

PASTORAL LETTER
OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

ON

CHRISTIAN HOPE IN THE CURRENT CRISIS (MAY 1986)

That our country is in a state of crisis is a matter of common knowledge. And part of that very crisis is that different sections within the country see the crisis differently. For some, it is a breakdown of law and order, of economic standards, of the entire infrastructure of a viable modern society. For others, it is the birthpangs of a freedom long overdue. But however one reads it, one thing should be clear to Christians: Christ is being crucified again (Heb 6:6), for everything that Christ lived and died for is at stake in our land today. Christian oppresses Christian. Christian attacks and kills Christian. Instead of being built up, the body of Christ is being torn to pieces.

We have spoken frequently on social issues in South Africa since our first pastoral on the topic in 1952. Over the years we have tried both to make positive recommendations as well as expose apartheid for the evil thing it is. Our repeated condemnation of the injustices in our country is too well known to need voicing here once again. It is a condemnation that the Gospel forces us to make, even though we realise that there are those who are alienated by such condemnations, and accuse us of meddling in politics. By contrast, others have protested that we did not condemn enough, that our protests were weak, even naïve, that we have not allied ourselves clearly enough to the cause of the oppressed and joined them in their struggle to overthrow their oppression. At times we get the impression that no one interested in hearing from us the demands of the Gospel, but rather that each wishes to be assured that we are on his or her side.

Let there be no mistake – we are not neutral in the current conflict in South Africa. We support fully the demands of the majority of people for justice. It is our concern for the speedy attainment thereof that has led us to support the use even of economic pressure to achieve this. We remind them of Jesus' words: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for what is right; they shall be satisfied" (Mt 5:5). We oppose the continuing refusal of the present government and its supporters to give meaningful political power to those who rightfully should have it. While understanding the former's fears, we oppose the injustices they perpetrate in the desperate hope of allaying them. We beg them to take seriously our Lord's words that whereas those who seek to save their lives will lose them, those who lose their lives for Jesus' sake will save them (Lk 9:24).

The gift of hope

Jesus gave His disciples the precious gift of hope. And it is that gift that He is offering us today. In this letter we wish to move beyond our condemnations of the evils around us – though such condemnation remain in all their fullness – and speak to you of hope in these critical times.

We all have our hopes. Some are fairly mundane. Others are lofty. Some are heroically self-sacrificing. Others are fairly selfish. But we cannot live without some form of hope. This is especially true of us as Christians, since Christians are above all people of hope. What then is our hope? No one has expressed it better than our Lord Himself when, the night before He died, He prayed: "Father, may they be one in us, as you are in me and I am in you" (Jn 17:21). Jesus took His followers from various, even opposed, strata in society. His closest disciples – the twelve apostles – united in their midst radically opposed Jewish factions. On the other hand, there was a freedom fighter such as Simon the Zealot and, on the other hand, someone who was a hated collaborator with the Roman regime and an extortionist of his own people, a tax-collector, Matthew. And after Jesus' death even a Pharisee would be part of that selected group – the apostle Paul. When Jesus prayed for unity within such a group he was no starry-eyed idealist. He knew well the price that had to be paid for it to exist.

He paid the first instalment Himself – a crucifixion inflicted on Him because the love He preached and practised was too demanding. Many religious leaders of the time could not face up to His demand that they accept wholeheartedly the poor and the outcast as their brothers and sisters; many of those very poor whose cause He upheld could not see beyond their desire for material welfare (Jn 6:27), and too, would pay the price for putting love first, for putting their love for one another before any sectional loyalties whatsoever. Thus the Jews persecuted them for opening their arms to non-Jews, while the Romans persecuted them for not paying at least lip service to the gods of the state. But in spite of their persecution they experienced the joy and strength of the greater thing Jesus had given them. Their love for one another, a love that transcended all the different groups and social strata they belonged to.

Our Christianity, then, is all about being one in Christ. It is all about Christians forming a new society, a society based on service to others, rather than the desire to dominate; a society based on sharing what one has with others, rather than the selfish scramble by each for as much wealth as possible; a society in which the value of being together as human beings is ultimately more important than any lesser group whether it be family, nation, race or culture.

The Church is meant to be, amongst other things, an example to the world of such a society, built on love. We fall far short of it. But it is the ideal towards which we should be striving. It is also such a society that we should be working for in South Africa. We need to be critical in our country of whatever conflicts with it. Hence, it leads us to condemn apartheid. But it also condemns any movement that would seek to establish its own tyranny in apartheid's place. How sad it is to see people, already oppressed to breaking point, being the victims of their own fellow sufferers who execute tyrannical mob judgement and mob violence.

Satanic work

The government's policy has created hate and madness in our land. It has done its satanic work well: We are far apart from one another, so far that many wonder if there is any hope.

