

**PASTORAL LETTER OF THE SOUTHERN AFRICAN CATHOLIC
BISHOPS' CONFERENCE ON THE OCCASION OF THE CENTENARY OF
THE FIRST PAPAL ENCYCLICAL ON SOCIAL JUSTICE, *RERUM
NOVARUM*, AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR NEGOTIATIONS IN SOUTH
AFRICA (13 FEBRUARY 1991)**

***Rerum Novarum* and Catholic social teaching**

1. *Rerum Novarum* is the title in Latin of a letter that was sent by the Pope to all members of the Catholic Church a hundred years ago on 15 May 1891. The Pope who sent it was Leo XIII and the subject he wrote about was the situation of workers.
2. At the time the establishment of factories had made life very hard for workers. Those who owned the factories were trying to make as much money as possible and therefore paid the workers as little as possible. Workers were getting more and more discontented and angry. There were arguments, quarrels, fights and even revolutions. It was a huge problem in many countries. Different people proposed different solutions.
3. With this picture before him Pope Leo XIII was becoming extremely anxious. Was this a matter that called for the help of the Church? Was it the Church's duty to speak out about the hardships of workers? About the rights and duties of the workers and factory owners? Did the Gospel of Jesus Christ have anything to say about the situation?
4. Pope Leo decided that it had. He wrote *Rerum Novarum*, pointing out the lessons of the Gospel for businessmen and workers. His letter burst on the world like a thunderclap. People of the world were not used to the Pope dealing with such matters. A new period had begun in the Church, a period of concern about social justice and sins against social justice, a period of Catholic social teaching and action flowing from it.
5. As time went by it became more and more clear that social justice is a matter of the highest importance for the Church, because it deals with so many aspects of people's lives. It deals not only with the right to work and fair wages, but also with many other rights and the duties that go with them: in matters like education, housing, medical care, freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of association, freedom of movement, national freedom, women's rights, children's rights, the right to vote in elections, and so on. The Church has to deal with these matters because promoting human rights is promoting human life, while denying them is hurting human life. Denying human rights is sinful since it causes suffering and conflict. During the past hundred years the Church has realised its role of speaking out on social justice and social sin.

Negotiations for a new South Africa

6. Apartheid has been the great social sin in South Africa. Now, thank God, the long and cruel tale of injustice seem to be coming to an end. This has been confirmed by what occurred recently at a gathering of leaders of many Church's called the Rustenburg Conference. At the gathering, representatives of the Dutch Reform Church spoke of an important decision of the Synod of their Church to declare apartheid a sin and to confess their guilt in not opposing it.

7. The Declaration issued by the Rustenburg Conference has led us with considerable pain to examine our own history. So in welcoming this Declaration, we recognise that its message applies to our Church as a corporate body. We must admit with sorrow that although as a Church we have often spoken out against the sin of apartheid, we are not innocent of all complicity in supporting or going along with it. So we ask forgiveness from all those, both within the Church and beyond, who have suffered from our actions, blindness and negligence in the past. We recommend to our members that they reflect upon the message of Rustenburg, pray over it and put it into effect. For our part, we re-affirm our commitment to remove all vestiges of apartheid in our institutions and procedures.
8. There is a new spirit of hope as the old divisions of the past give way to a growing desire for negotiations. Groups long opposed to each other are preparing to discuss their differences with a view of reaching an agreement. Negotiations in South Africa could lead to big changes. The major change would be recognition of equal rights for all people, equal political rights and equal opportunity in education and in making a living. Equal rights and opportunities of course bring equal duties and responsibilities. Obviously all this cannot happen overnight, but the change must be set in motion.
9. The normal way to achieve this is through a gathering of representatives of all the people of a country to work out a constitution. There would have to be negotiations about how to organise the election of such a constituent assembly and how the country is to be administered until a new government can be elected according to the new constitution.
10. All this looks clear and simple enough but there is a problem, the problem of people who have enjoyed power and privilege for so long. A great many of them are going to find it difficult to give up their power and privilege so quickly. People do not easily give up political power and the control they exercise over business, land, education and so many other things. This is nothing new. Giving up power has always been difficult in the history of human race. But this is no excuse for holding on to it unjustly.
11. We can foresee that while some will be willing to accept the sacrifice, others will want to make the process of change longer and more complicated in order to safeguard some of their power and privileges. Not only that, but some may try to stop the process entirely. Obviously if they try hard to do this, there will be violence in the country for worse than anything we have experienced in recent years.
12. There is also the problem that violence has actually intensified just at the time when negotiations have seemed possible. Why did this happen? Are there some people who wish to prevent negotiations by fostering violence? The great majority are tired of such violence. They want to see the process of negotiation proceeding peacefully.

