

**PASTORAL LETTER OF THE DIOCESE OF BETHLEHEM REGARDING
ALTAR SERVERS
(28 NOVEMBER 1994)**

Dear Altar Servers in the Diocese of Bethlehem,

I believe this is the first time I am addressing myself directly to you. I tell you why: I would like to invite you to do something important, which no other altar servers in this country has done. But I promise you that your example will soon inspire others to imitate you.

For 150 years there has existed an organisation within the Catholic Church, called Holy Childhood Association. Its aim is to make children realise that even they have a calling to help to help spread the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. They can and should do so by praying every day for the priests, sisters and lay persons who proclaim the Gospel throughout the world, and by making a financial contribution towards the mission work of the Church. Recently the national promoter of the Holy Childhood Association, Sr Josephine Andrews from Cape Town, visited a number of Catholic schools in our Diocese and spoke to the children about their missionary calling. Perhaps you have met her.

The motto of the Holy Childhood Association is 'Children helping children'. Whatever money children give for the mission work of the Church, via the Holy Childhood Association, is collected in Rome and then distributed in support of projects which aim to help children in the mission countries, such as orphanages, crèches, preschools, and material for catechesis. In our diocese too, many crèches were built and furnished with the help of moneys collected by children throughout the world, who are members of the Holy Childhood Association.

In many countries, one of the most successful drives to collect money for Holy Childhood takes place at the beginning of the year, when the Church celebrates the feast of Epiphany (6th day of January; in South Africa transferred to the following Sunday). In each parish this drive is organised and carried out by the altar servers. What do they do? They dress up like the Three Wise Men who came from the East in search of the new-born Messiah, about whom the Gospel tells us on Epiphany. Each of them carries something symbolising the gifts the Three Wise Men offered to the child Jesus in the stable at Bethlehem: gold, incense and myrrh. Another altar server carries a staff, with the star on top, which led the Three Wise Men to Bethlehem.

Why do they dress up like that? They have two aims in mind: Firstly, to remind the people about the love of god, who became man to redeem us from our sinful state and who invited the pagans to look for him even when he was still a small baby; secondly, to collect money which will help other children to know and love Christ.

How is this done? You dress up in the sacristy, or wherever the parish priest tells you. After this you pray for a little while in the Church, asking the Lord to bless your endeavour. Then you enter the streets, taking them one by one, singing a short song about the Gospel of Epiphany and what it means for us. At the end of the song you ask for a financial contribution towards the fund which helps children in need. One of

you has a container into which the money is placed. In each street you go from house to house, or sometimes taking two or three together. It does not matter whether Catholics live in the houses or not. Your message is good for all people, as Christ became man for all and offers redemption to all people of good will.

This is meant to be a serious job, not just a play. If you are a large group of altar servers, and if the parish is big, you may form two or even three teams of Three Wise Men, to proclaim the Good News in the streets of your town. But the selection of those who are allowed to serve as Three Wise Men is not simply left to yourselves. To take part in this drive is a privilege, and it must be carried out by exemplary, responsible boys. Therefore your parish priest must be presented with the names of those you propose for the task, and he must sanction them.

The drive takes place in the period between the 1st and 14th January 1995. It will be repeated every year in January from then onwards. In consultation with your parish priest, pick the days best suited for your particular places. It would be optimal if the Three Wise Men would be sent out by the priest and the congregation during Sunday Mass on the 1st or 8th of January, with a blessing for their work. The period mentioned is still holiday time, so many of you should be free to get involved in this special drive to raise funds for the purposes of the Holy Childhood Association. There may be different teams of the Three Wise Men for different days, taking turns in the work according to a roster.

Special care must be taken to keep the money collected safe. Immediately after returning from your walk through the streets, count the money collected and hand it to the parish priest or the person appointed by him. Each day, write the collection result into a list, which you keep in the sacristy. At the end of the drive, your parish priest will forward the result to our diocese's Director of the Pontifical Mission Societies. The latter will publish the collection results in the various parishes as soon as he has received the final results.

If your town suffers from an exceptional level of violence in the streets, discuss before embarking on the drive how to ensure that naughty people are not going to attempt to rob you of the collection money, while you are in the streets. Needless to say, this drive may only take place during daylight hours.

I encourage you to tape the song, which you will compose for use during the drive. If you send me the tape, I shall refund you for it. If I get many tapes, a prize may be offered for the top two chosen as the best. These could then be put at your disposal for the next Holy Childhood drive, in January 1996.

On the next page you see samples of altar servers clad as Three Wise Kings in countries elsewhere, to give you some idea what you could look like. I thank you for having read my letter to you. I hope many of you will be inspired by it to take appropriate action next January.

May Almighty God bless you and fill you with joy in your service at the altar!

+HUBERT BUCHER
Bishop of Bethlehem

First Sunday of Advent