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**Launch of the SACBC Pastoral Plan
26 January 2020: Regina Mundi Johannesburg
Bishop S. Sipuka**

In today's first reading God's chosen people of Israel, who represent the whole of humanity are on their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. God had delivered them from the oppression of Pharaoh with spectacular acts but now they find themselves in a moment of darkness. Their leaders have become corrupt and the poor have become destitute.

In this situation of darkness, comes Isaiah who speaks in God's name a promise of light and speaks as if it has already been achieved. **"The people that walked in darkness has seen a great light"**. Matthew in the Gospel presents Jesus as the one who fulfils this promise of bringing light. As we have heard from the Gospel Jesus in turn chooses other people as his disciples, Peter and his brother Andrew, and he chooses another pair, James and Brother John and we are told that he went around with them proclaiming the good news of the kingdom. After his departure from this earth, these disciples that Jesus had chosen would also become apostles who will continue his mission of bringing light to the world.

Like the people of Israel who were spectacularly liberated from the oppression of Pharaoh in Egypt, in 1994 we were spectacularly moved from the oppression of apartheid with great promises. We were the model and envy of the world, our economy grew, we won soccer cup, we won the ruby world cup, we had self-leaders like Mandela, Joe Slovo, Kदा Asmal, dedicated government ministers, and good Church leaders.

But right now we are like the Israelites when Isaiah spoke this message of hope to them. With load shedding, we literally live in darkness sometimes and also figuratively, darkness has descended upon us. Local governments are grossly mismanaged and resources are looted resulting in desperate reaction by the poor people as we see for example what is happening in Qwaqwa. People do not even have water to drink, to say nothing about other essential services.

And what is happening in Qwaqwa is just a sample of what characterises most of our municipalities, a huge percentage of our local municipalities are dysfunctional. Unemployment is growing phenomenally, violence is becoming a culture, especially against women and children, crime is rampant, the economy is declining, our credit ratings keep going down, the state owned enterprises that were meant to bring income for the country are instead bleeding the national coffers competing for funds that would be better used to improve the lives of the poor.

As it was the case with the Israelites, in addition to other factors, this darkness is largely due to corrupt leaders in our government who even in this moment of darkness are not concerned about the plight of the poor people but about their survival so that they can continue to loot. Their stomachs and not the common good are the main motivation of their actions that even among themselves they are prepared to murder if their survival is threatened.

As if this darkness brought about by political and business corruption is not enough trouble, our people are also abused and exploited at spiritual level. Our country is pervaded with mushrooming pastors and churches of all sorts who are in it for money. The desperate situation of our people is exploited by rogue pastors for financial gains, rapists posing as men of God pounce on innocent and vulnerable young women and girls, false prophets and apostles live a

luxurious life at the expense of the poor and minors and vulnerable people are sexually abused by paedophiles who hide behind clerical status in mainline churches, betraying the trust of the innocent placed upon them.

These are some of what may be called institutional darkneses, darkness from the government, darkness from business and darkness from religion or Churches. But there are also personal or cultural darkneses as well. One darkness that is encroaching in our country and in the African continent is the culture of selfishness disguised as democratic right which leads to a plethora of other forms of darkneses.

We are becoming an individualistic society with no sense of mission for the common good.

- As long as I am fine, I do not care about the person next to me.
- There is loud noise about rights and total silence about obligations and responsibility.
- There is disregard of traffic laws with disastrous consequences of the loss of life.
- the general lawlessness which makes it easy for people to destroy property with impunity is becoming a culture,
- the lack of concern for others in public places, the bullying of vulnerable people becoming the order of the day,
- the lack of respect in talking and engaging with others have become a typical South African behaviour,
- lack of conscientiousness and diligence in doing our work coupled with a sense of entitlement that overshadows the virtue of hard work is a worrying factor in society,
- the murder of hundreds of thousands of unborn babies, euphemised as termination of pregnancy is a diminishment of the value of life.
- All these darkneses are embraced and entertained in the name of personal democratic right.

If Vusi Nova the music artist was invited here and asked to sing one of his pieces, perhaps the most appropriate piece would be “As’phelelanga”, which means "we are not complete ". The number of whites present here is far more less than it could be, “As’phelelanga”. And so the other area of darkness in our country is lack of racial cohesion among South Africans that continues to persist more than 25 years of the new dispensation.

In the context of these darkneses, institutional and cultural darkness, like Isaiah, the Southern African Catholic are proposing this pastoral plan as a tool that can contribute to bring light in this situation. The pastoral plan begins with a call to evangelisation, and the big element of evangelisation is conversion, about which the Gospel speaks today, “repent for the kingdom of God is close at hand”.

With regard to institutional darkness, we are called to repent from the attitude of indifference to an attitude of active involvement in the transformation of our world because we are sent. In my opening address of the meeting of bishops, I noted with regret how many Catholics tend to see themselves more as there to be serviced by the Church, to be served sacraments, to be preached to and to be buried.

And because many Catholics have this mentality, we find ourselves with the same people working in the Church and we recycle the same people for leadership because the others are not willing to offer themselves. As Pope Francis reminded us recently, “We are all baptized and we are all sent”, not just some. So this is a conversion we need to make, we need to repent

from being a self-serving Church into being a missional Church, a Church that is sent, and Church that goes forth.

In today's Gospel Jesus chose disciples, disciples who would learn from him, and having learnt from him, then become apostles. These two identities go together. Some of us are happy to be disciples, sitting at the feet of Jesus, enjoying his company when we pray and meditate, learning from him when the word is preached to us, being strengthened and made holy when we receive the sacraments. This is good, but it must not end there, it must also include being an apostle, being sent out to continue the mission of Christ.

We cannot only be disciples sitting at the feet of Jesus, we must also get on our feet and be apostles who do the work of Christ. That is why at the end of Mass after we have been sitting at the feet of Jesus as disciples, the priest says, now go the Mass is ended and be apostles.

Being a disciple without being an apostle is not complete. Some of us like to be disciples only, we like to come to Church and eat our Jesus and go home, some cannot even wait for the closing prayer. After getting their weekly dose of Jesus, they think that they are done. No, after eating Jesus in whatever form, that is when the work begins, you become an apostle, you are sent to bring the light to the darkness of the world, to your neighborhood, to your school, to your work, to your home, to your parish.

Yet being an apostle without being a disciple is equally fruitless because if our apostolic work is not informed by the experience of Jesus it becomes just a social work with no evangelizing impact. In discipleship we are evangelized by Jesus, and in turn become evangelizers through being apostles.

The symbol of our pastoral plan is a hand. It is a reminder that by virtue of our baptism, we are all called to lend a hand. Hand is associated with work, we are all called work. Let us all look at what you can do to reach out motivated by our faith.

In this pastoral plan, there are 8 focus areas that we all need to work on as you can see them in the banners and posters. Just like being a disciple and an apostle overlap and complement each other, you cannot say I am going to work on this alone. We need to work on all of these because they build on each other and in that way we become a transforming light to our dark world.

As we sing the recessional hymn "here I am Lord" I invite each and every one of us to sing and mean the words of this song:

I the Lord of sea and sky
I have heard my people cry
All who dwell in dark and sin
My hand will save

I who made the stars of night
I will make their darkness bright

Who will bear my light to them?
Whom shall I send?

Here I am Lord Is it I Lord
I will go Lord
I will hold your people in my heart.

Of course we can do this if we repent of the selfishness that makes us to focus on ourselves. May the Lord grant us the grace for this needed missionary conversion. Amen