

## **PASTORAL LETTER OF THE DIOCESE OF BETHLEHEM ON FAITH AND POLITICS (2/9/1991)**

Dear Fathers, Deacons and Sisters,  
Dear People of God in the diocese of Bethlehem,

### **1. Why am I writing this letter to you?**

‘Happy are your eyes because they see, your ears because they hear! I tell you solemnly, many...longed to see what you see, and never saw it; to hear, and never heard it.’

Looking at the political changes, which have taken place in our country over the past year, one is tempted to use these words, which our Lord Jesus Christ once addressed to his Apostles (Mt 13:16).

A new era has dawned in our country, an era which many South Africans longed for, but never got to see. This new era offers us the unique chance to build a new South Africa in which peace and harmony will prevail. However, it brings also new challenges, which we have to face, if we wish to make our contribution to the building of this new South Africa.

One of the major challenges, in my opinion, is to learn quickly how to relate faith and politics. It is on this subject, therefore, that I am writing this letter to you.

The length of this Pastoral Letter makes it unsuitable for reading from the pulpit. As on a previous occasion, I therefore ask that be read and studied in the Pastoral Councils and Local committees of each parish, in the meetings of Sodalities and youth clubs, and in the houses of Religious, and that from there the message contained in my letter be spread to all our people in the whole Diocese.

May it help us to face the new challenges, and to make our contribution to the growth of South Africa’s post-apartheid society in peace and harmony.

### **2. The long night of apartheid has come to an end.**

The ‘original sin’ which has led this country to the tragedy of apartheid was committed long before most of us was born, viz. in 1910. In that year South Africa gave itself a new constitution, which made no provision for the participation of the country’s Black, non-white majority in the government of the country. Whatever political structures Black people involved over the years, in reaction to this injustice, were either ignored or swiftly repressed by the Whites-only government of the day.

The resulting political confrontation came to a head when fear of the Black political ascendancy led the majority of Whites in South Africa to vote the National party into power in 1948. This party had fought the election campaign under the banner of the slogan: Keep South Africa white! In 1960 the nationalist government smashed all existing Black political parties and clamped increasingly severe security laws on the country in order to smother any opposition to its policy.

A long fight ensued against the apartheid regime, in the course of which thousands have lost their lives, were tortured and maimed, imprisoned, or spent many years in exile. Milestones in the long struggle against apartheid inside our own country were the rise of the Black Consciousness Movement in the early 1970s, the SOWETO Uprising in 1976, the formation of the United Democratic Front in 1983, and the Standing for the Truth Campaign in 1988.

Eventually the White government realised that, for all its brutality against the Black majority, it was fighting a losing battle. This led to the historic moves in February 1990 by the present leader of the government, President F W de Klerk, viz. the unbanning of all political parties and the gradual release of political prisoners.

Our own area in the eastern Free State remained largely unaffected by the struggle against apartheid, until after the release from prison of Nelson Mandela. The reason for this is, among others that this area has a predominantly rural character, which limited education and work facilities, that the majority of its population is involved in a constant battle for sheer survival, and that it was exposed to severe repression from the regime's security apparatus. However, as in other parts of the country, also in our area, particularly the young people paid a heavy price in the struggle against apartheid, through loss of educational opportunities on account of school boycotts, temporary imprisonment, and through rough treatment by the security forces. Some of them even lost their lives.

### 3. A new era is drawing over our land

The same political party, which in 1948 brought the long, dark night of apartheid over South Africa, recently removed the last vestiges of apartheid legislation, including the extremely severe security acts, from the Statute Book. People are now free to assemble and to express political opinion without fear of prosecution; they can form political parties, join the political party of their choice.

The immediate and most important task in hand is to give the country a new and truly democratic constitution, through a process of negotiation between the government in power and the Black liberation movements, which are busy returning to the political arena as political parties. The negotiation process will also have to deal with the future of the Homelands which apartheid created in pursuit of its policy of separate development. As you will remember, the Catholic bishops of Southern Africa wrote about the whole issue of negotiations in their 'Pastoral Letter on the occasion of the centenary of the first Papal Encyclical on Social Justice, *Rerum Novarum*, and its implications for negotiations in South Africa', which was read to you last February.

