

PASTORAL LETTER OF THE DIOCESE OF BETHLEHEM

ON

BLACK AND WHITE WORSHIP

(ASH WEDNESDAY 1986)

Dear Fellow Believers in our Lord Jesus Christ,

This letter is long and I would rather have you read it in your homes than read it to you from the pulpit. I trust you will discuss the contents in your family and pray to God that thereafter you will also act upon it.

I was ordained bishop for this Bethlehem diocese nine years ago. I stressed then my firm intention to do all in my power to keep the flock entrusted to my care together in spirit of unity. I did so pointing to my bishop's crest. It shows black and white people going together in worship towards the centre of the cross, in which there is a representation of Jesus in the form of a seed grain, because He said of Himself: "Unless the seed-grain is prepared to die, it will bring no fruit."

At the time I chose this crest out of the conviction that it is the Church's task to remove fear and to bring about peace and reconciliation between all of South Africa's people and as a clear indication that I wished to put myself at the service of achieving this aim with and in Jesus.

I am happy that at last also the government of this country acknowledges in no uncertain terms that all structures erected in the past with a view to keeping people apart, must be removed if there is to be peace in South Africa. As the state president has said in a press statement, not all South Africans will believe him and his government that the complete removal of apartheid is the correct way to take. But the Catholic church, from the Pope to the bishops of this country, have always held that one cannot build a happy contented South Africa on principles which apartheid ideology upheld for so long. We often said and did things directly opposed to that ideology and we often got blasted for it.

Sometimes white Catholics thought the Church was wrong to take a strong and consistent anti-apartheid stance. Now at last the church is fully vindicated even those who once severely condemned her for her courageous stance *vis-à-vis* that policy of injustice.

Now that apartheid has officially been declared to be dying, let us look to the future and ask ourselves how we can contribute to the shaping of a new South Africa, where the dignity of all persons will be respected; where none will be afraid of another because of the colour of his or her skin.

Contrary to what some churchmen held in the heyday of apartheid, Jesus could never have subscribed to that policy of discrimination. If, perhaps, in the past we ourselves subscribed to apartheid as something necessary and unavoidable, it is time to realise

that if we wish to be truly His followers we must remove all vestiges of apartheid thinking and acting from our hearts and minds.

I appeal to you in Lent, that time when the Church encourages us to make a real move ahead in spirit of repentance and in our readiness to take a new look at our way of thinking and living in this world, to move out of a frame of mind which has been shaped by the traditional “South African way of life”, reinforced by nearly 40 years of effort on the part of government to achieve by rule of law, total apartheid between the different races in our country. It is not easy – but a start must be made.

During Lent we contemplate very specially the enormity of our sin and what it cost to redeem us from our slavery to it. We realise that ultimately sin always cause division. It separates us from God, and it also erects walls between people. It took the suffering and death of God’s own son to give us the means of reconciliation. St. Paul wrote to the Ephesians, warning them against the threat of “apartheid” between Christians who have converted from Judaism, and Christians who had converted from heathendom: “But now, in union with Christ Jesus, you who used to be far away have been brought near by death of Christ. For Christ himself has brought us peace by making Jews and Gentiles one people. With His own body He broke down the wall that separated them and kept them enemies. He abolished the Jewish Law with its commandments and rules, in order to create out of two races one new people in union with Himself, in this way making peace. By His death on the cross Christ destroyed their enmity; by means of the cross He united both races into one body and brought them back to God...It is through Christ that all of us, Jews and Gentiles, are able to come in the one Spirit into the presence of the Father.” (Eph. 2:13-18).

Let us pray fervently for that miracle to take place in our country: That the walls of separation fall – not due to violence, but because of our realisation that they were sinful and against the will of God; that unity take the place of enmity; that fear be replaced by love; and that true peace may rule in our land, based on justice to all.

“Some thirty years ago I attended a variety show in the huge Soldiers’ Field stadium in Chicago. A matchstick was passed on to each of the many thousands of onlookers. Then the lights were switched off and everybody sat enveloped in deep darkness. We were told to strike our matchstick all at the same time and to hold it aloft over our heads. Suddenly the threatening darkness was gone and the whole stadium filled with the warm glow of the light from the matchsticks. People were happy, joyful, and started to talk to each other. Then the floodlights came on again.

Somebody switched off the lights in South Africa in 1948 when apartheid became the law of the land. Apartheid has tumbled us into ever darkness, making it difficult to recognise our fellow men as brothers and sisters, even if they share our faith in the same Catholic Church.

We tried to convince ourselves that the world was wrong when it increasingly shunned us because of our policy of apartheid, but now those who switched off the light in 1948 have come to realise that apartheid is wrong, intrinsically wrong and evil. Let us therefore light our matchstick all over South Africa, dispelling the darkness of fear and hatred through the warm glow of our love which spurs on to

make good the wrongs of the past and to bring about true reconciliation in the spirit of Jesus our Lord.

I said we should pray fervently for peace in our land. Prayer must be coupled with deeds of love, which flow from a true spirit of repentance. As a constant reminder, I have asked priests throughout our diocese to ask to pray the Angelus three times a day. Please follow this invitation with the eagerness it deserves for we face critical times, as the Christians did in the time when the Angelus was first introduced as a popular prayer. We need to stem the tide of violence which threatens to devour our country, and we need to pray for and encourage those who have pledged themselves to dismantling apartheid totally. As for the deeds of love which ought to accompany our prayer for peace and reconciliation in our country, let us remember, "Charity begins at home".

Let us begin by making ourselves aware of the fact that in the places where we live there are Catholics on both sides of the wall which apartheid has erected between the different races in our land and that we take little cognisance of that fact in our day to day lives.

If Catholics living on both sides of that wall knew more of each other, I have no doubt they could also begin to discover common needs concerning their faith, and they would soon devise means to give greater expression to the faith in public through their common witness to that faith. Maybe this looks and sounds rather idealistic, but it isn't. God is with those who have faith in Him, and His power is able to surmount all human faintheartedness and rationalisations. Think of the courageous leadership Pope John Paul II gives the world wherever he goes; not only to Catholics, but to all people of goodwill and how his stress is always on the need for unity, echoing the prayer of our Lord: "Father, ...may they be one...in order that the world may know that you sent me and that you love them as you love me" (John 17: 21-23).

(Signed) HUBERT BUCHER
Bishop of Bethlehem