

## **PASTORAL LETTER OF THE DIOCESE OF BETHLEHEM ON CATECHESIS (30 JANUARY 1994)**

My dear brothers and sisters in our Lord Jesus Christ,

1. Just recently you heard a pastoral letter from me read to you, so you may be surprised to receive yet another one so soon. No, I haven't embarked on writing pastoral letters because I have nothing else to do! Far from it! The reason that I write again so soon is that over the Ascension weekend this year – in May – we shall hold once again a meeting of our Diocesan Pastoral Council. One of its themes will be catechesis. It is in preparation of this meeting that I want all of you to begin a process of reflection on the state of catechesis in our diocese.
2. First of all, to make sure we understand each other well, let us ask ourselves: 'what do we mean when we speak about catechesis?' This question is best answered by our Saviour and Lord Himself, who commanded His followers to 'go into the whole world and proclaim the Good News to all creation' (Mk 16:15). Reading the Acts of the apostles and the Letters of the apostles in the New Testament, especially the letters of St Paul, we quickly realise how seriously this command was taken by the apostles and the first Christians, at the beginning of the Church. Names like that of Lydia come to mind, who was a founder member of the Church at Phillipi in Greece (Acts 16:13-16), or of Aquila and Priscilla, who became inseparable companions of St Paul's great missionary undertakings (Acts 18: 2,18,26; Rom 16:3; 1Cor 16:19; 2Tim 4:19).
3. Our Lord Jesus further underlined the urgency of spreading the Good News everywhere, and to everybody, when he once said to his apostles: 'I have come to set the earth on fire; and how I wish it were already blazing!' (Lk 12:49). Catechesis aims at fulfilling this ardent desire of our Saviour: to make known to all people what they must do to be saved, and to proclaim this message to them as real 'Good News', as the most beautiful and important message they received in their whole life.
4. When the first missionaries came to this area in the Free State, they too looked out for men and women who could assist them in spreading the Good News as quickly as possible, to as many of whom have served our people with great zeal and dedication. You have noticed, however, that some ten years ago we discontinued to employ this type of catechist in our diocese.

Although this move has slowed down the numerical growth of our Local Church, it has had a number of far-reaching positive results. Most importantly, it has driven home to you the truth that catechesis is not the task of a few select individuals, but ought to be the concern of each member of any given congregation. This is exactly what was also proclaimed loud and clear by the Second Vatican Council, in its Decree on the apostolate of the laity, *Apostolicam actuositatem* (11:6; 111:10).

5. Together with its pastors, each congregation has a duty to ensure the ongoing formation of all its members in faith, not only its children and adolescents, but also its grownups, particularly adult catechumens. Those who make themselves available for this task may be termed catechists, but with a rather

new meaning of this term. They are not paid for what they do, but voluntarily perform a community ministry, just like other members of the congregation who bury the dead or lead the Sunday liturgy in the absence of a priest. I appeal to all of you – fathers, mothers, adolescents, and even children – to make available part of your time for teaching others in the faith, as catechists. I also appeal to Catholic teachers, not only those teaching in our own schools, but also those employed in government schools: use your teaching skills to help in your spare time as a catechist in your local congregation.

6. If all of you give ear to this appeal of mine and accept it with a ready heart, we will be able to improve dramatically the catechetical situation in our diocese. Teaching catechism will no longer appear to be the hobby of an odd few people, but take its rightful place among the many different ministries needed within our congregations.

Let me hold up before you the zeal with which many members of so-called sects spend countless hours each week in propagating their beliefs among others. Don't let them mock us by saying; 'Yeah you Catholics claim you have the full truth about Christ and the Church he wanted, but when it comes to proclaiming that truth you are lazy to teach even your own members, let alone outsiders such as ourselves'.

7. I am assisted in this drive to involve more people in teaching catechism by a special Catechetical Commission, which I constituted nearly two years ago. It is chaired by Fr Xolile Kumalo, parish priest in Phuthaditjhaba, whom I appointed in March 1992 as my Episcopal Vicar for Catechesis. Through the services of this commission, a number of people have already been trained as catechists in different parishes throughout our diocese. One of the commission's priorities is to standardise the material used in our diocese for teaching catechism to the different age groups.
8. Let me end this letter by issuing a few directives:
  - 8.1 this letter, once read from the pulpit, is to be studied by the Pastoral Councils of each parish and local community, with a view to its gradual implementation. Hopefully, from this study recommendations will be emerging for the consideration of the forthcoming Diocesan Pastoral Council meeting.
  - 8.2 Each Pastoral Council is to designate one of its members – or to co-opt a suitable person from among the parishioners – to be specially concerned with the adequate provision of catechesis within its territory and to serve as link to the diocese's Catechetical Commission.
  - 8.3 The Catechetical Commission is to make its presence felt through the length and breadth of the diocese, in continued co-operation with the Diocesan Formation Team, so that the aim of this pastoral letter can be achieved within the shortest possible time. Through its services, the substance of the *Catechetical directory for Southern Africa*, published in 1991 by the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference, is to be made known to and implemented by all catechists in our diocese.
  - 8.4 The adult and youth sodalities should actively support this drive for increasing the number of well-trained and dedicated catechists in our diocese, by their fervent prayer and through urging their members to make themselves available for training as prospective catechists.

Yours fraternally in the Lord,

+HUBERT BUCHER  
Bishop of Bethlehem