During the dark years of the struggle against apartheid, the Catholic Church formed one of the last bastions of defence, which courageously upheld the dignity of every human being, regardless of race or colour, and continuously spoke out against the atrocities perpetrated by the apartheid regime.

Now that the freedom of political expression has been won for all South Africans, the political parties can come into their own. Normal political life has started to come about in the Black community, though at the moment it is still badly hampered in many places on account of the violence, which is sweeping our country. The Church

in turn, freed from having to stand in for the political forces which were impaired by the apartheid regime, can now concentrate again on what is truly her own. We have given ourselves a blueprint for this task in the form of the Pastoral Plan, with its beautiful motto: 'Community serving Humanity'. Also in the emerging new South Africa, the Church's prophetic voice will have to be heard. Justice and Peace groups will not be out of work, but take a leading role in helping our Catholics to acquire an acute social conscience. These groups should be established in every parish.

#### 4. Participation in the building of a better society: our Christian duty

No society can prosper unless all its members are prepared to share in the burden of providing the necessary services to guarantee its orderly functioning. This attitude of readiness to help build a better society is enshrined in the motto of our Pastoral Plan: 'Community serving Humanity'.

It was tragic for the Black community in South Africa that throughout the period of apartheid, Blacks were regarded as objects, to be administered by Whites, or by those whom these had installed as their underlings. It was tragic, because this system robbed the most energetic members of the Black community of the opportunity to acquire valuable and necessary administrative experience. It was even more tragic that when the apartheid regime finally recognised the need to install Blacks in administrative structures, these 'local authorities' had to be rejected by the majority of the Black population as apartheid's afterbirth, and as not truly representative of the people.

Thus the whole ire, especially of the youth, turned against Black town councillors, but eventually singled out for attack any person linked with any institution created by the apartheid regime, as well as these very institutions. One need only think in this connection of attacks against Black teachers and school inspectors, and the damaging or total destruction of schools in many townships.

With apartheid now legally abolished, all our efforts must go into making our Black communities function well. In order to achieve this, our local Church's aim to become a 'community serving humanity' must inspire everyone of us and spill over into the towns and communities in which we live. Let Catholics everywhere be in the forefront where the building of our new South Africa is concerned; standing for office in administration, giving our best as teachers and students.

True, vestiges of apartheid mentality will still be with us for some time to come, and passive or even active resistance against the shaping of a new South African society must be expected from some die-hard ideologies. Let us overcome these obstacles through patient and confident service to the new South Africa we intend helping to build, ever choosing negotiation, and never violence, as our means of persuasion.

The election of men and women for office in our towns and local communities should not be dictated by party-political considerations, but the rule ought to be: put the best person for the job into the job.

Many of us, to date, have no experience in politics and political processes. We shall have to equip ourselves with the basic know-how about this necessary aspect of building a new South Africa. Above all, our contribution to the future political

development in this country ought to be hard work, honesty, reliability, and all other Christian qualities, which will help to put on the politics in this country the stamp of service to the people, rather than that of a quest for power and financial gain.

## 5. Faith and politics

In many countries of Africa, the Church experienced a drop in Church attendance and vocations to the priesthood immediately after these countries gained independence from their former colonial overlords. This is indicative of the sad fact that apparently many people there regarded active participation in the political life of their country as an alternative to their faith and religious practise. Occasionally even priests and sisters became so engrossed in political activities that their faith life suffered severe damage. Some of them left their religious commitment altogether.

Let us be careful not to rush for the same fallacy in the months and years ahead. Faith and politics are not interchangeable alternatives, one as good as the other. The truth is that politics can very easily degenerate into a mere quest for power and wealth, unless each politician is deeply committed to strong moral principles derived from his faith. The danger of falling away from one's faith exists all the more if a person joins a political party subscribing to an ideology, which puts the religious convictions of its members under pressure or openly declares religion an enemy of man's progress.

Much wisdom and prudent leadership will be needed on all levels of our community to enable each of us to pull our weight in public affairs, and at the same time to remain faithful to our faith commitment. Two extremes must be avoided: to shun involvement in politics under the pretext that politics is dirty business, and to get so involved in politics that no time is left for God or even one's family. Both would be wrong and destructive choices, which open the way for a ruthless caste of corrupt professionals lording it over the people.

