



Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference

SACBC Pastoral Letter during the Covid-19 Pandemic

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ

In the name of all the bishops I send you greetings of the risen Lord and wish you blessings of peace and hope.

As we know, when the news of Christ's resurrection was announced by the angel to the women followers of Jesus it was met with disbelief as they were still in great shock about his execution the previous day. They were in the total silence of fear and doubt. The silence that we observe on Holy Saturday, with no activity, is a symbolic joining of these first followers of Jesus who were mourning and confused because the one they believed was the Messiah, Jesus, had been killed.

This year our silence was also symbolic of the total silence and social isolation that has befallen the whole world because of the unexpected killer-Coronavirus that has brought fear to all humanity. With the announcement of restrictions followed later on by the declaration of a lockdown, we too in Southern Africa joined the world in the fearful silence of the Coronavirus.

In this atmosphere of eerie silence, we would like to remind all who believe that our silence is not that of despair but of hope. While Jesus was hanging, dead and silent on the cross, his power was working. The passion narrative of St. Matthew read on Palm Sunday tells us that when Jesus died, "the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom". The divide between God and humanity was removed and so God is not far from us during this time of fear and anxiety.

As he hung on the cross in silence and apparent defeat, the power of Christ's love was present and operational in the women, who though from a distance were in solidarity with Jesus and keeping watch. It was present and operational in the courage of Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus who claimed the body of Jesus and gave him a descent burial. After His resurrection, this power and courage would be characteristic of all the followers of Jesus, bringing the victory of Christ over evil to the whole world.

In the midst of this darkness, there has been and continue to be present signs of final victory over the pandemic with heartwarming gestures of solidarity in dealing with the Coronavirus. We applaud the cooperation among all people in observing the directives that come with a lot of sacrificial restrictions that are meant to curb the spread of the virus. We commend the government in its decisive leadership and wide consultation in its response to the pandemic. It is also touching to notice how individuals and organizations are trying their best to come to the rescue of those hard-hit by the pandemic.

We note the generous gesture of care by members of Government to make significant and generous donations to the common good. We recognize too, the generosity of Business Leaders, Groups, Sportsmen and Women and other Celebrities. It is heart-warming to hear that even some Gangs have declared a truce among themselves and decided to participate in distribution of food to the poor. And so even in this hour of a fearful silence, we are witnessing the good human qualities of care and cooperation among people, and this is consoling!

We call upon those who are ignoring the directives, (as if they are the only ones negatively impacted by this situation) to consider the common good that informs these restrictions. We join the Holy Father in his Easter message in calling for strong bonds of solidarity among us during this

Khanya House, 129 Main Street, Waterkloof, 0181 Pretoria; P.O. Box 941, Pretoria 0001, South Africa.

Tel: +27 (12) 323 6458, Fax: +27 (12) 326 6218, E-mail: sacbcgen@sacbc.org.za

time. Social distance in our every day life has often meant division between the poor and the rich, but the social distancing we are being called to now is that of mutual care and cooperation in eliminating the virus.

We have come face to face with the singular truth that, no matter what nation or race, what class or age, what economic power or weakness - rich or poor, *all of us are in this together*. This truth is undeniable. With this greater oneness comes the absolute necessity of greater solidarity. While we must regularly wash our hands to avoid the virus, let us not wash our hands of our responsibility for each other, particularly the poor who feel the impact of the lockdown the most and who will be affected by the effects of the virus the most.

We remember those infected by this disease and are struggling for their lives, the healthcare workers who are at great risk of infection, those who are anxious about losing employment, the street vendors and those who survive by doing piece jobs, as well as those sitting at home without the provision of basic needs. As bishops, we make a preferential option for people in such situations, not only in prayer but also to work with all concerned towards a relief of their situation, both during the lockdown and in the post-coronavirus period.

In the Easter Vigil we sing the *Exsultet* and bless the Easter Candle, a symbol of our risen Saviour who is with us and struggles with us. As we heard from the second reading of Good Friday, in him who has risen

We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need (Heb.4:16).

May the Lord who calls us out from the Sacrifice of Good Friday and the silence of Saturday lead us to the Sunday victory of his resurrection over this pandemic.

Yours in the Risen Lord



+Sithembele SIPUKA
Bishop of Mthatha and President of the SACBC