



Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference

COMMUNIQUE OF THE SOUTHERN AFRICAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS AT THE CONCLUSION OF THEIR JANUARY 2023 PLENARY SESSION

We, the bishops of the Catholic Church in Southern Africa, gathered for our plenary session in Pretoria from the 17th to the 24th of January 2023, give thanks to God for the opportunity of meeting to reflect on several issues facing us in our Conference area. We are also grateful for the opportunity this plenary session provided us to gather together and to encourage one another. We express gratitude to our respective dioceses for the resources that enabled us to have our plenary meeting, as well as to all those who were immediately involved in the preparation and took care of us for the duration of the plenary.

Tribute to Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI

Our Plenary meeting took place soon after the historical event of the passing on of Pope Benedict XVI. We joined with the president of our Conference in paying special tribute to him. His passing was a historical event because his mark as a theologian, a Pope and a leader is recognised globally. He is remembered as one who invited us to the truth that transcends our limited understanding, the truth that gives us a theoretical framework of how we must relate to and treat each other, the truth that liberates us from the dictatorship of our lower levels of existence, the truth that holds us accountable.

He taught us that a life worth living is not based on a personal construct of what we feel is good or right for us but rather on one that is grounded in something greater than ourselves, a truth independent of time and culture, binding everywhere and for everyone. He reminded us that ideologies that begin with the noblest intention, given their human origin can become destructive later. In contrast, a truth greater than us ensures that we will always strive to live according to its summons, even if, at times, we fail.

Tribute to Fr Albert Nolan OP

We joined with the president of our Conference also in paying tribute to the late Fr Albert Nolan OP. He was fondly remembered for his humble but powerful witness during the dark years of apartheid as well as for his passion for relating the Gospel to the circumstances of the poor and oppressed. We took cognisance of some of the important salient points he makes in his latest book *Hope in an age of Despair*. This provided us with a relevant thought for reflection, given the growing sense of despair in our Conference area, particularly in eSwatini and South Africa. We appreciated his call for compassion and solidarity with the poor as a way to contribute toward the alleviation of this sense of hopelessness.



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75th Anniversary of the SACBC and the Centenary of papal representation in Southern Africa

Our plenary session coincided with the celebration of the 75th anniversary of the establishment of the Southern African Catholic Bishops Conference (SACBC) and the centenary anniversary of Papal representation in Southern Africa. There is a causal link between these two celebrations because the creation of dioceses and the consequent establishment of the Conference depended on the representatives of the Pope, first in the form of “Apostolic Delegates” and later that of “Apostolic Nuncios” (Papal Ambassadors). The celebration of these two events provided us with the opportunity to reflect on the mission of the Catholic Church in Southern Africa since the establishment of the SACBC, noting the successes, failures, and the challenges still facing us.

We are encouraged to notice the growth of the Church and its impact on society.

- From a Church that initially focused on ministering to settlers to one that has become inclusive of all the local people in its membership. From a Church initially dependent on expatriate missionaries to one that is growing in becoming self-reliant, self-supportive, self-evangelising and self-ministering, in which all the faithful are taking ownership for its life and mission.
- During the time of apartheid, the SACBC was one of the prominent and recognised voices that constantly and continually advocated for change. The bishops played an important role in denouncing the ideological attitudes and practices against human dignity inherent in this system and in constantly calling for change and transformation. Through the numerous statements issued at different times, the Bishops not only condemned what was wrong but also offered pastoral guidance to the faithful on how to respond to the attendant social, political, and economic injustices.
- Through its various organs and departments, the Conference has served society beyond the confines of the Catholic Church and helped improve people's lives. This is particularly true of our schools which, though few and under-resourced, continue to provide quality education to many children of poor backgrounds. In recent times, the Catholic Church has been the number one institution in taking care of people with HIV and AIDS.

While thanking God for the growth that has taken place and the positive contribution made by the Church since the establishment of the Southern African Bishops Conference, at the same time we acknowledge with humility that there are still significant areas of growth and transformation that need to be dealt with.

- We note with some disappointment the slow march towards the ownership of the Church and its prophetic mission by the laity in general. The engagement of the Church with civic and political life has been, by and large, carried out by the Hierarchy with no involvement of the laity. It has been the bishops who spoke and issued statements on matters of justice and economic inequality. This is also true regarding carrying out the mission of the Church, which is still largely viewed as the domain of priests and religious. The notion of a self-supporting Church remains underdeveloped among our laity.



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- We continue to note with a sense of shame the failure in many of our parishes in South Africa to transcend the racial divisions of the past and be comfortable in being multiracial, multicultural, and multilingual. This is evident, for instance, in the perennial conspicuous absence of English-speaking Catholics in our Diocesan celebrations. This is a painful reminder of the continued lack of racial cohesion within the Church.