Let our Lord Jesus Christ's words be our guide, when He says: 'Mine is not a kingdom of this world' (Jn 18:36), and: 'Set your hearts on the Father's Kingdom first, and on its righteousness, and all these other things will be given you as well' (Mt 6:33). Politics will never establish paradise on earth, because the present is still under the evil influence of 'the prince of this world' (Jn 14:30). Yet, since the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ into this world, the healing medicine for the world's ills is at work through His followers who form His Mystical Body, the Church. We have the sacred duty to do all in our power that the light of Christ shines up in this world, and that through our devoted service to God and mankind the world will become a better place to live in for all.

I am looking with great expectations to the members of the Saint Joseph Men's Association. Now the time has come to implement fully the aims and purpose of your organisation, as it is spelt out in point 3 of your handbook. Now, as never before, your chance has come to become a real leaven in our society. All of you are called upon to be shining examples in public concern and good housekeeping at home.

## 6. Choosing a political party

As already mentioned, the constitution upon which the Union of South Africa was founded in 1910 denied Black people the right to vote and to participate in the government of this country. This state of affairs was upheld by the subsequent constitutions adopted under the nationalist government in 1961 and 1983 respectively. Hopefully this unjust situation will come to an end very soon, as the new constitution, which is to emerge from the process of negotiation between the present government and the liberation movements will no doubt enfranchise all South Africans.

Once the democratic process is fully in place, many different political parties will vie for involvement in the country's government, on local, regional and national level. The decision about which candidates will take public office on these different levels will be made by all citizens casting their votes for the candidate of their choice, in general elections. As a rule, these candidates will be members of different political parties, each party having its own political aim and programme of action. Thus voting for a candidate means also voting for a party and for what it stands for. Voters have, therefore, the duty to inform themselves about the political programme of the party whose candidate they wish to choose as their representative in government.

As Christians, we shall preferably vote for those parties whose political programme is in harmony with, or nearest to our Christian convictions. The same applies when it comes to your choosing a party for membership. Once you have joined a party, do all in your power to keep it faithful to the commitments, which made you, decide to join it. As an individual, you would not seem to have much clout to do so, however, do not forget that each party is made up of individuals like yourself.

If each member of the party uses and fulfils his or her democratic rights and duties, the leadership of the party cannot just do their own thing.

## 7. Making known and implementing the Church's Social Teaching

On account of her long history, and her experience with so many different peoples and cultures over the centuries, the Catholic Church has accumulated and unequalled body of wisdom and data concerning the organisation of our human society. It is referred to as her Social Teaching, which she is ready to share freely with all people of good will. As you are aware, the Church in South Africa has devoted this whole year to celebrating the centenary of the publication of the encyclical letter *Rerum Novarum*, which laid the foundation for the Church's social teaching in modern times. As our society is about to reshape itself fundamentally, after its long imprisonment in racial prejudice – which long preceded the apartheid ideology – it is our duty to make our Church's social teaching known, and to help implement it.

To begin with, we ourselves must become familiar with it. Here I appeal again in particular to the Saint Joseph Men's Association, who specifically mention the Church's Social Teaching in their constitution (Clause 4.4.3). I appeal also to our Justice and Peace Groups, and to all sodalities and youth clubs: make yourselves familiar with the Church's Social Teaching; make it known to others; and help to let it take shape in your local community and in our country as a whole.

In shaping the new South Africa, we shall have to be aware of both extremes in socio-economic theory and practise which have brought so much suffering over countries

and their people in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, viz. liberal capitalism and Marxism socialism, as the Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, warned in his recent social encyclicals *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* of December 1987, and *Centesimus Annus* of May 1991.

As equality in economic opportunities will grow in years to come, care will have to be taken that people do not fall for the temptation to simply amass wealth. Instead they must be taught to develop a social conscience, making them willing to share their surplus with the less fortunate society.

Neither must people be allowed to fall for the lure of Marxist socialism, with its false promises about equal distribution of wealth. Since 1989 we have witnessed the rapid breakdown of the socialist economies in the Soviet Union and its satellites in Eastern Europe. We have also seen the failure of many socialist ventures in Africa. The lesson is the same in Europe as here in Africa. Marxist socialism's promise of paradise on earth is a dream, which always ends with total disillusionment for the majority of the people. Sooner or later they realise that a small clique of bureaucrats impose harsh sacrifices on them, while they enrich themselves and leave behind a ruined economy.

