

## SACBC STATEMENT

### ON

### ATTACKS ON THE NEW NATION (20/7/87)

The Southern African Catholic bishops' Conference is greatly perturbed by the series of attacks, local and abroad, that in recent months have been made on its weekly newspaper *The New Nation*. By implication the attacks are against the Catholics Bishops' Conference itself. Within the Church such attacks are being orchestrated primarily by so-called "Catholic" groups such as Tradition-Family-Property and the South African Catholic Defence League.

The first public attack on *The New Nation* was made by the state president, Mr P. W. Botha, last year. Since then *The New Nation* has been condemned by government spokesmen, and action against it has been threatened. The two groups, Tradition-Family-Property and the South African Catholic Defence League are corroborating the view and stance of the National Party, which, as especially the black community knows, cannot tolerate opposition or alternative views on the realities of South Africa today. These attacks are therefore seen in a very serious light and as yet another attempt to silence the voice of those who continue to call loudly and clearly for the lifting of repression and the setting in motion of a process towards justice for the poor and oppressed.

We would have expected the self-professed upholders of Christian and Catholic values such as family, personal and social rights as contained in Catholic social teaching, to believe in and accept the moral guidance given by their bishops (who moreover enjoy the support of the Holy Father) rather than that put forward by parties with vested political interests.

At present *The New Nation* editor, Mr Zwelakhe Sisulu, along with an estimated 2000 others, languishes in prison. He is detained without trial – something which is cruel and unjust and offends the basic teaching and values of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Recalling Hebrews 13:3: "Remember those in prison as if you were there with them and those who are being maltreated, for you like them are still in the world", we would have expected those attacking *The New Nation* for publishing unsavoury facts about life in South Africa today, would be protesting with vehemence against injustices that have been condemned on several occasions by Pope John Paul II.

We point out that the editorial content of *The New Nation* is not fabricated in order to create a climate of unrest. Rather, what is reflected in the newspaper is the stark reality of life in South Africa, particularly in the townships. A survey has shown that at least 450 000 people read *The New Nation* every week. This attests to *The New Nation* truly and accurately reflecting the daily reality and sentiments of its readers, in spite of the likes or dislikes of the uninformed or the supporters of the *status quo*.

As the bishops pointed out to the state president, the government and country as a whole should be grateful to *The New Nation* for informing them about this daily reality and the sentiments it evokes, so that appropriate steps might be taken towards a

just and lasting settlement to the current conflict. Anyone who is interested in a negotiated and peaceful settlement should in fact be eager to get unsanitised information on the lives and problems of the people with whom and on whose behalf they will be negotiating. It is precisely because the Catholic Bishops' Conference sees negotiation as the way to peace based on justice, that it defends the right to existence of a free press.

We vehemently refute the allegation that the South African Catholic Bishops' Conference is running a "communist" newspaper. To read communism, or communist instigation, into the intense and continued protest of the oppressed against the repression and injustice of the apartheid system, is to reveal crass ignorance of and insensitivity to the desperate situation facing us. *The New Nation* does not promote communism. The editor and staff know that communism is incompatible with Catholic views upheld by the Catholic Bishops' Conference. We recognise that in the exercise of the freedom accorded him, the editor has on occasion paid tribute to Marxist personalities, not so much for their Marxism as for their struggle against oppression. That such tributes could create the wrong impression has been conveyed to the editorial staff.

Constructive criticism of *The New Nation* is taken seriously by the Board of Publishers and is communicated to and discussed with the editorial staff. We are aware and accept that, as with any new venture, *The New Nation* has experienced teething problems. We are proud of its achievements to date in bringing to light information which otherwise would not have been made known and in letting the voice of the oppressed be heard. We reaffirm our support for it in its efforts to inform the people of South Africa about lives, conditions and viewpoints not normally known, but which must be taken into account if we are to resolve conflict.

We reject in the strongest terms the attacks on the paper, especially those made anonymously or by people who do not (or do not want to) understand that to expose the truth is one of our pastoral obligations – for truth will set us free.

We address the conscience of those Catholics who have blatantly ignored the injunction of Christ our Lord concerning the settling of disputes within the community of believers: "If your brother does something wrong, go and have it with him alone, between yourselves. If he listens to you, you have won back your brother. If he does not listen, take one or two others along with you...but if he refuses to listen to these, report it to the community" (Mt 18:15-16).