Call to Civil Responsibility and Ethical Leadership

We looked at and acknowledged again the plethora of problems facing our countries and affecting especially the poor and vulnerable. However, we are troubled by the phenomenon of the poor failing to take responsibility and initiative within the scope and the means available to them, choosing instead to depend on and rely only on government grants. The morally right government policy of giving grants to the poor and the elderly has unfortunately engendered a culture of dependency and laziness, where people do not make use of available opportunities and do what they can to earn their living.

Even more troubling is the problem of poor people engaging in criminal activities. Part of the problem of electricity in South Africa that is rarely spoken about is that the poor engage in illegal electricity connections to avoid paying. Then there is the growing culture of vandalization of property, theft, refusal to pay for services when one can lawlessness, lack of consideration for the other, the practice of littering, and the failure to keep one's space of living clean.

Echoing the dismissal of the "romanticisation or canonisation of the poor" by the late Fr Albert Nolan in his latest book *Hope in an age of Despair*, we hereby extend a challenge to our people to appreciate their dignity and to do what they can to provide for themselves. The poor must also play their role and become responsible citizens.

We continue to decry the deep corruption scourge in South Africa, which seems to have become an accepted practice in both the public and the private sectors, as well as the poor track record in holding those responsible to account. We note with dismay the poverty of responsible and ethical leadership on the part of many of our political leaders who put their personal interests and those of their political parties first instead of the common good of the people they are elected to serve. This is currently evident in the continued instability in a number of our metropolitan municipalities where political parties seem to be more interested in playing power games than focusing on service delivery.

In this regard, we deplore the use by some political leaders of the legacy of apartheid as an excuse for their failure to do their job and deliver the necessary services. Indeed, lack of basic service delivery is often ascribed to the apartheid legacy when, in fact, it is due to sheer greediness and corruption. We note with a sense of disappointment how the nobly conceived policy of Black Economic Empowerment appears to be benefitting a few politically connected people and does not translate into the economic betterment of the majority of black people. We continue to call for ethical and courageous leaders who put the good of the people before their own interest.



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The Continuing legacy of Colonial and Apartheid racism

We noted with dismay the latest incidents of racism in South Africa, with particular reference to the racial incident at a holiday resort in Bloemfontein, where some white people violently prevented some black teenagers from using a pool. We recalled that there had been a number of such incidents in the recent past. We find it disconcerting that, after almost 30 years of the new dispensation; we still witness incidents of this nature.

As already alluded to above, we acknowledge that as the Church in South Africa we too still have some serious work to do in addressing the effects of racist social conditioning in our own members. Racism, we note again, is deeply entrenched in our society, and cannot be ended simply by pretending that it does not exist or by wishing it away. In this regard, we recalled with a sense of remorse that while in the past the hierarchy of the Church issued statements condemning apartheid and racism, in its internal daily life and practice the Church colluded with discrimination and segregation in its parishes, seminaries, and religious congregations. This racially informed way of being Church has, unfortunately, continued well into our own times and is proving difficult to transcend.

However, while it has admittedly taken long for the SACBC to deal directly with the challenge of racism and its manifestation in the Church, in 2016 the bishops did issue a pastoral statement making a call *“to have a candid conversation on racism and its manifestation in order to adequately and seriously address racism and racial divisions”*. As we celebrate the 75th jubilee of the SACBC, we renew this call to make the fight against racism a personal mission by remaining awake to unconscious racial tendencies and to convert. Furthermore, we encourage the use of programs and workshops in our parishes which facilitate awareness-raising regarding the deeply entrenched effects of the long history of racist social conditioning and provide adequate and appropriate ways of helping people to break free from such, largely unconscious, effects.

The situation in eSwatini.

While we were in Plenary, we learnt with great sadness about the murder of Thulani Maseko, widely regarded as a protagonist of dialogue in the efforts to bring about political stability in that country. We join our brother, Bishop Jose Luis, in condemning his murder and call on “those who make a choice of violence” to choose the way of peace instead.

Ad Limina Visit

The year 2023 will see us finally paying a visit to the Holy Father in June, which was cancelled two years ago because of Covid 19. It will provide us with the opportunity to share with the Holy Father the joys and challenges of our ministry in the Conference area. The topics of our sharing will include the process of the Synod on Synodality, the issues we are dealing with through our programmes and departments, and the social and political challenges facing us in our area.



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Hope in the age of Despair.

This plenary sought to identify and reflect on issues of concern in our Conference. In this communique, we have briefly given our response. We plan to continue our reflection and provide a much lengthier response to give hope in the midst of the many challenges facing our Conference area.

On behalf of all the Bishops of the SACBC:

+Sithembele Sipuka
SACBC President

24 January 2023