On the other hand, there are convincing examples of free market economies where, unlike in the socialist system, the individual's spirit of enterprise is not squashed, but tempered and guided by social principles derived from the Social Teaching of the Church, resulting in maximum benefits for all. Such models, appropriately referred to as 'social market economy', should be before our eyes, rather than those proposed by socialist propagandists. To bring them about in our country will require hard work, honesty in administration, and a common vision for all South Africans, rather than a struggle between classes of people, which the Socialists want people to believe to be avoidable.

#### 8. 'Mine is not a kingdom of this world'

What did Jesus mean when he said to Pontius Pilate that his kingdom was not of this world (Jn 18:36)?

The immediate meaning is clear from what Jesus said further to his unjust judge: 'If my kingdom were of this world, my men would have fought to prevent my being surrendered to the Jews. But my kingdom is not of this kind...I came into the world for this: to bear witness to the truth; and all who are on the side of truth listen to my voice' (Jn 18:36). However, we hear in Jesus' declaration to Pilate about the otherness of His kingdom also this: kingdoms come and go; empires come and go; power blocks come and go; whereas the Church, the vehicle through which Christ's kingdom is preached to all generations is here to stay until His return, at the end of time.

Political parties must respect the priority of their members' faith commitment, because whatever good these do in terms of their membership in any particular party springs forth from their being rooted in a personal relationship with the living God, our Creator and Redeemer. Likewise, each of us must have a deep self-respect for our mysterious union with our Lord Jesus Christ. We must have a high regard for, and protect, His Body, the Church, who is the mother through whom we receive spiritual health and nourishment from childhood to death. Long before there were political parties, she was there, and in every generation, since the days of the apostles, she

inspired Christian men and women to give outstanding service to their particular peoples, and humankind as a whole.

As Catholics we rejoice in the freedom of political expression, which has been gained as last for all South Africans. Many Catholics were among those who paid a high price in suffering to achieve this freedom. As Catholics we shall continue to make our contribution to the unfolding democratic process in our country, giving our support to all those parties, which deserve our support. However, in the light of Christ's words to Pilate, we shall also emphasize and maintain the Church's freedom and independence from the political sector. In this connection I wish to draw your attention to a few issues which may arise sooner or later also in our area:

- Political parties are sometimes insensitive to our obligation to worship God our Father on Sundays. This becomes apparent when political rallies are held on Sunday mornings, colliding with our Mass times. Whenever this happens, we must point out the problem politely and firmly to the political leaders and insist on change of attitude on their part.
- The use of our churches or chapels for any form of manifest political activity is totally ruled out. The same applies where a congregation conducts its divine services in a multi-purpose hall.
- If a political party requests to use a church hall for a meeting, great discretion will be required before agreement is given for such use. A factor to be kept in mind is that we are still at the beginning of a long learning process concerning democratic rules of tolerance and fair play. Up to the moment, the use of violence against political opponents is still the rule of the day. Thus you might easily see your church hall vandalised by the opposition of the party to whom you granted permission to use it for their meeting.

When such requests are made on us we are not wrong in pointing out to political leaders that our Church supported their cause during the time when they and their parties were suppressed by the apartheid regime. Now that they are free, let them patiently build up their own infrastructures or use public facilities for their meetings, the use of which can no longer be denied them. They must not behave as if they had a birthright to the use of all facilities, which we erected for our own purpose.

Sometimes political leaders may invoke the notion of a 'People's Church' in this connection, in an attempt to transfer political concepts into the church. In reply, we shall tell them two things: Firstly, that the Catholic Church very much sees herself as the 'People of God', and that she gives a wide berth to participation of every member in her life and growth. Secondly, that since apostolic times she has evolved her own structures which have stood the test of time. Even though they are subject to change, in response to the changing times, they cannot be fashioned according to the passing whims of men. As visible Body of her invisible Head, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, she will always have an aspect of mystery about herself which escapes our limited human perception.

