

Rebuild Hope, Trust, Confidence and Stability in Zimbabwe

Pastoral Letter of the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference
on current affairs in the country

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Dear sisters and brothers in Christ, all men and women of good will,

Introduction

(1) We begin by disowning a recent statement issued in our name during the recent stayaway that started on 14 January 2019. We, the Catholic Bishops of Zimbabwe, never issued any statement during that period. We are dismayed that our name was abused in the manner it was.

On another note, we have also followed with surprise a concerted vilification of the Catholic Church in *The Patriot* following the publication of the post-elections report of the 30 July 2018 harmonised elections by the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP). In our view, the CCJP report and critical analysis of the elections was objective and factual. Fairness demands that analysis of the report, positive or negative, be challenged based on facts to the contrary and not on an imagined patriotism.

Our Observations

(2) We, the Bishops of the Catholic Church in Zimbabwe, have observed with increasing concern and alarm the state of our Zimbabwean nation from the time of the military - assisted political change that took place in November 2017 to the total shutdown of Zimbabwe's major cities and rural trading centres that began on Monday, 14 January 2019.

(3) We witnessed with sadness and concern the dissipation of hope for a united nation and a promising future when our politicians failed to harness the palpable oneness and goodwill prevailing among Zimbabweans across the political divide during and immediately after the political events of November 2017.

(4) We also witnessed with sadness and concern the resurgence of political and social polarisation before, during and after yet another disputed national election held on 30 July 2018, culminating in the violent unrest on August 1, 2018, during which property was destroyed, many people were injured and at least 6 civilians were shot dead.

(5) We have also witnessed with sadness and concern Government's piecemeal and knee-jerk reaction to the worsening economic situation, exemplified by the unilateral imposition of 2% tax on the country's major money - transfer and payment system and by the hefty increase in fuel prices on 12 January 2019, the immediate cause of the violent demonstrations and riots that brought Zimbabwe's major cities and rural trading centres into complete lockdown.

We are saddened and concerned by:

(5.1) Government's failure to arrest the deteriorating economic situation that has seen many companies close, many breadwinners losing their jobs, the cost of living soaring beyond the

reach of the majority of people; these have been the cause of industrial unrest in the country's key service sectors, particularly Health and Education;

(5.2) Violent demonstrations and riots that have resulted in the destruction of property and disruption of essential services;

(5.3) Government's heavy-handed and intolerant handling of dissent and expression of rights by Zimbabwe's dissatisfied population resulting in injury and death to innocent ordinary people.

(6) We are writing at a time when our country is going through one of the most trying periods in its history. Once more the resilience and resolve of Zimbabweans is being put to test. We thank the many Zimbabweans who continue to pray ceaselessly for our Country. We, your Shepherds, write to you at this time to help rebuild hope, trust, confidence and stability in Zimbabwe.

(7) The dramatic pre-election events seemed to many Zimbabweans to promise a new chapter of our history and were greeted by most with immediate and spontaneous rejoicing. We had many reasons for hope. At the same time, however, other voices raised concerns about the unconstitutional mode of these changes, and in particular the initial and continuing role of the military with attendant risks to the freedom of our political processes that this might carry for the future. The post-election period has justified some of those concerns. Zimbabwe is burning; its economy is hurting; its people are suffering. Many ordinary Zimbabweans express disappointment that hoped-for changes are yet to be felt, in access to employment, cash and broad stakeholder consultations. Our quasi currency, operating with multiple exchange rates, is fuelling a national crisis. If we are to restore hope and trust in our nation we always need to speak the truth, no matter how painful. Only the truth will make us free (Jn. 8:32). We need to go back to the pre-election vision where Government and its President seemed to create new space for political activity, allowing for the activation of Constitutional Commissions and reform of State institutions. To get our economy working again, Zimbabwe needs strong institutions for without the necessary reforms we become irrelevant and spectators in the life of the modern world. Elections are never, in themselves, the answers to problems, but as part of a wider programme of transformation, they can be moments of national recommitment.

Beyond the Elections: Towards The Zimbabwe We Want.

