

STATEMENT

On

THE CURRENT SITUATION AND CITIZEN RIGHTS OF BLACKS

SACBC Plenary Session, February 1977

Having dedicated most of the time at this plenary session to the consideration of our own role as leaders in the social mission of the Church in South Africa, we feel obliged also to give some consideration to the events that have occurred since June 1976 and the resulting situation.

We recall that the disturbances began in Soweto with a demonstration on the part of the youth against a system of education, which the students regarded as narrowing and limiting rather than developing their education.

The disturbances represent a wider frustration of black youth unwilling to grow into society in which they can have no say as to the manner in which they are governed; cannot even have ordinary worker organisations to defend their right to a living wage; cannot be sure of having the right to a house and home near where they must work when they marry, are declared by the system in the Republic unfit for citizenship on grounds of colour only, without question of ability of qualification, and if they protest are suppressed with the unnecessary and horrifying violence we have recently witnessed.

Realising that South Africa has entered a critical phase in the rejection by the majority of its people of a social and political system of oppression, we add our corporate voice as leaders of the Catholic Church in this country to the cry for a radical revision of the system.

People starved of freedom, deprived of their just rights and humiliated in their personal and corporate dignity will not rest until a proper balance of justice is achieved.

We affirm that in this we are on the side of the oppressed and, as we have committed ourselves to working within our Church for a clearer expression of solidarity with the poor and deprived, so we commit ourselves equally to working for peace through justice in fraternal collaboration with all other churches, agencies and persons dedicated to this cause.

We again confess our conviction, so often repeated, that the only solution of our racial tensions consists in conceding full citizenship and human rights to all persons in the republic, not by choice on the false grounds of colour, but on the grounds of the common humanity of all men, taught by our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the struggle that has reached new intensity since June 1976 we are especially perturbed by what appear to be reliable reports of police brutality. We realise that a situation of violence breeds atrocities on both sides, but we are speaking of seemingly systematic beatings and unjustifiable shootings during disturbances and of cold-blooded torture of detained persons.

With these reports coming in as the accompaniment of confirmed accounts of the many deaths of persons in detention, we cannot but harbour the gravest misgivings about police action and behaviour.

We call for an investigation and resolve to collaborate with others intent on bringing the truth to light and we protest in the strongest possible terms against the intention of the government to provide legal indemnity for the police and other security personnel who may have been guilty of unprovoked and disproportionate violence.

It is clear that the Black people of the Republic have passed the point of no return, and no temporary suppression by violence, only a just sharing of citizenship, can give hope of any safety for the children, Black or White, now growing up in the Republic, and prevent the horrors of civil war in the future.

This is only to say that the Christian commandment of love must be fulfilled, and if it is fulfilled we can trust in God to give the grace of friendship and peace in social life.