In the times lying ahead of us, our Pastoral Councils will assume increasing importance in assisting the priests in carrying out their pastoral duties with wisdom and discretion. The reason why I insist on the use of the term 'Pastoral Council' is precisely to emphasise their being called to take part in the priest's pastoral concern

for the flock entrusted to him by the bishop of the diocese. He should also be able to rely on his Pastoral Council in dealing with sensitive matters such as those mentioned.

- Under no circumstances must we allow political matters to split our faith community. This holds true for parishes and local communities, Pastoral Councils, Communities of Religious, as well as Sodalities and youth organisations; in other words, it concerns all levels of our Local Church, not least our presbyterium.

Pastors in particular must be careful not to align themselves publicly with any particular political party, otherwise they run the risk of alienating those members of their congregation who give their support to opposing parties.

As citizens going to the polls, they have, of course, a right to their own political preference. However, their political standpoint must not warp their proclamation of the timeless Word of God.

## 9. Community serving humanity

For a very long time the Catholic Church in South Africa was reviled by detractors as ‘The Roman Danger’. Catholics in this country have suffered much from misunderstanding and outright enmity. At the height of the apartheid regime’s sway, Catholic bishops were even defamed by the authorities as communists. In spite of all opposition against her, today the Catholic Church is the single largest denomination in our country. Over the years her contribution to South Africa’s education, health care and social services has been huge, quite in excess of what might have been expected in terms of her membership. As the motto of our Pastoral Plan expresses it so well, we Catholics are determined to render our wholehearted service to this country also in the future.

As chaplain of the Chiro Youth Movement, I joined in 1972 the motto of this organisation, which it still uses today: ‘We build our nation in the spirit of Christ’. At the time, with apartheid still firmly in place, this motto may have had an unreal ring. Today everybody is speaking about nation building. Indeed the challenges before us are huge. Not only must the prejudices be overcome which over the 40 years of apartheid indoctrination have implanted in many South African hearts. More specifically, among the Black population, there is a huge backlog in the following areas:

- General education, resulting from decades of ‘Bantu Education’;
- Professional training, caused by years of job reservation for whites;
- Housing, as a result of legislation which prevented freedom of movement and settlement;
- Unemployment, the enormity of which only naïve or wicked people blame entirely on the economic sanctions applied against South Africa to make her abandon the apartheid policy.

Besides these backlogs, apartheid has bequeathed to our society a number of other problems:

- Political violence;
- An increasing crime rate;



- Disintegration of our families, resulting in several ancillary evils, such as one of the world's highest divorce rates, the steady increase of one-parent households, and the threat of an AIDS epidemic;
- Widespread alcoholism and growing drug abuse; and
- Low work incentive.

Against this dark background of social evils besetting our society, it is almost a miracle that our Black people have survived at all. However, it is clear that we shall have to make a supreme effort to overcome these evils. Let us in the diocese of Bethlehem do all in our power to uplift and build our nation in the spirit of Christ, fighting all that breaks down the social fabric!

Here I turn again with real urgency and great confidence to our Sodalities and youth organisations, as well as to Small Christian communities where they exist: there is no time for internal squabbles; there is work to be done all around you.

If you have no appeal to the young, ask yourself why, and apply the correct remedy. Regard your associations as training grounds for leadership in society. Remember the age-old rule of St Benedict: '*Ora et labora, Pray and work*'. Pray by all means in your associations, but do not forget to work also. A nation has to be rebuilt, and it needs your unqualified support.

There may be a danger that many of our people, especially among the youth, will regard politics as the cure-all for our nation's ills. This could lead to what has been termed a 'culture of entitlement': *we have suffered neglect and deprivation for so long; now we have a right to possess all the things which were withheld from us!* Politics will certainly have to lay an important role in bringing about a more just distribution of wealth in our country, but even more important will be a change of heart in people. This will not come about through politics alone, but as a result of true repentance, that complete about turn in people's lives which our Lord demanded of his followers (Mk 1:15), and which the Church faithfully advocates to this day.

Assuring you of my continuous prayer, that you may, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, learn to see faith and politics in their true perspective, and that as a community serving humanity you may help to build our nation in the spirit of Christ, I remain.

Yours sincerely in the Lord  
 +HUBERT BUCHER  
 Bishop of Bethlehem