

III

SOUTHERN AFRICAN BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

STATEMENT ON APARTHEID

**Issued by the Plenary Session of the Conference,
held in Pretoria, July 2nd-6th, 1957**

In 1952 the Catholic bishops of South Africa issued a statement on race relations which emphasised the evil of colour discrimination and the injustices which flow from it. This statement maintained that non-Europeans in South Africa had a strict right in justice to evolve towards full participation in the political, economic and cultural life of the country. It pointed out, however, that this evolution could not take place unless the people concerned made their own vigorous contribution towards fitting themselves for the exercise of full citizenship.

Five years have gone by since this statement was issued. During that time there has been no change of direction in South Africa's racial policy. Rather, the old policy of segregation, responsible in large measure for the social pattern of the country, has under the name of apartheid received clearer definition and more precise application. Apartheid is officially held to be the only possible formula for South Africa's mixed society. Integration is considered unthinkable and partition into separate states impracticable.

The basic principle of apartheid is the preservation of what is called white civilisation. This is identified with white supremacy, which means the enjoyment by white men only of full political, social, economic and cultural rights. Persons of other race must be satisfied with what the white man judges can be conceded to them without endangering his privileged position. White supremacy is an absolute. It overrides justice. It transcends the teaching of Christ. It is a purpose dwarfing every other purpose, an end justifying any means.

Apartheid is sometimes described as separate development, a term which suggests that under apartheid different races are given the opportunity of pursuing their respective and distinctive social and cultural evolutions. It is argued that only in this manner will these races be doing the will of God, lending themselves to the fulfilment of His providential designs. The contention sounds plausible as long as we overlook an important qualification, namely, that separate development is subordinate to white supremacy. The white man makes himself the agent of god's will and the interpreter of His providence in assigning the range and determining the bounds of non-white development. One trembles at the blasphemy of this attributing to God the offences against charity and justice that are apartheid's necessary accompaniment.

It is a sin to humiliate one's fellow man. There is in each human person, by God's creation, a dignity inseparably connected with his quality of rational and free being. This dignity has been immeasurably enhanced by the mystery of our redemption. In

the words of St. Peter we are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a consecrated nation.” (I. Peter II,9). Christ Himself has said, “I have called you my friends.” (John XV, 15). No man has the right to despise what God has honoured, to belittle one whom Christ has called friend, to brand a fellow man with the stigma of inborn inferiority. It is an insult to human dignity, a slur upon God’s noble work of creation and redemption. Christ has warned us against inflicting such injuries: “...any man who says Raca to his brother must answer for it before the Council: and any man who says to his brother, Thou fool, must answer for it in hell fire.” (Matth. V,22).

From this fundamental evil of apartheid flow the innumerable offences against charity and justice that are its inevitable consequences, for men must be hurt and injustice must be done when the practice of discrimination is enthroned as the supreme principle of the welfare of the state, the ultimate law from which all other laws derive.

This condemnation of the principle of apartheid as something intrinsically evil does not imply that perfect equality can be established in South Africa by a stroke of the pen. There is nothing more obvious than the existence of profound differences between sections of our population, which make immediate total integration impossible. People cannot share fully in the same political and economic institutions until culturally they have a great deal in common. All social change must be gradual if it is not to be disastrous. Nor is it unjust for a state to make provision in its laws and administration for the differences that do exist. A state must promote the well-being of all its citizens. If some require special protection it must be accorded. It would be unreasonable, therefore, to condemn indiscriminately all South Africa’s differential legislation. It would be unfair to disparage the services provided for less advanced sections of the population and the noble and dedicated labours of many public officials on their behalf.

Many who suffer under the sting of apartheid find it hard to accept counsels of moderation. Embittered by insult and frustration, they distrust any policy that involves a gradual change. Revolution not evolution is their slogan. They can see redress only in the sweeping away of every difference and the immediate extension of full civil rights to all. They do not stop to contemplate the confusion that will ensue, the collapse of all public order, the complete dissolution of society and perhaps their own rapid destruction in the holocaust. This is particularly true of those who find the atheistic communism the inspiration of their present striving and their hope for the future.

A gradual change it must be: gradual, for no other kind of change is compatible with the maintenance of order, without which there is no society, no government, no justice, no common good. But a change must come for otherwise our country faces a disastrous future. That change could be initiated immediately if the ingenuity and energy now expended on apartheid were devoted to making South Africa a happy country for all its citizens. The time is short. The need is urgent. Those penalised by apartheid must be given concrete evidence of the change before it is too late. This involves the elaboration of a sensible and just policy enabling any person, irrespective of race, to qualify for the enjoyment of full civil rights. To achieve this will undoubtedly take statesmanship of a high order for the difficulties are not to be minimised. It is no easy matter to dispel fears and prejudices and introduce measures so contrary to the main trends and customs of the past.

Obviously no South African government can attempt such a change without the consent of the white citizens. On their shoulders lies squarely the burden of responsibility. Let them examine their conscience in the light of Christ's teaching this cannot be tolerated forever. The time has come to pursue more vigorously the change of heart and practise that the law of Christ demands. We are hypocrites if we condemn apartheid in South African society and condone it in our own institutions.

This does not mean that we can easily disregard all differences of mentality, condition, languages and social custom. The church does not enforce human associations that, because of these differences, can produce no good. She understands that the spiritual welfare of her children cannot be fostered in a social atmosphere wholly alien and uncongenial. But the Christian duty remains of seeking to unite rather than separate, to dissolve differences rather than perpetuate them. A different colour can be no reason for separation when culture, custom, social condition and above all, a common faith and common love of Christ impel towards unity.

We give expression to these observations in the knowledge that the faith and the charity of our people will prompt a truly Christian consideration of them and, in due course, behaviour in full conformity with the teaching of our Saviour. We have every reason for this confidence because we have before our eyes a great proof of the loyalty and generosity of our people in the magnificent response to the Catholic Bishops' Campaign for Mission Schools and Seminaries.

To all white South Africans we direct an earnest plea to consider carefully what apartheid means: its evil and anti-Christian character, the injustice that flows from it, the resentment and bitterness it arouses, the harvest of disaster that it must produce in the country we all love so much. We cannot fail to express our admiration for the splendid work done in many quarters to lessen prejudice, promote understanding and unity and help South Africa along that path of harmony and co-operation which is the only one dictated by wisdom and justice. On the other hand we deeply regret that it is still thought necessary to add to the volume of restrictive and oppressive legislation in order to reduce contact between various groups to an inhuman and unnatural minimum.

We pray God that minds may be enlightened to see the truth and the hearts encouraged to act without regard to the prejudices of the past. It will take sacrifice. Yet sacrifice need not deter us whose forefathers have left us the heritage of their bravery. The purpose before us now is one of the noblest causes we could embrace: the triumph of Christ in our country's laws and customs, in the spirit of that hope recently expressed by His Holiness Pope Pius XII: "that a task of constructive collaboration may be carried out in Africa: a collaboration free of prejudice and mutual sensitiveness, preserved from the seductions and strictures of false nationalism, and capable of extending to people rich in resources and future the true values of Christian civilisation which have already borne so many fruits in other continents."