

PASTORAL LETTER

FROM THE BISHOPS OF THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH IN SOUTHERN AFRICA AND THE BISHOPS OF THE CHURCH OF THE PROVINCE OF SOUTH AFRICA

29th June 1975

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

For more than four hundred years after the Reformation the Roman Catholic and the Anglican Churches had no dealings with one another. Most members of both Churches did not understand the differences, which caused their separation and have continued to keep them apart. They knew little and cared less about one another, and were quite content to accept the situation

During the present century many Christians have realised that divisions between them are sinful and contrary to the Will of God. At the Second Vatican Council in Rome the Roman Catholic Church adopted a new approach to other Christian communities and encouraged dialogue with them. A new chapter in relations between our two Churches was opened when Archbishop Fisher of Canterbury visited in March 1966 Pope John and this relationship was deepened by the visit of the Archbishop, Dr. Michael Ramsay, to pope Paul VI. After their meeting they expressed the desire to work for the removal of the differences, which continue to keep us apart. They agreed together to appoint a joint Anglican/Roman Catholic Commission, which should identify and seek to resolve our differences as a first step towards the recovery of our visible unity in the Body of Christ.

Other joint Anglican/Roman Catholic Commissions have been set up in various parts of the world to assist the International Commission in its work. In 1968 one of these Commissions was established in South Africa by the Roman Catholic Bishops' Conference and the Synod of Bishops of the Church of the Province. It has made a valuable contribution to the work of the International Commission.

Although there are still important differences between our two Churches, there are many matters of faith and practise on which we are already agreed. This is made very clear by the Report issued by Roman Catholic and Anglican theologians after their meetings in Malta in January 1968.

“We record with great thankfulness our common faith in God our Father, in our Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Spirit; our common baptism in the one Church of God; our sharing of the Holy Scriptures, of the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, our common Christian inheritance for many centuries with its living traditions of liturgy, theology, spirituality, Church order, and mission.

Since these words were written, the International Commission has published agreed statements on the “Doctrine of the Eucharist” and “Ministry and Ordination” in the hope that they will constitute the basis for a wide study, and ultimately lead to the acceptance of a common doctrine on the Eucharist and the Ministry.

It is obvious, however, that Christian Unity cannot be brought about simply by agreements reached by theologians. We can find unity, by God's grace and according to His design, if not only Bishops and Priests but also the members of our congregations are convinced that it is God's Will, and take an active part in seeking and promoting it. All our people must know of these developments, which are taking place in our relations with one another and share in them if the barriers of mutual ignorance and prejudice between us are to be removed.

Both our Churches are also engaged in Conversations with various other Christian bodies, because both are committed to seeking nothing less than the visible unity in Christ of all Christians. We, the Roman Catholic and Anglican Bishops in Southern Africa, however, believe it right to address this our joint pastoral letter to our own people at this time, to urge them to co-operate in the work of restoring true unity in Christ between our two Churches. There are many things, which we must still, in conscience, continue to do separately until we have been brought to full unity in truth and charity. But there are many other things, which, without sacrifice of principle or loyalty, we can and should do together. Joint parochial study groups can provide an opportunity for frankly facing difficulties and for increasing knowledge and understanding. There are many moral and social issues upon which we should be able to agree to take the same stand. Greater co-operation in training men for the ordained ministry could be to our mutual advantage. Priests of both Churches can collaborate in solemnizing mixed marriages. Church buildings can be shared. Both communions should seriously offer prayers and sacrifice for unity and wherever possible this should be done in common. Contact should be sincerely sought by those chosen by both communities to work as activators in order to establish a good will, thus creating an atmosphere where the spirit of unity can grow.

In these and other ways we can bear our witness together to the Lordship of Christ and our brotherhood in Him. And we shall promote that visible unity of the Body of Christ, which we believe to be His Will, and without which we cannot effectively proclaim His Gospel of reconciliation to our country and the world.

Heavenly Father, we pray that we may be given the grace to work together with your son for the unity of the Church, his Body, for which he worked, prayed, suffered and died.