

SOUTHERN AFRICAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

Pastoral Statement on the Environmental Crisis

5 September 1999

Mother Nature

Often we stand in wonder at the beauty and perfection of God's creation, and marvel at the variety of forms in which life is expressed on earth. At the same time we become aware of how easily the delicate and complex system that allows life to continue can be damaged by irresponsible human intervention. Scientists have been warning us for over thirty years of the rapid deterioration of the natural environment and of the impact this has on every living being.

Our country is affected by the global environmental crisis. We now face the consequences of the economic development of the past which revolved around the exploitation of South African mineral and natural resources, with minimum concern for the environment. Environment is not only about landscapes and the survival of endangered animals, but it is also about the life of the people, the conditions in which women and men are living, working and recreating.

Human Irresponsibility

In the past year the Hearings on Poverty have highlighted the serious injustices perpetrated against poor people through the deterioration of the environment. We have learnt from people's submissions about the massive health problems millions of people are facing as a result of the dumping of hazardous waste next to their homes. Such waste is contaminating the air and poisoning water supplies.

We have learnt how overcrowding in poor restricted living conditions has resulted in the violation of nature in both rural and urban areas. Overgrazing the land and cutting down trees for energy and industrial purposes are some of the causes for our massive soil erosion. Workers in mines, industries and farms have become ill, some have even died as a result of exposure to chemicals.

While recognizing the increase in the number of homes that now have access to water and energy, we call for extra efforts to bring these resources to those communities who still lack them; and we appeal that all further development in the country be done in environmentally sustainable ways.

Communities in overpopulated urban and informal settlements some times live where air pollution is above acceptable international health standards. People become sick because there is no clean water, and because sewerage and waste management is still totally inadequate.

We Can Change

All damage to the environment is a grave problem which calls for prompt and creative response. Many interested groups and non-governmental organizations are committed to the task of drawing up and spreading information on environmental issues. They are working towards the development of responsible stewardship and appreciation of creation.

We are particularly pleased with the new policy on the environment which the government has adopted in the National Environmental Management Act, 1998. We believe this policy is a major step forward in achieving environmentally sustainable development.

We urge all the faithful to become familiar with the new legislation and with the Church's teaching on environment. We also encourage all to do whatever is possible to make these known to others: by organizing workshops, information sessions and talks, and through the use of liturgies and homilies.

We also call upon individuals, parishes, associations, dioceses, and especially youth movements to participate actively in the nationwide effort to ensure that principles and norms contained in the law and Church teaching are implemented.

Finally, we commend the work that is being carried out in the Church by individuals and groups already active in awareness campaigns inspired and/or commissioned by the SACBC. Everyone's talents and involvement are needed to redress the damage caused by human abuse of God's creation. This we must do because it is not just the beauty of the environment that is at stake here, but the survival of the human race and of creation entrusted to its stewardship.

5 September 1999

For more Information

- *Peace with God the Creator; Peace with all Creation*, World Day of Peace Message of John Paul II, 1990.
- Message of the Holy See to the General Assembly of the U.N., 6 November 1 992
- *Renewing the earth*, U.S. Episcopal Pastoral Statement, 1991.

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