

PASTORAL LETTER

On

RECONCILIATION

SACBC Plenary Session, 9 February 1975

To the Clergy, Religious and Laity of South Africa

1. Late on Christmas Eve His Holiness the Pope opened the Holy Door in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome to inaugurate the Holy Year of 1975. This door remains closed and sealed at all times except during a Holy Year. It is opened as a symbol of access to God's mercy through the special penitential practises of a Holy Year.

Year of Pilgrimage, Prayer and Penance

2. The Holy Year of 1975 will draw many pilgrims to Rome for visits to the principal churches of Rome, St. Peter's, St. Paul's, St. John Lateran and St. Mary Major. It is clear that anyone going on such a pilgrimage must go not merely for enjoyment as a tourist but in the spirit of the Holy Year, the spirit of pilgrimage.
3. This is first of all a spirit of prayer prompting full participation in the special devotions of the Holy Year, in Eucharistic celebrations, in silent meditation on the mysteries of the faith and intimate conversation with our Lord, in shared prayer and other devotions, such as the Rosary and the Stations of the Cross.
4. This spirit of prayer must also be a spirit of penance leading to participation in penitential services and the use of the Sacrament of Penance, of the traditional Christian practices of fasting from food, abstaining from luxuries, giving alms more generously and offering oneself in Christian service for the benefit of others, the sick, the disabled and the poor.
5. Concern for others to-day must go far beyond the needs of individuals and take in the great situations of poverty, privation and oppression under which vast masses of people live. There is little one can do as an individual about these situations, but they should never be absent from our minds in times of prayer and penance; for this will render us constantly aware of large-scale injustices and sufferings that call out for the healing power of the gospel communicated through people of faith, goodwill and courage. Such awareness shared with others in a prayerful and penitential spirit can be a source of Christian counsel, decision and action at the right time and place.
6. The opening of the holy Year in Rome coincides with the closing of the preparatory Holy Year that has been celebrated all over the world outside Rome. The Holy Year Indulgence can now be gained only in Rome. But this does not mean that outside Rome we should abandon those practices and celebrations that have been fostered during the preparatory Holy Year. It seems an excellent idea to continue and even intensify them in union with those who make the pilgrimage to Rome. Few, relatively speaking, can make this pilgrimage. All the more reason, therefore, for identifying ourselves from afar with the celebration of the Holy Year in Rome by continuing what has been started during our preparatory Holy Year. It was with this in mind that the Southern African Bishops' Conference resolved "that practices and observances of the Holy Year be extended until the end of the Holy Year in Rome, with special emphasis on the need for reconciliation in South Africa."

Reconciliation

7. What do we mean by reconciliation? The simplest description of reconciliation starts from a situation in which one person dislikes another or feels anger, resentment or hatred against that person, or both feel this way about each other. Reconciliation occurs when the bad feeling is overcome, and the two people become friendly. We have no difficulty in understanding such situations, we have all experienced them.
8. The position is much more complicated and much more serious when the bad feeling is not merely between one person and another, or even one family and another, but between one community and another. The long history of mankind is full of stories of such bad feelings

between communities, between tribe and tribe, nation and nation, between people of different religions (Christian, Jewish and Moslem; Catholic, Anglican and Protestant) between people who own land or factories or businesses and those employed as workers on the land or in the factories or businesses. Between communities there are differences of language, custom and appearance; there are political differences, economic differences, religious differences. These frequently lead to great animosities and hatreds, wars and revolutions. We cannot deny the fact that we find it hard to like people of a different community. We are more tempted to fight them.

9. Yet we cannot live without belonging to a community. The community gives us friends, neighbours and fellow-workers. It protects and educates us and gives us our language and our own ways of thinking, feeling and acting. Because we grow up in these ways, we usually do not like the ways of other communities. Enmity between communities is one of the worst examples of human sinfulness. Community spirit is one of the greatest blessings of mankind. But when it turns into a spirit of enmity against other communities it is one of the greatest evils.
10. A disastrous aspect of this evil is that it blinds us, it prevents us from seeing the evil in ourselves. We belong to our community as a drop of water belongs to the ocean, as a grain of sand belongs to the earth, as a breath of air belongs to the atmosphere. We see with the eyes it gives us. We hear with the ears it gives us. Its spirit is our spirit. Its life is our life. Whatever is good in it is in us. Whatever is evil in it is in us also. That is why we find it so hard to see the evil. As with our individual failings, others see them much more quickly and clearly than we do. We may never see them. One of the greatest tragedies of the human race is that communities hardly ever see and admit their own failings. They do not want to see them. They prefer to remain blind to them. That explains to some extent why one community can persist in oppressing another without apparently any qualms of conscience.
11. As long as this goes on, reconciliation is impossible. The community that is hurting the other sees no need to change; and the community that is being hurt gets more and more resentful, until its resentment bursts out into the open conflict.

