

PASTORAL NOTE

On

MIGRATORY LABOUR SITUATIONS

SACBC Plenary Session, 1976

We address you on a matter of great seriousness in the daily life of Christians, the question of employing and accepting employment under the system, which does not allow people to have their family with them where they work.

Social action to change this system has had little or no effect in the last twenty-five years. We send with this letter, suggestions for further study for such action.

But a Christian cannot wait for wrong systems to change to conform his life with the love and justice of Christ. He must work out how to live rightly in the situation, while also giving his full energies to trying to reform it.

We need continually to be shaken out of conformity with social evils with which we grew up, and to examine our conscience as to how far we can participate in or profit by them.

THE SITUATION

There are Africans forced to live apart from their families for much or most of their working life in mines, in the vast and growing industrial hostels, in domestic work and similar situations. The best estimates known to us, in this matter where full official statistics are not published, place the number of such migrant workers between 1,5 and 2 million. This includes nearly two thirds of the African workers in industry, commerce and services in the republic. Statistics show a rise in the number of migratory workers in proportion to stabilised African workers. There are signs of some change in the mining industry connected with difficulty in getting labour from neighbouring countries. But in urban areas proportionately more hostels and less family housing are being built. To these people forced to live outside the family we should add the great number obliged to live so far from work that they have to be out of their houses fourteen to sixteen hours a day, with no normal family life, and vast numbers unable to live with their family on account of housing shortages.

A small number of jobs have been created in African areas outside the White areas of the Republic, but this does not touch the main problem, since the present African work force is needed by the Republic, and its permanence is shown by the fact that Africans outnumber all other workers in the republic put together.

The evils of the system have even been admitted by Government spokesmen. It is known to cause the break-up of family life, failure in the formation of growing children, loneliness of separated husbands and wives and fatherless families, widespread infidelity and homosexual practise, hindrance to the stabilization and organisation of labour outbursts of violence among unsettled people, and similar evils.

How far can we participate in or profit by such a system?

THE JUSTICE OF WORK CONTRACTS

Employment in which one person provides wages and the other work makes a partnership in the support of the life of both, which is not chiefly for the convenience of one but for the full human dignity and life of both. Human persons must not be employed only as source of energy and work, but so as to provide for the needs and rights of their personal and family life. So if an employer employs under a system, which places extra and unnatural burdens on the worker he should be prepared to share the burden. The worker should as far as possible avoid taking work in such a manner as to damage his family life.

WITHIN THE ORGANISATION OF THE CHURCH

We must begin hereby assuring that our church parishes and institutions do not conform wrongly with the system. Some urban presbyteries have found that they can do without domestic help in the evenings and at weekends. Various methods may be needed in others and our institutions, such as shortening or altering hours and periods of work so that people can be more with their families, and paying in such a way as to make it possible. What we preach we must do.

No one can declare moral laws exactly for such an immense variety of circumstances, but we must make this a matter of serious examination of conscience, thinking of the effect of the system on the families of the poor in whom we must see Christ. We must remember that no apostolic or humanitarian end can justify use of wrong means in its achievement, and that on the contrary if we seek integrity all else is promised to us, not least in money about which we are often unduly solicitous. Christians cannot altogether abstain from using this wrongful system if only because many people could otherwise get no work, but we can make sure we lighten its burdens as much as possible. We intend to follow up this statement with further examination of Church employment in our Dioceses.

LAY EMPLOYEES

We ask all lay employers to examine their conscience in the same way, and first of all where it is chiefly a matter only of convenience in the employment of domestics. The whole thing becomes more complicated for those in economic competition in farming, industry and commerce. On the other hand they have the same promise or guarantee that if they seek integrity all things necessary will be added to them, and we ask them to consider the ways and means of mitigating the evil mentioned above. We must remember that from its origins Christianity placed its true followers in many situations of social disadvantage, which they gladly accepted. Anyone about to employ migratory workers should examine his conscience as to whether and under what conditions he may employ.

EMPLOYEES

Knowing that migratory labour is the only possible means of subsistence for so many we can no longer offer them such advice as this. Some do undoubtedly take advantage of the system to escape immediate family responsibility. Others use it more than necessary, taking work away from home longer than necessary. They may make mistakes here for the highest motives, such as saving to get their children the best school education. They may forget that such education can be made up later, by evening school and such means, but nothing can ever again take the place of the presence of both parents in the formative years of children and their united loving influence. Relative poverty in a truly united family may be a far greater blessing than

more money in one, which is not so united. If employers generously assist by means such as we have suggested above, workers should give an equally generous energy to their work.

The study plans we offer will bring out certain points, such as that our migratory labour system cannot be hastily compared with employment of foreign migrants in Europe, America or other parts of Africa, and that this menace to family life is increasing rather than decreasing in the Republic.

The point of this letter is to remind ourselves that while we labour by social action to get the system reformed, we must take burdens on ourselves directly in the situation in which God places and calls us.