(8) It is in the nature of free and fair elections that no individual or group should be able to determine the results. It is certain, therefore, that some will be disappointed. The issues that face us are not simple, and we are divided in our opinions about the way forward. If it is true that, as we wrote in March 2013, "most Zimbabweans have lost trust in the leadership", it is also true that an exaggerated trust in individual leaders or parties has not in the end served us well. We do not need a strong man or woman but strong institutions. We need to develop a new and challenging kind of politics, a new cooperation and harmony based on reasoned argument, generous compromise and respectful toleration. Zimbabwe is faced with a crisis that is not just political and economic but moral and spiritual. A new Zimbabwean politics needs to be more collaborative, inclusive and based not on one or two leaders, however effective and charismatic, but rather on strong democratic institutions that embody and secure the values of our democracy, regulate our politics, build trust and administer peace, truth and justice to all.

We now need to set our main focus on the type of society that we desire in Zimbabwe for ourselves and for our children. As Zimbabweans, we need to contribute as equal and respected members to solutions to difficulties of elections and the reform of the electoral process; national healing and reconciliation; criteria for addressing long term issues of governance; transparency and accountability; poverty, unemployment, economic inequality, development, rural to urban migration, conflict resolutions and injustices, among others.

(9) Recommendations

(9.1) We call upon Government and the Opposition to put their differences aside and work together to free Zimbabwe from economic shackles and international ostracisation. His Holiness, Pope Francis, in his Message for World Peace Day 2019 says: "Politics is an essential means of building human community and institutions, but when political life is not seen as a form of service to society as a whole, it can become a means of oppression, marginalization and even destruction." We hasten to say a precedent for working together between Government and Opposition was set when the Government of National Unity (GNU) was formed under similarly difficult circumstances in 2009 and Zimbabwe's economy and prospects were positively revived and only began to regress yet again from the time the GNU expired in 2013;

(9.2) We call upon Government to consult broadly and desist from unilateral imposition of policies that exacerbate the people's suffering and to have policy consistency in order to instil confidence in investors, especially foreign investors;

(9.3) We call upon Government to desist from heavy-handed handling of dissent and expression of rights and grievances by the people and to desist from denying people their rights, including the barring of access to social media communication imposed on 15 January 2019;

(9.4) We call upon all people to exercise tolerance towards each other and to express their constitutional rights in a peaceful and nonviolent manner. Peaceful protest is provided for in the Constitution. Regrettably, citizens' protests and acts of civil disobedience degenerated into violence, destruction of property, injury and loss of life. We urge you to always shun violence and be mindful to respect everyone's rights, especially those who do not agree with you.

Conclusion

(10) While for many hope for a better Zimbabwe might appear lost, we re-affirm St. Paul's message that when all else fails, there are three pillars that remain for us to hold onto: Faith, Hope and Love (1Corinthians 13:13). We believe in a God of second chances, who is always offering us new opportunities. Even in the midst of current tensions and disturbances there are new opportunities to rebuild hope, trust, confidence and stability in our country. The task at hand requires our collective responsibility in upholding everything that is good and right, to promote unity, reconciliation, and national cohesion. We wish to state our firm belief that Zimbabwe would easily become one of the best countries to live in on earth if only all of us, it's people, committed to living and working with each other in harmony, tolerance and peace, putting the interests of the country before selfish and political party interests. "Behold how good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity" (Ps133). Let us seize all

opportunities to rebuild hope, trust, confidence and stability, accompanied by ongoing prayers for our country.

God bless you all.

- +Robert C. Ndlovu, Archbishop of Harare (ZCBC President)**
- +Alex Thomas, Archbishop of Bulawayo (ZCBC Vice President)**
- +Paul Horan, Bishop of Mutare (ZCBC Secretary/Treasurer)**
- +Michael D. Bhasera, Bishop of Masvingo & Pontifical Administrator of Gweru**
- +Albert Serrano, Bishop of Hwange**
- +Rudolf Nyandoro, Bishop of Gokwe**
- +Raymond Mupandasekwa, Bishop of Chinhoyi**