

'God Hears The Cry Of The Oppressed'

Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference (Harare)

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Pastoral Letter by the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference on the Current Crisis of Our Country

Holy Thursday, 5 April 2007

As your Shepherds we have reflected on our national situation and, in the light of the Word of God and Christian Social Teaching, have discerned what we now share with you, in the hope of offering guidance, light and hope in these difficult times.

The Crisis

The people of Zimbabwe are suffering. More and more people are getting angry, even from among those who had seemed to be doing reasonably well under the circumstances. The reasons for the anger are many, among them, bad governance and corruption. A tiny minority of the people have become very rich overnight, while the majority are languishing in poverty, creating a huge gap between the rich and the poor. Our Country is in deep crisis. A crisis is an unstable situation of extreme danger and difficulty. Yet, it can also be turned into a moment of grace and of a new beginning, if those responsible for causing the crisis repent, heed the cry of the people and foster a change of heart and mind especially during the imminent Easter Season, so our Nation can rise to new life with the Risen Lord.

In Zimbabwe today, there are Christians on all sides of the conflict; and there are many Christians sitting on the fence. Active members of our Parish and Pastoral Councils are prominent officials at all levels of the ruling party. Equally distinguished and committed office-bearers of the opposition parties actively support church activities in every parish and diocese. They all profess their loyalty to the same Church. They are all baptised, sit and pray and sing together in the same church, take part in the same celebration of the Eucharist and partake of the same Body and Blood of Christ. While the next day, outside the church, a few steps away, Christian State Agents, policemen and soldiers assault and beat peaceful, unarmed demonstrators and torture detainees. This is the unacceptable reality on the ground, which shows much disrespect for human life and falls far below the dignity of both the perpetrator and the victim.

In our prayer and reflection during this Lent, we have tried to understand the reasons why this is so. We have concluded that the crisis of our Country is, in essence, a crisis of governance and a crisis of leadership apart from being a spiritual and moral crisis.

A Crisis of Governance

The national health system has all but disintegrated as a result of prolonged industrial action by medical professionals, lack of drugs, essential equipment in disrepair and several other factors.

In the educational sector, high tuition fees and levies, the lack of teaching and learning resources, and the absence of teachers have brought activities in many public schools and institutions of higher education to a standstill. The number of students forced to terminate their education is increasing every month. At the same time, Government interference with the provision of education by private schools has created unnecessary tension and conflict.

Public services in Zimbabwe's towns and cities have crumbled. Roads, street lighting, water and sewer reticulation are in a state of severe disrepair to the point of constituting an acute threat to public health and safety, while the collection of garbage has come to a complete standstill in many places. Unabated political interference with the work of democratically elected Councils is one of the chief causes of this breakdown.

The erosion of the public transport system has negatively affected every aspect of our Country's economy and social life. Horrific accidents claim the lives of dozens of citizens each month.

Almost two years after the Operation Murambatsvina, thousands of victims are still without a home. That inexcusable injustice has not been forgotten.

Following a radical land reform programme seven years ago, many people are today going to bed hungry and wake up to a day without work. Hundreds of companies were forced to close. Over 80 per cent of the people of Zimbabwe are without employment. Scores risk their lives week after week in search of work in neighbouring countries.

Inflation has soared to over 1,600 per cent, and continues to rise, daily. It is the highest in the world and has made the life of ordinary Zimbabweans unbearable, regardless of their political preferences. We are all concerned for the turnaround of our economy but this will remain a dream unless corruption is dealt with severely irrespective of a person's political or social status or connections.

The list of justified grievances is long and could go on for many pages.

The suffering people of Zimbabwe are groaning in agony: *"Watchman, how much longer the night?" (Is 21:11)*

A Crisis of Moral Leadership

The crisis of our Country is, secondly, a crisis of leadership. The burden of that crisis is borne by all Zimbabweans, but especially the young who grow up in search of role models. The youth are influenced and formed as much by what they see their elders doing as by what they hear and learn at school or from their peers.

