PASTORAL LETTER
OF THE SOUTHERN AFRICAN BISHOPS’ CONFERENCE
ON ECONOMIC PRESSURE FOR JUSTICE (MAY 1986)

Our fundamental role as bishops is pastoral care. That is to say we are called at all times and in all circumstances, to give pastoral guidance to those who are in our care. We do this by preaching the gospel, by interpreting it for our times and by bringing to bear upon our situation its hope and challenge.

In times of serious crisis, there is usually a great deal of conflict and confusion about issues so central to people’s well-being, that clear vision of the issues and of what God demands from people committed to His gospel is difficult. In such times all Christians are called upon to open themselves to that gift of the Spirit known as discernment. As for ourselves, it is our pastoral duty to give a lead in exercising that gift. This prophetic task of ours, as it is called, demands of us that we reflect on the issues in the light of the gospel (cf Mt. 5) to see them through eyes opened by Jesus’ teaching, and to decide on what the Lord demands of us here and now. This decision is a decision of conscience, a decision or option that might open up new perspectives for others and thus give them a lead and provide them with a definite direction. It is a decision that inevitable involves taking a bold stand on controversial issues in the sphere of politics and economics, since it is these very areas that are at the root of the conflict and confusion.

In such circumstances our prophetic witness might provide a challenge to people far beyond our dioceses, our country and our Christian fold. It might also provide encouragement and bring some measure of hope to millions of people who are beyond our usual pastoral care.

It is prophetic calling that requires us at certain times to make a direct intervention in the affairs of our country. We realise that our stand represents a point of view with which not all Catholics will agree. But while we acknowledge that in such matters our decisions of conscience about how to pressurize the present government to change do not oblige all Catholics to agree with us, they do give a lead that must be taken seriously. For, what we have done, we have not done lightly. It was only after much reflection, discussion, listening, consulting and prayer that we have decided upon the stand that we are now taking on the issue of putting economic pressure on the apartheid government. As St. Paul once said about another issue: “I have no directions from the Lord but give my own opinion…and I think that I too have the Spirit of God.” (Cor 7:25-40).

Effective non-violent pressure

We must emphasis from the start that it is the unprecedented seriousness of our present crisis, the enormity of the present suffering of the oppressed people of South Africa and the horrifying spectre of escalating violence that has led us to take this stand. Anyone who does not appreciate the untold daily sufferings of the people, the pain, the insecurity, the starvation and horrors of widespread unemployment that are associated with the present system, will also not appreciate the need for drastic and
extraordinary measures to put an end to all the misery as quickly as possible. The system of apartheid has caused so much suffering and so much harm to human relations in our country for so long and is now being defended, despite some reforms, with such repressive violence that people have had to resort to the strongest possible forms of pressure to change the system. It seems that the most effective of non-violent forms of pressure left is economic pressure.

We are deeply concerned about the additional suffering that some forms of economic pressure might cause and we remain very sensitive to the possibility of further unemployment and escalating violence. But against this we have to balance the enormity of the present suffering and rate of unemployment, and the prospects for the future, if the system of apartheid is not dismantled soon. The aim and purpose of economic pressure is to change our society so that the present sufferings may be removed together with the obstacles to employment deriving from the apartheid system.

In considering economic pressure, we recognise that it can be a morally justifiable means of bringing about the elimination of injustice. In deciding in a particular case whether such pressure is justified or not, one needs to balance the degree of injustice and pressing necessity to eliminate it, over against the hardship such pressure may cause.

Many have already judged that the situation in our country is one in which economic pressure is justified. We not only respect their decision but express our admiration for their dedicated service in working for justice here. We assure them that their efforts have not been in vain, but have helped bring about some of the changes that have occurred so far.

We are aware that certain developments are eminent, such as the initiative of the Commonwealth Eminent Persons Group, and the forthcoming Federal Congress of the National party. These may demand a reassessment of the issue of economic pressure. Should the government announce really basic changes, there may be mitigation of economic pressure, or at least its maintenance at the present level, until the genuineness of such changes is clear. On the other hand, there may be an increase in economic pressure should the government prove intransigent.

**Economic viability**

We ourselves believe that economic pressure has been justifiably imposed to end apartheid. Moreover we believe that such pressure should continue and, if necessary, be intensified should the developments just referred to show little hope of fundamental change. However, we need to point out that, in our view, intensified pressure can only be justified if applied in such a way as not to destroy the country’s economy, and to reduce as far as possible any additional suffering to the oppressed through job loss. At the moment we can see no justification for the sort of pressure that would leave a liberated South Africa in an economically non-viable situation. However, we also recognise that the most important factor in deciding on how much suffering should be allowed to flow from economic pressure is the opinion of the oppressed of our land. It is imperative therefore that their views be as fully canvassed as possible. Such consultation is especially important in local consumer boycotts,
where, in order to achieve conformity, not infrequently forms of intimidation are used that range from the regrettable to the most inhuman imaginable. The latter cannot be condemned strongly enough.

We realise we cannot give specific advice on how exactly economic pressures can or should be applied. The feasibility, effectiveness and consequences of each method vary from one case to another and change with circumstances (See footnote). Only those with the necessary expertise can make these judgements, and in doing so they need to keep always in mind the conditions justifying such pressures.

Recognising that the final word is far from being said, we will set up a commission to advise on various aspects of the overall issue that will arise.

We acknowledge yet again that in taking steps such as scrapping of influx control, the government has initiated certain potentially genuine changes. However, if these are not linked to the issue of negotiation with accepted leaders of the people, the current civil war situation will continue and with it an escalating spiral of violence. Such negotiations are possible only if political prisoners are released and their organisations unbanned. The release of such leaders is therefore a vital element in considering the degree to which change is genuine and economic pressure needs to be applied.

We have taken a decision of conscience over which we have agonized. It has been a Gethsemane experience, torn as we have been between the need to promote positive non-violent action against apartheid and the fear of adding to the misery and violence. We now call on you, dear people of God, to reflect on what we have said. To some it may be inadequate, to others deeply disturbing. We beg you not to make hasty judgements about it, but to reflect in the light of the Gospel on the crisis through which we are passing. In such a time we must all examine our conscience in order to make sure that what we seek is God’s will and not our own.

Together we must pray long and hard and we must fast or do other acts of penance. As your bishops we call for an intensification of the campaign of prayer for justice and peace and for the observance of a special day of prayer and fasting on the first Friday of each month. In this we shall be co-operating with other believers who are embarking on similar observances. May the Spirit who has transformed God’s People so often in the past do so again in our midst here in South Africa and may the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your minds and hearts in Christ Jesus Our Lord.

**FOOTNOTE**

**Forms of economic Pressure**

**Divestment:**
This is a process whereby pressure is put on bodies to withdraw funds from companies which are investigating in South Africa, for example, by selling shares in companies operating in the country. The aim is to put pressure on big business and the government to change. Divestment helps to expose the horrors of apartheid and to create a lack of confidence in the system at international level.
Disinvestment;
This has a number of aspects such as refusing new capital investment in South Africa, withdrawing or refusing loans, selling existing plant and removing physical capital.

Embargoes and Trade Sanctions:
Banning trade with South Africa whether export or import.

Boycotts:
Similar to sanctions but can also be applied by non-governmental persons or agencies.

Signed at Marianhill, Natal:

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