Reconciliation in South Africa

12. There is no denying that we have a situation of this kind in the Republic of South Africa. Because it is such a painful and critical situation, it is necessary to dwell on it for a short while. People of Botswana and Swaziland, to whom these words are addressed, are asked to be patient with this special attention to a problem of the Republic. As members of the Church, of the human family and of the regional community of Southern Africa, they are no doubt interested and concerned and surely willing to help in any way they can, especially with their prayers.
13. The history of the past produced the South African situation, when none of us alive today took part in what was happening. But we live with the result, which accounts to this: that the White community, though numbering less than a fifth of the total population, has practically all the political power and nearly all the wealth. Because of this it controls the lives of the other four fifths of the population and, being human, it controls them largely for its own benefit.
14. Obviously people can argue for ever about the details of the situation and about whether or not this or that detail should be changed. But, by and large, the position is that, because of historical developments, a White minority dominates a Black majority and enjoys the profits and benefits of this domination. This is known by the ugly word "oppression", and oppression is an injustice that arouses passions of anger and enmity that inevitably erupt in violence.
15. We have seen what happened in Mozambique and Angola. We know what is bound to happen in Rhodesia, South West Africa and the Republic of South Africa, if there is not rapid settlement in these countries bringing White

domination to an end. The end of White domination does mean, of course, the end of White participation in these countries. Whites will be welcome to stay and share in the common effort, as in most countries of Africa.

16. The White community of South Africa has the choice in its hands: a peaceful settlement or violence. Blacks have made this clear, and history and world opinion are on the Black side. A peaceful settlement does not mean a sudden and total upheaval; it means an agreement to work within acceptable time limits towards a just sharing of power and wealth.
17. To achieve such an agreement will be extremely difficult. Many say that it is utterly impossible and that, consequently, the only foreseeable future for South Africa is a long-drawn-out violence leading to the ultimate collapse of White power, as in Mosambique and Angola. In fact, that is what may occur. But as Christians can we just sit back and let it happen?
18. Christianity means believing in an all-loving and all-powerful God, in the Incarnation of his Son and the life, death and resurrection of Jesus for the redemption of mankind, in the gift of the Holy Spirit, the very light, power, strength and love of God. Christianity means believing in this loving power of God within us. We call it grace and believe that if we respond to it, the unbelievable is possible. "I can do all things in him who strengthens me". (Phil. 4:13). It is even possible, with the grace and our response to it, that the white community of South Africa, despite all that we have said about the difficulties human communities experience in seeing what is evil in themselves and trying to overcome it, may see and act in time.
19. This is what we have in mind when we speak about reconciliation in South Africa. The first step must come from the white community, because it is the White community that has the power and the wealth and is responsible for the present state of oppression.
20. That the White community must make the first step does not mean that it is the only sinner. Every person who recognises in himself and his community the power to do evil and to oppress must recognise that what Whites have done in South Africa most human communities would do, given the opportunity. The sins of the White community in South Africa exemplify the sinful capacities of all mankind. Black groups in South Africa must recognise that they, too, can be guilty of tribal and ethnic animosities and of unjust exploitation of poor and defenceless people. They must also prepare themselves for generous acts of forgiveness when they see on the part of Whites a practical readiness to extend the hand of friendship and to work for justice.
21. There is much to repent of, much to forgive and many situations that cry out for reconciliation.
22. Clearly we of the Catholic Church, who wrote these words or listen to them, or read them, do not have the ability to make significant changes in the control of power and wealth in South Africa. That ability lies elsewhere. What we can do looks insignificant But if we do our share and work with others who have the same convictions, and, above all, if we work with God, what results may not be achieved? Let us remember the words of St. Paul: "No, it was to shame the wise that God chose what is foolish by human reckoning, and to share what is strong, that he chose what is weak by human reckoning: those whom the world thinks common and contemptible are the ones God has chosen – those who are nothing at all to show up those who are everything". (I Cor. 1:27-28)

23. Inspired by these thoughts we call on Catholics throughout South Africa to persevere with, to multiply and to intensify, during the Holy Year of 1975, the observances recommended and put into effect during the Holy Year of preparation. In these observances we are mainly concerned with prayer and repentance, with the kind of prayer and repentance that will bring about change of heart and behaviour, for only such change among a great number of people in South Africa will lead to the kind of reconciliation needed for a peaceful solution to our problems.
24. Christ is our hope and our reconciliation. As St. Paul says: "He is the peace between us, and has made the two into one and broken down the barrier which used to keep them apart... This was to create one single New Man in himself out of two of them and by restoring peace through the cross, to unite them both in a single Body and reconcile them with God." (Eph. 2:14-16) When Paul wrote these words he was thinking of the barrier between Jews and Gentiles. Our barrier is just as real and just as difficult to remove, but in Christ all things are possible. Let us go forward in the strength he gives us.