If our young people see their leaders habitually engaging in acts and words which are hateful, disrespectful, racist, corrupt, lawless, unjust, greedy, dishonest and violent in order to cling to the privileges of power and wealth, it is highly likely that many of them will behave in exactly the same manner. The consequences of such overtly corrupt leadership as we are witnessing in Zimbabwe today will be with us for many years, perhaps decades, to come. Evil habits and attitudes take much longer to rehabilitate than to acquire. Being elected to a position of leadership should not be misconstrued as a licence to do as one pleases at the expense of the will and trust of the electorate.

A Spiritual and Moral Crisis

Our crisis is not only political and economic but first and foremost a spiritual and moral crisis. As the young independent nation struggles to find its common national spirit, the people of Zimbabwe are reacting against the "structures of sin" in our society. Pope John Paul II says that the "structures of sin" are "rooted in personal sin, and thus always linked to the concrete acts of individuals who introduce these structures, consolidate them and make them difficult to remove. And thus they grow stronger, spread, and become the source of other sins, and so influence people's behaviour." [1] The Holy Father stresses that in order to understand the reality that confronts us, we must "give a name to the root of the evils which afflict us." [2] That is what we have done in this Pastoral Letter.

The Roots of the Crisis

The present crisis in our Country has its roots deep in colonial society. Despite the rhetoric of a glorious socialist revolution brought about by the armed struggle, the colonial structures and institutions of pre-independent Zimbabwe continue to persist in our society. None of the unjust and oppressive security laws of the Rhodesian State have been repealed; in fact, they have been reinforced by even more repressive legislation, the Public Order and Security Act and the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act, in particular. It almost appears as though someone sat down with the Declaration of Human Rights and deliberately scrubbed out each in turn.

Why was this done? Because soon after Independence, the power and wealth of the tiny white Rhodesian elite was appropriated by an equally exclusive black elite, some of whom have governed the country for the past 27 years through political patronage. Black Zimbabweans today fight for the same basic rights they fought for during the liberation struggle. It is the same conflict between those who possess power and wealth in abundance, and those who do not; between those who are determined to maintain their privileges of power and wealth at any cost, even at the cost of bloodshed, and those who demand their democratic rights and a share in the fruits of independence; between those who continue to benefit from the present system of inequality and injustice, because it favours them and enables them to maintain an exceptionally high standard of living, and those who go to bed hungry at night and wake up in the morning to another day without work and without income; between those who only know the language of violence and intimidation, and those who feel they have nothing more to lose because their Constitutional rights have been abrogated and their votes rigged. Many people in Zimbabwe are angry, and their anger is now erupting into open revolt in one township after another.

The confrontation in our Country has now reached a flashpoint. As the suffering population becomes more insistent, generating more and more pressure through boycotts, strikes, demonstrations and uprisings, the State responds with ever harsher oppression through arrests, detentions, banning orders, beatings and torture. In our judgement, the situation is extremely volatile. In order to avoid further bloodshed and avert a mass uprising the nation needs a new people-driven Constitution that will guide a democratic leadership chosen in free and fair elections that will offer a chance for economic recovery under genuinely new policies.

Our Message of Hope: God is always on the Side of the Oppressed

The Bible has much to say about situations of confrontation. The conflict between the oppressor and the oppressed is a central theme throughout the Old and New Testaments.[3] Biblical scholars have discovered that there are no less than twenty different root words in Hebrew to describe oppression.

One example is the Creed of the chosen people, which we read on the First Sunday of Lent: *"My Father was a homeless Aramaean. He went down to Egypt to find refuge there, few in numbers; but there he became a nation, great, mighty and strong. The Egyptians ill-treated us, they gave us no peace and inflicted harsh slavery on us. But we called on the Lord, the God of our fathers. The Lord heard our voice and saw our misery, our toil and our oppression; and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with mighty hand and outstretched arm, with great terror, and with signs and wonders . . . "* (Deut 26:5b-8).