Yet, there is hope. It is a hope that looks beyond the group identities and group interests apartheid has forced us into. It is a hope that looks beyond that to something

that is more precious to us than anything else: Being one with each other, as Jesus is one with His Father. It is a hope that demands enormous sacrifices from all of us.

Every mass is a celebration not only of our unity, but also of the price Christ paid for it. Every mass is a reminder that unity cannot become a living reality without sacrifice. We can only be open to each other by emptying ourselves, and that means sharing Christ's cross. This is already a reality for many of our people. It will become still more of a reality in the near future. However, every mass is also a celebration of hope, a reminder that after Good Friday comes Easter, after death comes the resurrection, after sorrow – joy.

We Christians do have a hope, therefore, that can inspire us; a hope that can heal the divisions in our country.

Such a hope will, first of all, lead the privileged among us to work for the freedom of our brethren suffering under the apartheid system. How can our unity with them be a true hope, if we do not work to destroy all that prevents it from becoming a reality?

Secondly, our hope is one that will also lead the oppressed themselves to throw off the yoke of their oppression. They have every right to do so and many are dying in that cause. Their sacrifice must not be in vain. However, let it be the **Christian** hope that inspires them to such heroism. It is not easy to suffer and, above all, die for being one with those who have oppressed you. But that is precisely what Jesus calls us to do. As Paul wrote to the Romans, "It is not easy to die even for a good man – though of course for someone really worthy, a man might be prepared to die – but what proves that God loves us is that Christ died for us while we were still sinners" (Rom 5:7). As Jesus died, He asked His Father to forgive His persecutors. What we saying here is not a call to the oppressed of our country to simply accept their oppression and practise patience. On the contrary, their very hope, their very love for those who oppress them demands that they get rid of it, that they fight it with all the legitimate means at their disposal. However, we beg them to keep the correct motives clearly in perspective; to allow the Christian hope to free them from the danger of being enslaved by distorted hopes, such as the hope of vengeance, the hope of power for power's sake, the hope of dominating those who dominated them.

Thirdly, our Christian hope can liberate also the privileged groups in our society from their own distorted hopes, such as the hope that they can somehow or other retain their power and their privileges and still satisfy the just demands of their suffering brethren. Such a hope is distorted since one cannot see how it can be fulfilled other than by entrenching injustice.

Our Christian hope, therefore, can both inspire and liberate us. What is more, it can give the strength to rise even above those hopes that are quite legitimate, but lesser ones. For many people, such hopes revolve around a good standard of living and of education. Those who already enjoy these things, legitimately hope that they may continue to do so. Those who do not enjoy them yet, legitimately hope to do so in the future. But these hopes may not be fulfilled. If we become so attached to them as to make them the only meaningful hope we have, then we may well experience the darkness of despair. However, if there is hope for us beyond that, then we will find the strength to face such an eventuality.

Our calling

By God's grace, we live in a pluralist society. We live in a country where many languages are spoken, where cultures and standards of living vary enormously. For some people this may be a recipe for disaster. For a Christian it is a challenge, an invitation to savour the joys of unity and diversity. The major contribution we as Christians can make on our subcontinent is to preach that vision, and support movements that seek to make it's realisation a possibility.

Each of us can do something to remove injustice, to give tangible expression to our unity in Christ. Some feel called to perform actions that result in the ultimate sacrifice of life itself. Today, even showing solidarity with those suffering, exposes one to such a risk. Others protest to the point of risking the lesser but still terrifying sacrifice of falling into the hands of the security police. However, not all are given the grace to perform such great deeds. The majority of us will follow such heroic examples in smaller ways.

Witnessing to love

Examples of smaller but nevertheless very real contributions are increasing around us. Some focus on fasting as a form of prayer and as a way of identifying with suffering. Others focus on the economic disparity in our land and so tax themselves voluntarily in order to share the proceeds with those less privileged. Others concentrate on the need for just labour practises and try to bring about a just wage system within their firms, even at the risk of becoming less competitive and being priced out of the market. Others, again, focus immediately on creating cells of friendship expressive of our oneness in Christ, cells that cut across the lines that divide us into groups. Then there are those who take the risk – for it is increasingly such today – of witnessing to love by practising non-violent forms of protest despite immense provocation by others to be violent. All such and many, many other deeds are effective contributions to the realisation of our hope. Their very presence in our midst gives hope to us. They are signs, sacraments of hope that can sustain us.

In addition to all the above, however, is prayer. What we hope for is, in effect, the transforming power of God's love in our lives. Such a power is obtainable only through prayer. In prayer we open ourselves to God's influence as well as demonstrate our eagerness for His love to transform the world around us. Let us pray long and hard, then, that our hearts may so be inflamed by our hope that we may effectively contribute to its becoming a living reality in this beloved land of ours.

Signed at Marianhill, Natal:

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