



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS TAKING PART AT HARARE (ZIMBABWE)
TO THE FIRST GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE «INTER-REGIONAL
MEETING OF BISHOPS OF SOUTHERN AFRICA»**

*To my dear Brothers
the Bishops of the Southern African Region*

1. It gives me great pleasure to address the First General Assembly of the Inter-Regional Meeting of Bishops of Southern Africa, being held at Harare. I am happy to note that your meeting is a concrete realization and precious fruit of the Second Vatican Council's explicit wish that "contacts between episcopal conferences of different nations be encouraged in order to promote and safeguard their higher welfare" (*Christus Dominus*, 38).

Not being able to be present personally, as I would have wished, in order to share more fully in the joys and concerns of your pastoral ministry, I greet you with the words of the Apostle Paul: "Let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you stand firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents" (*Phil.* 1, 27-28).

"In one spirit, with one mind striving side by side". This is the interior disposition of heart that animates you as you gather to examine the reality of your local Churches in relation to each other, and in the context of the concrete challenges which you face. In doing so you give expression to the collegial nature of your episcopal office. May the Lord abundantly bless your fraternal charity, your openness to each other, and your communion in faith and Christian life!

2. The theme you have chosen for your discussions is indicative of the breadth of your responsibilities as successors of the Apostles. In these days of prayers and dialogue, your thoughts will centre on "the prophetic mission of the Church and its social teaching in the Southern African region".

The countries of this geographical area form a complex and diversified social, cultural and political reality. The Church, nevertheless, speaks to each particular situation within this diversity, precisely because she speaks the words of her Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ who is the "light of all nations".

The task of evangelization, of which Bishops are the principal agents, implies - as my predecessor Paul VI wrote - "the unceasing interplay of the Gospel and of man's concrete life". While the "good news" of redemption in Christ is a message of universal validity - the same for all times and places - its proclamation involves an explicit message, adapted to the different situations constantly being realized (Pauli VI, *Evangeliu Nuntiandi*, 29).

This explicit message concerns the rights and duties of every human being; it concerns family life, life in society, international life, peace, justice and development. In a word, it concerns man, man in the complex reality of his concrete existence.

3. As Pastors of Christ's flock you share in the solicitude of Christ himself, the Good Shepherd of all men and women. As you address yourselves to the varied and often painful situations of your peoples, I propose for your consideration something I wrote in the Encyclical "Redemptor Hominis": "What is in question here is man in all his truth, in his full magnitude. We are not dealing with the 'abstract' man. We are dealing with 'each' man, for each one is included in the mystery of Redemption, and with each one Christ has united himself forever through this mystery" (Ioannis Pauli PP. II, *Redemptor Hominis*, 13).

As a result, we can conclude that the object of the Church's care is each man and woman in his or her unique and unrepeatable human reality. Every human life has an inalienable value which comes to it from the fact that every human being is created in the image and likeness of God - an image and likeness that always remains, at all times and in every circumstance.

Through your episcopal consecration and ministry the Church is made present in the midst of your peoples. Through you and your collaborators, especially the priests and religious, the Church participates in the concrete historical circumstances of your peoples and your countries, proclaiming the word of truth that frees, and administering the transforming grace of the sacraments of faith.

In a special way the Church wishes to be close to the suffering and the oppressed. She wishes to console the weak and the dispossessed; to defend and assist the growing numbers of refugees and displaced persons in your region; to walk hand in hand with the migrant workers, forced by situations of poverty and underdevelopment to seek a livelihood far from their homes and families.

The solidarity of the Church with the poor, with the victims of unjust laws or unjust social and economic structures, goes without saying. But the forms in which this solidarity is realized cannot

be dictated by an analysis based on class distinctions and class struggle. The Church's task is to call all men and women to conversion and reconciliation, without opposing groups, without being "against" anyone. Every form of ministry and service in the Church must be an expression of the love that is in the heart of Jesus.

4. Your Assembly will face many difficult and urgent questions for which, often, no easy solution can be found. It is important then that your words and actions reflect the certainty and hope that flow from the redemptive mystery of the Cross and Resurrection of Christ. In this way your deliberations will be truly prophetic: that is, open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and in full harmony with the saving message of the Gospel. The genuine prophetic force of our teaching role within the ecclesial community comes, not from ideological and socio-political preconceptions, but from our proclamation of the Lord's word in confidence and freedom. Indeed, as Saint Paul writes, "the word of the cross . . . is the power of God" (*1 Cor.* 1, 18).

5. Without entering into the subject-matter of your discussions, I am happy to have this opportunity to reaffirm my conviction that "man is the way for the Church, the way for the daily life and experience, for her mission and toil" (Ioannis Pauli PP. II, *Redemptor Hominis*, 14). I pray that your hearts will be filled with evangelical love for all God's people, and I encourage you to be guided only by the desire to defend and promote man's true dignity.

It is my ardent hope that the First General Assembly of the Inter-Regional Meeting of Bishops of Southern Africa will succeed in fostering a deep sense of ecclesial communion between all the local Churches of the area, and that by sharing the joys and sorrows of your pastoral mission you will be strengthened in the love of Christ and in the desire to serve his brothers and sisters to the utmost of your abilities.

In the fellowship of the Father who has called us in the power of the Holy Spirit to be witnesses of his Son to the world, I gladly impart my Apostolic Blessing, as a pledge of my spiritual closeness. May God be with you and the Churches over which you preside and which you serve.

From the Vatican, 2 August 1984.

IOANNES PAULUS PP. II