The Bible describes oppression in concrete and vivid terms: Oppression is the experience of being crushed, degraded, humiliated, exploited, impoverished, defrauded, deceived and enslaved. And the oppressors are described as cruel, ruthless, arrogant, greedy, violent and tyrannical; they are called 'the enemy'. Such words could only have been used by people who in their own lives and history had an immediate and personal experience of being oppressed. To them Yahweh revealed himself as the God of compassion who hears the cry of the oppressed and who liberates them from their oppressors. The God of the Bible is always on the side of the oppressed. He does not reconcile Moses and Pharaoh, or the Hebrew slaves with their Egyptian oppressors. Oppression is sin and cannot be compromised with. It must be overcome. God takes sides with the oppressed. As we read in Psalm 103:6: *"God who does what is right, is always on the side of the oppressed"*. [4]

When confronted with the politically powerful, Jesus speaks the language of the boldest among Israel's prophets. He calls Herod *'that fox'* (Lk13:32) and courageously exposes the greed for money, power and adulation of the political elite. And he warns his disciples never to do likewise: *"Among the gentiles it is the kings who lord it over them, and those who have authority over them are given the title Benefactor. With you this must not happen. No, the greatest among you must behave as if he were the youngest, the leader as if he were the one who serves"* (Lk 22:25-27). And he warns Pilate in no uncertain terms that he will be held to account by God for his use of power over life and death (John 19:11).

Throughout the history of the Church, persecuted Christians have remembered, prayed and sung the prophetic words of Mary: *"[The Lord] has used the power of his arm, he has routed the*

arrogant of heart. He has pulled down princes from their thrones and raised high the lowly. He has filled the starving with good things, sent the rich away empty" (Lk1:50-53).

Generations of Zimbabweans, too, throughout their own long history of oppression and their struggle for liberation, have remembered, prayed and sung these texts from the Old and New Testaments and found strength, courage and perseverance in their faith that Jesus is on their side. That is the message of hope we want to convey in this Pastoral Letter: God is on your side. He always hears the cry of the poor and oppressed and saves them.

Conclusion

We conclude our Pastoral Letter by affirming with a clear and unambiguous Yes our support of morally legitimate political authority. At the same time we say an equally clear and unambiguous No to power through violence, oppression and intimidation. We call on those who are responsible for the current crisis in our Country to repent and listen to the cry of their citizens. To the people of Zimbabwe we appeal for peace and restraint when expressing their justified grievances and demonstrating for their human rights.

Words call for concrete action, for symbols and gestures which keep our hope alive. We therefore invite all the faithful to a Day of Prayer and Fasting for Zimbabwe, on Saturday, 14 April 2007. This will be followed by a Prayer Service for Zimbabwe, on Friday, every week, in all parishes of our Country. As for the details, each Diocese will make known its own arrangements.

May the Peace and Hope of the Risen Lord be with you always. Happy Easter.

Prayer For Our Country

God Our Father,
You have given all peoples one common origin,
And your will is to gather them as one family in yourself.
Give compassion to our leaders, integrity to our citizens, and repentance to us all.
Fill the hearts of all women and men with your love
And the desire to ensure justice for all their brothers and sisters.
By sharing the good things you give us
May we ensure justice and equality for every human being,
An end to all division, and a human society built on love,
Lasting prosperity and peace for all.
We ask this through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Our Father... Hail Mary... Glory be to the Father ...

+*Robert C. Ndlovu, Archbishop of Harare* (ZCBC President)

+*Pius Alec M. Ncube, Archbishop of Bulawayo*

+*Alexio Churu Muchabaiwa, Bishop of Mutare* (ZCBC Secretary/Treasurer)

+*Michael D. Bhasera, Bishop of Masvingo*

+*Angel Floro, Bishop of Gokwe* (ZCBC Vice President)

+*Martin Munyanyi, Bishop of Gweru*

+*Dieter B. Scholz SJ, Bishop of Chinhoyi*

+*Albert Serrano, Bishop of Hwange*

+*Patrick M. Mutume, Auxiliary Bishop of Mutare*

References:

[1]John Paul II (1987), Encyclical Letter Sollicitudo Rei Socialis, paragraph 36

[2]Ibid

[3] The Kairos Document (1985), Challenge to the Church, A Theological Comment on the Political Crisis in South Africa, p 19 f

[4]The Kairos Document (1985), Challenge to the Church, A Theological Comment on the Political Crisis in South Africa, p 20