

**PASTORAL LETTER OF THE DIOCESE OF ALIWAL NORTH FOR THE  
SEASON OF LENT ON THE CHRISTIAN WAY OF HANDLING  
CONFLICTS (13 FEBRUARY 1991)**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Each year the time of Lent is for us a time of preparation for Easter, a time of conversion. We convert by following the way of Christ more deeply and by turning away from our sins. My task as bishop is to assist you in this, and to point out to some particular ways of conversion. This year I wish to invite you to repent by considering your ways of solving conflicts, your ways of acting when tensions and quarrels arise. I ask you to examine your consciences on this specific topic because our whole country of South Africa has reached a point where we begin to fear that the big conflicts of our country might not be solved in the right way. We earnestly pray that through negotiations justice and peace may come to our country. We promise to do everything possible to bring about a new way of living together in justice and peace. Most of us will, however, say that they are not able to contribute in any way to the solution of the conflicts of our country. Many of us will say that we can only pray, but can do nothing else. I think, however, we must at least show God that we are fully honest when we pray for a peaceful solution of the conflicts. We must show Him that we definitely do everything possible wherever we are.

This means we must begin where we are. We must make a start in our home, in our marriage, in our neighbourhood, in our parish. Where we are we must start solving conflicts in the right way, in the way of Christ. This is the only convincing way of telling God that we are also determined to approach other, larger conflicts in the spirit of Christ. There are quarrels between husband and wife, we have tensions between parents and children, we suffer from conflicts between leaders of a parish, we have clashes between different groups of a parish. Let us repent by mending our ways of dealing with the conflicts of our immediate surroundings. This will be an honest sign to God that we are truly seeking ways also of solving the huge conflicts of our country. It will be a convincing way of putting ashes on our foreheads now before Easter.

Let us begin our examination of conscience by asking ourselves: what mistakes are we making when conflicts arise? To what kinds of sin have we become accustomed when quarrels begin, when others do wrong to us? How often do we fail to listen honestly to the complaints our opponent has against us? How often are we only focussing on our own hurt feelings, not in the hurt feelings of the other one? How often do we fail asking the simple question: if I were he or she, how would I feel? If I were the other one, what would I dislike? What would I demand? Just to ask this question honestly is already a way of conversion. How often do we use anger in the wrong way? There is a right anger and a wrong one. Are we not very often allowing a wrong anger to rule our thoughts and actions? How often do we try and overpower the other person through a show of anger and even rage? Are we not often relying on the power of anger rather than on the power of the truth? If we do so, are we then not saying that might comes before right? Are we then not similar to those whom we read with shock in the newspapers, those who brutally assault the innocent ones, putting might before right? How often do we use force instead of trying to come to an

understanding with one another? None of us wants force to be used against us, but how often are we doing this to others? How can we pray in a convincing way for an end of violence among the political groups of our country if we ourselves are ready at any time to use violence in our homes, between leaders, between groups? In our quarrels, how often do we give in to the sinful wish to inflict pain on the other person in order to get our own way? And are we not enjoying the defeat of the other person? Do we not desire to dominate others, to come out on top and the others below? Can we really say of many of our conflicts that we have honestly tried to respect the other person and have honestly looked for a just solution? Indeed, there is a need to examine our consciences through many, many questions. There is a need to ask pardon from God and from our neighbour. There is a need to convert and to seek new ways of solving conflicts in the spirit of Christ. How did He deal with conflict?

Jesus, too, was tempted to use force. Satan came to Him and said he could become a mighty ruler, ruling over others and dominating them. Jesus knows what conflict is: He was unjustly accused, His good name was spoilt, He was wrongly suspected, He was threatened, and He was despised. His teaching was attacked, His good deeds were overlooked. He was unjustly imprisoned and was tortured. He was illegally condemned to death and killed. He surely knows what conflict means. Jesus certainly did not tell us to avoid conflict. When the teachers of the law were ill-treating the people, He told them they were wrong. When leaders misused their office, He openly opposed them. When the authorities wanted Him to keep silent, He refused to do so. Jesus did say we should turn the other cheek after being beaten, but this does not mean that we should allow evildoers to do anything they like. It means that we should not take revenge, and it means that we should be prepared even to suffer disadvantages in order to solve conflicts. It means that there are times when it is better to endure suffering than to insist on what is right. To deal with conflicts correctly means to distinguish wisely when to oppose evil and when to endure it. The golden rule which Christ gave us for all situations of conflict is so simple: 'always treat others as you would like them to treat you' (Mt 7:12).

Control yourself where self-control is needed, have courage where courage is needed, have mercy where mercy is needed, have understanding where understanding is needed, have patience where patience is needed. Try many ways, call a neutral mediator, ask your neighbours to assist, and always remember that it is your brother or your sister who opposes you. 'You are all brothers and sisters' He says (Mt 23:8), and this includes even those who offend us. Jesus especially warned against the sin of looking for revenge. He rejected the age-old phrase 'love your neighbour and hate your enemy'. He said we should rather love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (Mt 5:44). We will have to continue learning how to love those who do wrong against us. In this short letter during Lent we cannot mention everything that must be considered in our dealing with conflict. I ask every one of you and every one of your communities and groups to think about your ways of dealing with conflict. I ask you to begin new ways of behaviour, Christian ways of opposing evil in a Christian way. Evil must be opposed, but in the way of Christ. May God bless you in your endeavour to love your enemies, to overcome evil with love, to renew the spirit of your home, and to build a new South Africa in the Spirit of God.

There are of course many more ways of fasting before Easter, many more ways of renewing our faith. I pray for each of you and for each one of you and for each one of

your communities, that you may find many ways of turning back to God, many ways of preparing yourselves fittingly for the greatest feast of Easter.

Ash Wednesday 1991  
+FREDERICK LOBINGER  
Bishop of Aliwal Diocese