

**PASTORAL LETTER OF THE SOUTHERN AFRICAN CATHOLIC
BISHOPS' CONFERENCE:
FREE AT LAST
(26/5/1994)**

1. Introduction

On behalf of the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference, the Administrative Board of the SACBC would like to express its profound thankfulness to Almighty God and to share its joy at this time of grace for our country. The elections in South Africa have been successfully completed and a new government of national unity has been peacefully installed. It enjoys the support of the overwhelming majority in the country and as such can claim legitimacy in the eyes of the international community and loyalty from all citizens at home. The whole world prayed for us during the tense weeks prior to the elections and the whole world rejoices with us at this wonderful achievement. We congratulate the new government and assure it our prayers and support as it tries to bring about reconciliation, healing and national unity.

2. Our gratitude to those who worked for justice

As we remember the past, we feel particular gratitude to our own church members who struggled for justice for the best part of a century. Many suffered long years in prison or in exile and even more suffered from harassment and persecution. Theirs was truly a prophetic witness. It is because of their efforts, the efforts of thousands like them and our national campaign of prayer that we can say 'Thank God, we are free at last.' All who brought about the peaceful settlement through negotiations deserve also to be regarded as heroes and heroines. We thank the many Catholics who joined with others to educate people about voting. The fact that the spoilt votes comprised less than one percent is testimony to the good work done. The many hundreds who worked as observers during the elections also helped towards the remarkably peaceful and joyful atmosphere that prevailed during those days. National healing and reconciliation began in the long queues outside the voting stations as people reached out to one another. Each one who voted helped bring about our liberation. We congratulate everyone who contributed to bringing us into the new democratic South Africa.

3. The challenge to become involved

Now begins an era of new challenges for all of us. With our new found rights and freedoms come new responsibilities. As Christians we are particularly challenged to contribute to the common good of society through activities inspired by the gospel. Some Catholics have already taken up the burden of public office at national or provincial level. We congratulate them and urge them to work for the good of all. Others serve in less prominent capacities but still make a valuable contribution to society. In fact, we urge all our laity who are suitably qualified and interested to become involved in the public life of the country. We cannot just stay aloof and criticise. We must also work for a more just society. This does not mean total acceptance of everything a new government, even a government of national unity, might do or suggest, but it means that as well as being constructively critical we must

be constructively active. The opportunity has now been created, we are challenged to respond.

4. Contributing to the new constitution

One of the first tasks of the new parliament will be to draw up a final constitution. It is important for people to get to know the Interim Constitution and especially the Bill of Rights it contains. It is imperative that church groups submit recommendations for inclusion in future legislation. These should be aimed at ensuring the maximum fairness and freedom for all while at the same time upholding high moral and ethical standards. Again, active participation is the best safeguard against an unwanted future constitution.

5. Economic involvement

While political matters cannot be underestimated, it is economic issues that affect peoples' daily lives more immediately. All parties in the government or national unity have stressed the need for a programme of reconstruction and development. It is only if this programme is implemented that living conditions will improve. Only improved living conditions will bring stability and stability is essential if our young democracy is to survive. If we want democracy and peace, we must tackle our economic problems.

6. A call to work hard

It is the poverty, homelessness, and malnutrition of the majority of our citizens that one can see the enduring results of apartheid. Unfortunately, these did not disappear with the elections. President Mandela's call to all citizens to work hard and to address these evils deserves our fullest support. This enormous task will take decades to complete so we will have to work patiently as well as enthusiastically. Each one is capable of doing something to help in answer to the many needs in our country. Using the words of the well-known parable we can say that there are people who need someone to share a fish with them so that they can eat; others need someone to teach them to fish so that they can help themselves and some need people to fight for their right to have equal access to fishing and active participation in the economy. But people also need to work in self-help projects rather than passively wait to receive help. We are all challenged to help build up a strong economy and to ensure a better distribution of the wealth it brings. We have the privilege of making a good beginning so that gradually we can begin to care for all the members of our society, especially those most vulnerable: the old and the handicapped.

7. A new era

While emphasising the role of the laity in promoting the material and spiritual health of the nation, we realise that clergy and religious too have their part to play. As bishops, we commit ourselves to developing peace and prosperity in the whole region of South Africa. We hope to meet the new Government of National Unity and pledge it our support of our people. We will remind it that it carries the hopes and dreams of many. However in the future, if the need arises, we will also criticise it and lobby for improvements when things go wrong. In doing this we will co-operate with other civil

and religious bodies committed to the same ideals and values. We thank God for having brought us to this moment and we ask for an outpouring of the Spirit that we may prove worthy of the wonderful opportunity that is being offered to us.