards the year 2000, and the Golden Jubilee of our diocese.

Yours fraternally in Him,

HUBERT BUCHER  
Bishop of Bethlehem