

SACBC STATEMENT

ON THE RELEASE OF FATHER MKHATSHWA AND OTHERS WHO HAVE BEEN DETAINED (16/ 6/ 87)

The release of the secretary general of the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference, Father Smangaliso Mkhathshwa, has done a great deal to lift the gloom and despondency that set in when the state of emergency was re-imposed with even stricter restrictions in spite of numerous calls to lift it or to allow it to lapse.

For the bishops, the family, friends and well wishers of Father Smangaliso, this is a welcome and long overdue end to an extremely difficult period of detention without trial. During that time he was allegedly cruelly tortured and subjected to unthinkable personal humiliation. The bishops' conference is overjoyed that Father Mkhathshwa has been released and welcomes him back into its midst with open arms and warm hearts. Unfortunately our joy is tempered by knowledge that there are still many others, including children, who are languishing in goal, not for any crime committed, but for refusing to allow the injustice and repression of the apartheid system to continue unchallenged.

Some will say, and rightly so, that the latest release of detainees is once again a case of too little, too late, meaning:

- That all detainees, all political prisoners and all those whom their communities accept as their authentic leaders should have been released as well.
- That the past year has been valuable time wasted. For instead of throwing people into detention, the government should have been working towards removing the major obstacles to a negotiated solution to our country's problems.

Nevertheless the government is to be commended for these releases, which at least in these cases bring to end the injustice of depriving these people of their liberty without due process. We hope against hope – sadly, perhaps in vain – that this action will signal the beginning of significant steps to ease the tension and prepare a climate of talks.

It must be said, again, that the state of emergency is an ill-conceived measure, as it will not solve the basic constitutional problem that faces us. Furthermore, no black leader can feel free to engage in meaningful talks as long as the state of emergency lasts, since for blacks it is the most blatant form of intimidation, and no-one is free to negotiate while he or she is being intimidated in this way.

As we welcome Father Mkhathshwa and other detainees into our midst, we call to mind, and thank most sincerely all those at home and abroad who have prayed and worked for their safety, their wellbeing and release, or who sent messages of support and solidarity.

We also warmly thank all staff at the general secretariat for bravely accepting the hardship of working without their shepherd, and for taking on willingly and generously the extra burdens brought on by his absence. Their spirit of sacrifice and

service has enabled the bishops' conference and the church to continue its mission in these difficult times, that is:

To proclaim the good news to the poor, to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to captives and freedom to those in prison, and the year of the Lord's favour (Isaiah:61).

Signed by: Bishop Wilfrid Napier, president of the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference.