

## **PASTORAL LETTER OF THE SOUTHERN AFRICAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE ON STATE ACTIONS (MARCH 1988)**

As bishops of the Catholic Church in South Africa, we want to convey to you our profound dismay at several state actions in this country in recent days.

These actions have heightened levels of fear and tension and the degree of oppression experienced by many of our fellow citizens. As pastors of a church which represents approximately ten per cent of the population, it is our duty to state unequivocally the Church's position when basic human rights are violated.

### **General position of the Church**

The Church is concerned with the totality of human life. That totality extends to the quality of life and to everyone's God-given freedom which must be protected and fostered from birth to death so that all may live to their full human potential.

This means that there are basic human rights which God gives to every person and which must be protected by the community as a whole, be it the religious, political or economic community.

If any community violates these rights then it is the duty of the Church to point this out and to plead for redress. The Church must do this no matter which government or political system is in power. For example, the Catholic Church in Zimbabwe spoke clearly both to the Smith regime and to the present Mugabe government on the violation of human rights.

This duty of the Church must in no way be construed as meddling in politics, because the Church is not supporting any political party but safeguarding basic human rights and ideals.

By its very calling as an institution founded by Christ, the Church has a divine duty to involve itself in human affairs.

May we remind you that in his address to the Catholic bishops of South Africa in Rome, Pope John Paul II was both explicit and supportive when he declared the Church's position in political matters. He said:

"During these past years you have borne witness to hope in many ways, thus showing your people the relevance of Christ's Paschal Mystery for their lives. Year in, year out, you have stood with your people in their needs; at the same time you have withstood must unjust criticism in transmitting to them the uplifting message of the Gospel. In statements that have spanned decades you have insisted on justice and the need for the true commandment of love, and invited your people to prayer and to universal fraternal solidarity. In particular, you have raised your voices on human rights, the fundamental equality of all persons, the defence of the oppressed and the concrete demands of justice throughout your region." (Address of John Paul II to the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference, Rome, November 1987).

### **Present restrictions**

In the light of declaration of support from the pope, the Church views the restriction on 18 organisations and on several individuals with indignation.

Organisations have the right to work for the common good, to develop democracy, to help those in need, to support the families of detainees and to dissent from political decisions, which crush legitimate alternatives allowed in civilised countries.

We protest in the strongest possible terms at the restrictions that have now been added to the very repressive measures which already shackle our society.

We call on the state to lift these restrictions, to return to the rule of law, and to abolish apartheid and its evils. It should now be clear to all who value human dignity that apartheid destroys human dignity, cruelly divides communities and that for these reasons it has been judged immoral and inhuman by the international community. We also call on the state to go give to every citizen of this country their God-given rights so that they may develop as true children of God.

We make this call in the spirit of the universal teaching of the Church to oppose injustice wherever it exists.

### **The Promotion of Orderly Internal Politics Bill**

Several organisations in this country depend on overseas assistance for their development. Many of these organisations help the victims of apartheid. They also work to repair the damage apartheid has done to South Africa, and to reconstruct our shattered society on a more equitable basis. They reach the needy and underprivileged through education and through the formation of vital infrastructures appropriate to proper human development.

If the proposed legislation now before Parliament becomes law, it would mean in effect that the government could decide arbitrarily which good works should be done in this country, and which should not.

We therefore condemn the proposed legislation, since it could give the government totalitarian powers, and urge all those who value democracy and liberty to oppose it.

### **The New Nation**

Freedom of the press is basic to any civilised society. This freedom has already been severely restricted in South Africa. *The New Nation* is now threatened with a restriction that would silence it for three months.

*The New Nation* is a secular weekly newspaper owned by the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference. It enjoys editorial freedom and independence. It is an organ known for its vigorous debate on crucial issues. It is a voice, which champions the rights of those without rights. It carries news and views which other newspapers tend not to publish in the present climate of punitive restrictions.

Even this freedom has been curbed by the state. This is a crushing blow to the very limited right to dissent that barely survives in this country.

We deplore this action; and while we may not necessarily agree with opinions published in *The New Nation*, we uphold fully the right to editorial freedom and the right to dissent which that newspaper embodies.

**“Inadmissible affront”**

We have expressed ourselves forcefully in this letter because we believe that the Church’s position in the present repressive situation should be clear and unequivocal. While on the one hand we condemn the violation of human rights in South Africa, we want to stress with equal emphasis that the granting of those precious human rights would enable our society to be transformed in such a way that there could be justice, peace and enough for everyone.

Human dignity is at the centre of the transformation we all desire. Pope Paul VI proclaimed himself very firmly on this issue when he was in Africa 18 years ago. He stated:

“We deplore the fact that there persist social situations based upon racial discrimination and often willed and sustained by systems of thought; such situations constitute a manifest and inadmissible affront to the fundamental rights of the human person.”

We appeal to the government today to turn away from the disastrous road, which it has chosen for our people. We echo the distress of Pope Paul VI when we say: “The cause is urgent and the hour is late.”

Pope John Paul II tells us very clearly that the events of history have confirmed Pope Paul’s judgement. At the same time he pleads that violence should not be accepted as the solution to violence. Rather, violence must give way to reason, mutual trust, sincere negotiations and fraternal love.

In the present context of apartheid, a call to conversion becomes ever more relevant and necessary for our people. The only adequate solution to the problem is the conversion of hearts, that Pope John Paul spoke of to the Southern African Catholic Bishops’ Conference in Rome in November 1987.

May Our lady assumed into Heaven, the patroness of our country, intercede for us and obtain for us the gift of a just peace.

Yours sincerely in Christ Our Lord.

**Signed:**

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Acting- President

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