Can the Church help in negotiations?

13. Can we as members of the Church do anything to help? Certainly we can. We can influence public opinion in the right direction. We speak of public opinion as the way the majority of people think and feel about matters of importance in their society. In regard to negotiations, we can help to promote a Christian outlook among the members of our Church, among our friends and neighbours.

14. One practical way of doing this is by sharing our thoughts and feelings with others in an atmosphere of faith. Many people are becoming accustomed to participating in small groups like prayer groups and faith sharing groups and in small communities. In our groups and communities we should read a passage of Scripture that tells of how the believers of old were faced with similar problems. We should then, in a spirit of faith, ask the questions of our time: why are some of us reluctant about negotiations while others are for them? What do we expect from negotiations? What do we fear from negotiations? Are our reasons, our expectations, and our fears, in keeping with our faith? What is God saying to us in this situation?
15. The most wonderful discovery we can make in these groups and communities is how important Christian love is in all experiences of life. Thinking and praying about our experiences in the context of love changes our attitudes into more Christian ones. We call this conversion. We come to realise more fully what Jesus meant when He said: 'I give you a commandment: love one another; just as I have loved you, you must also love one another. By this love you have for one another, everyone will know you are my disciples.' (john 13: 14-15).
16. Other methods too should be used, such as sermons, addresses, conferences, workshops and efforts to find out the truth of what is happening and to understand the process of negotiations, including discussions between different groups – all in the spirit of Christian love of which Jesus gave us the supreme example on the cross, the love that He poured on His disciples after His Ascension when He sent the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.
17. Sharing and spreading our Christian convictions and attitudes often means taking them with us into meetings with members of other churches and with people of other faiths, also with people of no religious faith at all but who like us are seeking love and justice, freedom and peace.
18. A very important aim should be the fostering of a spirit of tolerance between people who hold different political opinions. Some people have a tendency to use violence against those who differ from them. Others try to intimidate people to make them vote in a certain way. The opposite of this is tolerance, that is, respecting people and respecting their freedom even when they differ from us.
19. All efforts on our part of course, are impossible without God's help. We should seek His help in prayer: private prayer, family prayer, group and community prayer, liturgy and informal services of God's word.

A programme for 1991 on *Rerum Novarum* and negotiations

20. That prayer and effort may be vigorously pursued, we, your bishops, are promoting 1991 as a year's programme concerning *Rerum Novarum* and negotiations. In this we are being greatly helped by the commissions of our Bishops' Conference. The programme must be seen in the context of the Pastoral Plan we launched in 1989 with the motto Community Serving Humanity. Our dioceses will combine this programme with their own ways of implementing the Pastoral Plan.
21. The programme will begin after Easter this year and the first month will concentrate on what it has meant for the Church. This will include an observance of the centenary of *Rerum Novarum* on 15 May or the Sunday

- before. Thereafter, month-by-month consideration will be given to other aspects of Catholic social teaching and their importance for negotiations.
22. This letter is an appeal to all to pray and participate in the effort to promote a climate of Christian love and peace. It is an appeal to promote the programme that we have prepared for the centenary year. In regard to this programme the appeal goes in a special way to our dear brothers in the priesthood who have the pastoral care of parishes. Much depend on you to ensure that the programme is followed in parishes throughout the country. And much depends too on the lay people and religious who are your co-workers in the service of God and His people.
23. We look to you, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, to accept this programme with enthusiasm and to promote it vigorously out of love for God and all the people of our beloved country, South Africa, that stands on the threshold of great changes. Through God's help may we do our share to promote theses changes with faith and hope, love and justice.

Prayer for a new South Africa

Father in Heaven,
Your Son has called us
To work for your kingdom.
We praise you for men and women
Who have answered his call throughout the ages.
We praise you for a hundred years
Of social teaching in your Church
Send your Spirit to us in our present need.
Be with those who negotiate
And with all who work
For a new South Africa,
So that peace may flourish
In truth, justice,
Love and freedom.
Through Christ our Lord.
Amen.