

SACBC STATEMENT

ON

THE DIAZ CENTENARY (29/1/88)

The observance of the fifth centenary of the arrival of Bartholomew Diaz in South Africa has become a contentious issue, the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference stated.

It cannot be denied that the voyage of discovery undertaken by Bartholomew Diaz in 1487/8 dramatically re-enacted by the sailing of a replica of his caravel from Lisbon to Mossel Bay was an heroic episode.

We congratulate the Portuguese nation on the great achievements of its navigators in their golden age of exploration.

But, while undoubted developments ensued, it cannot be forgotten that the voyage of Bartholomew Diaz, like those of other intrepid explorers, introduced a period of Western colonisation that resulted in much cruelty, oppression and exploitation. People whose countries have suffered under that experience see no reason for participating in celebrations that recall its beginnings.

The Portuguese people had little to do with South Africa's historical development, but western colonisers who followed the trail they had blazed laid the foundations of the apartheid policy.

It is not surprising therefore, that great numbers of South Africans prefer not to participate in the celebration of any event closely associated in their minds with the beginnings of colonialism and that personalities and institutions of the Catholic Church are among those that are abstaining.

A recent experience of blatant discrimination at Mossel Bay makes the decision to abstain particularly applicable in that town. A group of so-called coloured school children were ordered off a "white" beach, even though that beach was the only safe one for them. In spite of a letter from the local bishop, no satisfactory reply was received.