

POPE JOHN PAUL'S MESSAGE TO SOUTHERN AFRICA

And to the bishops during their ad limina visit to Rome

(November 1987)

Dear brother bishops,

1. In meeting you today I embrace in the unity of our Lord Jesus Christ all the faithful of the countries that you represent: the Republic of South Africa, the Republic of Botswana, the Kingdom of Swaziland, and Namibia.

Your very presence here evokes praise for God, whose providence has been manifested in the history of your evangelisation, and whose love and power have sustained your people throughout all the vicissitudes of their past.

In reflecting on the role of bishops, the Second Vatican Council offers us this splendid summary of what they are about: "In the bishops ... our Lord Jesus Christ, the supreme High Priest, is present in the midst of those who believe" (Lumen Gentium, 21).

Precisely because of this, because you represent Jesus Christ in the midst of your people, you are from them living signs of Christian hope. The hope that you embody and express is linked to the paschal mystery, which is constantly renewed in the Church.

To all who have some understanding of the complex reality of Southern Africa, it is obvious that this aspect of your mission is extremely important: Proclaiming, guaranteeing and bearing witness to a hope that "does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit" (Rom 5:5).

And today I express my full solidarity with you in that hope which springs from the victory of the crucified and risen Christ – that hope which is invincible.

2. During these past years you have borne witness to hope in many ways, thus showing your people the relevance of Christ's paschal mystery for their lives.

Year in, year out, you have stood with your people in their needs, and at the same time you have withstood much unjust criticism in transmitting to them the uplifting message of the gospel.

In statements that have spanned decades, you have insisted on justice and the need for true reconciliation, proclaimed the commandment of love, and invited your people to prayer and to universal fraternal solidarity.

In particular, you have raised your voices on human rights, the fundamental equality of all persons, the defence of the oppressed, and the concrete exigencies of justice throughout your region.

For its part, the Holy See has been firm in its own proclamation of human dignity. Eighteen years ago, in Africa itself, Paul VI stated:

“We deplore the fact ... there persist social situations based upon racial discrimination and often willed and sustained by systems of thought; such situations constitute a manifest and inadmissible affront to the fundamental rights of the human person ...” (AAS 61, 1969, page 585).

In 1974, in his address to the United Nations Special Committee on Apartheid, Paul VI appealed once again for the banishment of systematic discrimination. In so doing, he expressed his conviction that “the cause is urgent and the hour is late” (22/5/1974).

Since then the events of history have confirmed this judgement. At the same time, reason itself still pleads that violence not be accepted as the solution to violence, but that it “must give way to reason, mutual trust, sincere negotiations and fraternal love.”

In the present context of apartheid, a call to conversion becomes ever more relevant and necessary for your people. The only adequate solution to the problem is the conversion of hearts.

3. At this time you are examining your own role as pastors, re-evaluating your specific priorities and methods in the light of the needs of the hour, with a clear view to fulfilling your aims. You are again asking yourselves what is to be accomplished and how it is to be done. You are asking your people to compare the situation of their lives and their society with the gospel and its transforming power.

By the grace of God and the action of the Holy Spirit, it is becoming clearer and clearer to many that the church’s role in the world is to work for the Christian transformation of society through changes that are in accord with the gospel message.

In all these changes it is the Lord Jesus Himself who is active and who works through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Everything that is related to a change of structures is linked to a change of hearts.

For this reason, as bishops you are concerned with insisting on the enormous power of love. You are convinced that your experience of unity, together with prayer, will truly contribute to the goal that must constantly be reaffirmed: The Christian transformation of society.

The power of love in which you place your trust is not primarily human love, but rather divine love – the love of God for all those who are poor and oppressed, the love of God poured out in the heart of Christ, who in the act of revealing love also teaches us to love, to pardon, to be just, and to be reconciled.

The constant proclamation of God’s love, together with daily witness to this love, has an effectiveness yet undiscovered in evoking the response of human love.

Through the Eucharistic sacrifice, prayer, the preaching of the word and reflection on it, the power of divine love is unleashed in society.

4 The needs of the hour will continue to require insistence on human dignity and the foundation of human dignity in the mysteries of creation and redemption.

The needs of the hour will still require appeals to all who hold power to recognise the rights of the oppressed, as well as the role of society and the function of public authority in their relation ship to the common good and to the whole of God's plan for humanity.

