



Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference

SACBC Pastoral Letter in preparation for South Africa's Elections in 2009

Awake! Awake! Protect Our Democracy
17 February 2009

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

After 15 years of democracy, we are once again about to take part in elections to choose a new government. Since the "miracle" elections of 1994, when God answered our prayers for peace, the excitement about the end of apartheid and the new experience of voting is over. South Africa is an emerging democracy, with all its vigorous debates, conflicting interests and related power struggles.

Outstanding Challenges

As a nation we have made many advances over the past years. We thank God for the wise and selfless leaders that have helped us to achieve this, and for the goodwill shown by so many of our people. Yet we all remain concerned about the enormous challenges that still face us. We know that there will be no easy solutions to the problems of:

- Poverty, the growing gap between rich and poor, rising prices and the lack of jobs;
- The lack of adequate housing, public services and service delivery;
- Unstable families, increasing domestic violence and teenage pregnancies;
- Sexual exploitation and alcohol and drug abuse;
- Increasing instances of abortion;
- The high levels of crime and violence, and a justice system that is slow and often ineffective;
- The weakening of organs of society which should be strengthening our democracy (such as the SABC and the courts of law);
- The increase in HIV&AIDS and the plight of vulnerable children;
- The low quality of public education; and
- The influx of migrants and refugees and the associated xenophobia.

These and many other problems are a serious challenge to any government, and it is up to each one of us to decide which party has the policies and commitment to address them effectively. It is important to judge a party on its overall policy regarding the key values of the Gospel such as promoting life, human dignity and justice in relation to the above issues.

As we approach the elections, we your Bishops would like to share our concern about our young democracy, and what it should look like. While there is a lot of very positive and healthy debate about what it means to be a democracy, we are conscious of tendencies that we think are a threat to it. The tragedies that followed the elections in Kenya and Zimbabwe in 2008 remind us, even if our situation is not quite the same, that we cannot relax, and that guarding genuine democracy is an ongoing challenge.

What is it that we should guard against?

1. Guard against *blind loyalty*.

We should not continue to vote for a party simply because it is the one we have always supported (an attitude of “My party, right or wrong”). Every citizen must ask whether the party they have supported in the past is making a real contribution to the progress of our people. Following Jesus’ understanding of solidarity in Mark 3:35, our first loyalty must be to our fellow citizens, and to the good of our country as a whole, not to a specific party or leader: “Anyone who does the will of God, that person is my brother and sister and mother”. There is nothing wrong with changing our choice of party; indeed, it is sometimes necessary to do this if a democracy is to remain dynamic and healthy. And let us remember that, in a true democracy, we should not base our choice on race, language, tribe or cultural group, but on the policies and standpoints of the various parties.

2. Guard against *intolerance and intimidation*.

Freedom of speech does not give a person the right to speak abusively about others. So we should be careful to avoid saying or doing anything that will make other people afraid and thus limit their freedom. Such actions include an intolerance of, or lack of respect for, other people’s views or beliefs, and any attempt to force anyone to vote in a certain way. In Luke 6:35, we are reminded to “love your enemies and do good to them”. Thus the use of violent language and the making of threats is also completely unacceptable; the opponent in a democratic context, unlike in periods of struggle against oppression, is no longer someone to be overcome, but rather a competitor that challenges me to examine my own values and beliefs.

3. Guard against *corruption*.

Corruption (including favouring family members and friends for jobs) reverses all the gains we have made in our struggle for justice. It leaves people feeling disillusioned, powerless and hopeless. This weakens their participation and destroys the heart of a democracy. We all need to demand continuous accountability and a spirit of service from our leaders at all levels, making full use of all the institutions that exist to work against corruption in our society. Unfortunately, many people are afraid to challenge corruption, as they themselves are also easily tempted at times to engage in some form of it— even through such small actions as seeking favours from friends in positions of authority, or tax evasion. We all need to start by resisting the temptation of corruption ourselves, as we learn in Matthew 7:5: “Take the log out of your own eye first, and then you will see clearly enough to take the splinter out of your brother’s eye”.

4. Guard against *doing nothing*.

In a true democracy all citizens are called to participate and respond to issues that arise on an ongoing basis - not only at election time. However, many of us do nothing because we feel that we are powerless to bring about change. This then easily develops into an attitude of dependency, where we simply wait for the government to deliver. When citizens stop participating, and don't bother to vote, those in positions of authority are allowed to do as they please without fear of being challenged. As we are reminded in Matthew 7:21, 'It is not anyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord" who will enter the kingdom of Heaven, but the person who does the will of my Father in heaven". Let us commit ourselves to build our country and our democracy together, and to make the effort to become involved in a way that will give hope to all those still waiting for a better future.

Our Role as Christians

As Christians, we are called to work with all South Africans to ensure the growth and strengthening of democratic values and practices. We believe that Jesus Christ shows us the way to fullness of life. So, in his spirit, at this election time we are particularly called to consider the following demands of our faith:

1. We must promote the central elements of our Catholic Social Teaching, including:
 - a. Respect for life and human dignity;
 - b. Social responsibility and the common good;
 - c. A just sharing of wealth and resources;
 - d. The importance of participation; and
 - e. Compassionate solidarity with the poor and the marginalized.
2. We must listen to the needs of the poor and the marginalized and make them our priority;
3. We must have the courage to stand up for our convictions amongst our friends, neighbours and colleagues, and in our political activities; but let us also show respect for the views of others, and be prepared to learn from them;
4. Let us promote family values and the values of *ubuntu* by challenging individualism and greed;
5. Let us promote respect for the Rule of Law, and demand that our political leaders do the same; and
6. We must be awake and vigilant in challenging all threats to our democracy.

A Call to Prayer

To assist us in realizing our role as Christians, we ask every parish to begin a vigil of prayer from now until the elections. We also ask that, at every Mass during this period, the following prayer, or a similar one, be included in the Prayer of the Faithful:

“Lord, we pray that our forthcoming elections may bring about a deepening of our democracy, and that we will carry out our duties as citizens responsibly and with respect for the rights of others. May the choices we make bring hope to the poor, unity to all our people and a more secure and peaceful future for our children.”

We hope that all these prayers will inspire us to move to action, so that the Church can become a strong force in bringing justice and peace to our beloved land.

May God bless Africa.

Archbishop Buti Tlhagale
President
Southern African Catholic Bishops Conference

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