

## **THE CHURCH AND RACISM: TOWARDS A MORE FRATERNAL SOCIETY (9/2/89)**

“All racist theories are contrary to Christian faith and love” is the unequivocal affirmation of The Church and Racism: Towards a more Fraternal Society document, requested by Pope John Paul II and prepared by the Pontifical Commission “Iustitia et Pax” (Justice and Peace) of the Vatican. The document condemns all forms of racism and can be seen as having far-reaching implications for relations between the church and state in South Africa.

The Southern African Catholic Bishops’ Conference warmly welcomed the document that has been distributed to Episcopal conferences throughout the world and to the leadership of other Christian confessions. It will also be made known to representatives of governments and international organisations, as well as to groups active in the task of seeking to overcome racism through concrete and progressive efforts.

In addition to looking at the phenomenon of racism, the document treats other manifestations of conflictual attitudes of intolerance and prejudice, often akin to racism or containing racial elements.

### **Racism poisons**

Apartheid is considered to be the “most marked and systematic form of institutionalised racism”, sanctioned by the constitution and laws of the “regime of apartheid”. That the majority of the population “remains excluded from effective representation in national government” is denounced and the Vatican expresses concern that blacks are relegated to ‘homelands’ which are hardly capable of being self-sustaining and are moreover economically and politically dependent” on the National Party government.

The document states that “...if racism troubles the peace of societies, it also poisons international peace. Where there is no justice on this major issue, violence and wars easily break out, and relations with neighbouring nations are disturbed.”

The Vatican encourages an early end to apartheid’s “state of repression” and the development of a positive non-racial future. “South Africa is an extreme case of a vision of racial inequality. The prolongation of a state of repression, of which the majority of the population is victim, is less and less tolerated. Such a situation carries within it a seed of racist reflexes on the part of the oppressed, which would be as unacceptable as those of which they are victim today. For this reason, it is urgent that these prejudices be overcome in order to build the future on the principle of the equal dignity of every person.”

“The entire South African community, as well as the international community, must make every effort to promote a concrete dialogue between the parties involved. It is important that the fear, which causes so much inflexibility be banished. It is as important to avoid internal conflicts that are exploited by others to the detriment of peace.”

## **Opposition**

“An increasing number of people have become more sensitive to injustice and oppose all forms of racism. They may do so out of religious conviction or for humanitarian reasons. This inspires them at times to stand up against repression by certain powers, or at least against the pressures of a sectarian public opinion, and to face scorn and imprisonment.”

The Pope and other members of the international community have made considerable efforts to fight racism in all its forms. The Vatican has stated that its endeavours should not be seen in isolation from the many and diverse efforts made by Christian communities around the world.

In this context special mention is made of the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference's commitment to “racial equality and against apartheid.”

The situation in South Africa has given rise, across the world, to manifestations of solidarity with those who suffer because of apartheid as well as in support of ecclesial initiatives that are frequently carried out ecumenically.”

## **Constructive solutions**

Pope John Paul II repeatedly expressed his concern to the Catholic bishops. On 10/12/88, in Harare the Pope said: “The question of apartheid (understood as a system of social, economic and political discrimination) engages your mission as teachers and spiritual guides of your flocks. Determined efforts are necessary to counteract injustices and to advocate replacement of that policy with one consistent with justice and love. I encourage you to continue to hold firmly and courageously to principles which are the basis of a peaceful and just response to the legitimate aspirations of all your fellow-citizens.”

The Catholic Church and the Vatican in particular encourage efforts to condemn racism and racist acts. “The application of legislative disciplinary and administrative measures, or even appropriate external pressure, can be timely, for countries and international organisations has at their disposal a range of initiatives that can be taken or encouraged. Racism is equally the responsibility of citizens but without their going so far as to replace violently one unjust situation with another injustice. Constructive solutions must always be envisaged.”

The document of the Pontifical Commission is presented in the context of the specific mission of the Church that wants “first and foremost to change racist attitudes and to appeal to the moral and religious sense of people. The Church states exigencies, but uses fraternal persuasion as the only weapon. To do this the Church asks God to change hearts and offers a place of reconciliation. For in spite of the sinful limitations of members, the Church is aware of having been constituted a witness to Christ's charity on earth, a sign and instrument of the unity of mankind.”

## **The Church and Racism:**

### **Towards a more Fraternal Society**

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