

**CHILDREN
AT
WAR**

A PASTORAL LETTER TO PARENTS FROM THE BISHOPS OF THE CPSA

NOVEMBER 1986

We, the Bishops of the CPSA, are very conscious of the distress and perplexity of members of our Church, black and white, whose children are caught up in the turmoil of our times.

There are those whose sons are called upon to serve in the SADF. Others have children who have left the country, either to avoid such service, or to wait until a better order is found for the land. There are others whose children have left in order to take part in "the armed struggle." All these, parents and children, are beloved members of God's family to whom we are concerned to minister in the love of Christ.

In a normal society a Defence Force may be considered to have a legitimate place in order to protect against foreign aggression or malicious insurrection.

In most civilised societies some persons find such military service unacceptable in conscience. These are usually termed pacifists or conscientious objectors and provision is made for reasonable alternative service. Christian tradition acknowledges that it is right to allow people to follow conscience even where a majority believes that conscience to be in error.

The pain and perplexity in South Africa arise from the fact that in the eyes of the majority of the governed, the Government lacks legitimacy. The socio-political and economic system which has been established is seen to be unjust and oppressive. In their experience black people, and especially youth, have increasingly come to realise the human damage caused by the systematic denial of proper education to them. The legal restraints upon their participation in the "free enterprise" system and the generally unequal life opportunities available to them have come to be seen as hostile and provocative. For these reasons the SADF is seen as defending an unjust order.

In a normal society stability and order are capable of restoration, but in an unjust one police or military action is perceived as oppressive and so fuels the cycle of violence. Many young people (with or without support from their parents) are therefore in Christian conscience seeking other options for serving their country than in the SADF.

We condemn violence from whatever source. The Church upholds the sanctity of human life. Jesus said: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." (Matthew 5:44). State sponsored brutality and brutal reaction to it are both intolerable. Bombings, necklacings, shootings, sjambokkings, teargassing and torture are all horrible. We must recognise that until the inhumanity of injustice is removed such inhuman things will continue.

By use of the Defence Force in the townships, South African is turned against South African. On the border too it is not a foreign enemy who invades. The pain is still more intense for Namibians, who see the presence of the SADF as a mark of illegal occupation. Fellow Christians face each other across the guns.

There are many, who believe that the SADF is essentially defending apartheid. Others believe that the SADF is defending South Africa against communism. We are convinced that the proper defence against any system which devalues the worth and God-given dignity of each person, is the propagation and practice of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ within a just society. Dehumanizing political systems are less likely to find followers in a society which is justly ordered.

We call on you, the people of God, of every race and background, to come together and find each other as sisters and brothers in Christ.

Understandable white fears, fuelled by guilt and propaganda, can be greatly eased by encountering the warmth and humanity of the black community expressed in *ubuntu* (humanness, compassion, sharing, togetherness and reverence for human life). Blacks gripped by fury need to be recalled to these very roots.

In view of this, the Church has to be concerned for people with varied needs and differing attitudes conscientiously held.

The Church is bound to help guide her members in the formation of conscience. This may involve the uncomfortable challenge posed by the demands of the Gospel.

With this in mind the Church must minister to all in the love of Christ:

1. To those who agonise over their Christian responsibility in the face of military call-up.
2. To those who decide to serve in the SADF.
3. To those who in Christian conscience seek other ways of national service, or who refuse to serve at all.
4. To children who have left the country.
5. To those affected by the experience of military service, imprisonment or exile.
6. To the parents of all these groups, who sometimes cannot understand their children's decisions or who may be unable to trace their whereabouts.
7. To all those who are confused and damaged by the present turmoil.

This search to minister to all these different groups presents many complex problems, in spite of which the Church tries to do all that it can to provide adequate pastoral care for its members.

We pray for you, and ask you to hold together in the love of Christ even where there are grave differences in thinking about the way forward into that peace and justice which we all seek by the grace of Christ our only Saviour.

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