But the "hour" which Paul VI in 1974 characterised as "late", now requires more than ever, in addition to prophetic statements and appeals, the mobilisation of the whole ecclesial community, in the spirit of the gospel – which is the spirit of conversion of individual hearts – with the weapons of the gospel, to bring about in the power of the gospel the Christian transformation of society.

Needed at this point is indeed a special kind of Christian education that teaches the full scope of Christian liberation and justice, and takes into account the whole saving reality of Christ's death and resurrection.

In telling us to stand firm in the Christian struggle, St Paul specifically describes the weapons of the gospel. Among these he speaks of "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" Eph 6:17). This sword, which is capable of "discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Heb 4:12), is the great weapon at the disposal of the Christian community in its combat with the evils of society. When the community of the Church assembles in prayer to reflect on the word of God, the Holy Spirit himself pours out God's love on His people and gives them that hope which does not disappoint (cf. Rom 5:5). With this hope and this love, and with reliance on the word of God, it is possible to achieve what human means never can succeed in achieving. Dear Brothers: Jesus assures us: "What is impossible with men is possible with God" (Lk 18:27).

5 All the efforts which the Church makes to help promote the Christian transformation of society are within the context of her obedience to the gospel of Christ. They are conditioned by her understanding of evangelisation as the proclamation of the gift of salvation given to humanity through the paschal mystery of Christ. The Church wishes all her members to understand "the profound links that exist between evangelisation and human advancement" (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 31).

Human advancement on its part includes both integral human development and Christian liberation. In this sense Paul VI asked: "How in fact can one proclaim the new commandment without promoting in justice and peace the true, authentic advancement of man?" (*EN*).

The human being who is created and redeemed by God is worthy of a total and radical liberation – liberation not only from structures that violate human dignity, but liberation from sin itself.

It is extremely necessary to make sure, when it is a question of dismantling those structures, that they are not replaced by other structures that would perpetuate, in a

different form, conditions unworthy of the children of God; deny freedoms necessary for Christian liberation; and be opposed to the fundamental values of the gospel.

The triumph of the gospel is the universal triumph of love over hatred, through the conversion of hearts. In this triumph is found the true Christian transformation of society according to the gospel. Intransigence, the prospect of inevitable conflict, old and new violence – all this must yield before “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.”

The Church in your region is very clearly called at this time to place all her trust in the word of God and in the power of Him who “is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask and think’ (Eph 3:20).

6. Regarding the mission of the laity in your local Churches, I am convinced that the recent Synod of Bishops has furnished you with many reflections that will be useful in your pastoral planning.

A heightened realisation by the laity of their dignity and their call to contribute actively to the mission of Christ and His Church has generated a new enthusiasm that is pervading the Church under the action of the Holy Spirit. It is another gift of the Lord, which I pray will be a further help to the Church in Southern Africa, to fulfil the needs of this hour.

In treating of evangelisation, Paul VI stated that “the first means of evangelisation is the witness of an authentically Christian life” (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 41).

These words become a special challenge in the present situation to all the religious of your dioceses.

Yes, we must all be convinced that the witness of the consecrated love has a supernatural effectiveness that far surpasses the power of external edification. In this area religious have a special part to play, as witnesses to God’s love, in furthering the gospel message.

Your priests, too, together with the seminarians, must realise that their contributions to the solutions to all the problems of freedom and justice must be rooted in their own fidelity of love. Proclaiming the word of God to the faithful, listening to it in their hearts and applying it to their own lives, they will be ever more effective as peacemakers and reconcilers of God’s people.

Dear brother bishops: your own contribution of unity among yourselves, your experiencing together the love of Christ, and your bearing witness to this love, are themselves splendid acts of Episcopal leadership – a pastoral contribution to the local churches over which you preside and which you love and serve.

7. There are many particular problems that are object of our attention but which cannot be adequately commented on at this time. One of these is the very important question of Namibia. Be assured that the Holy See is following this issue in all its details with deep concern and keen solicitude for the wellbeing of the people themselves.

My last word to you, dear brothers, is one of hope. With great love in our Lord Jesus Christ, I send my message of hope to all your beloved priests, religious and laity.

Remember always that Christ is with you. His Spirit dwells in you and His word strengthens you. Christ never abandons His disciples, and to all of you He repeats: "Take courage! I have overcome the world" (Jn 16:33).