

ZIMBABWE CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE
Pastoral Letter
addressed to
ZIMBABWEANS IN THE DIASPORA

19 June 2012

***'There is surely a future hope for you,
and your hope will not be cut off '***
(Proverbs 23:18)

1. INTRODUCTION

We, the Catholic Bishops of Zimbabwe, primarily address this letter to Zimbabweans in the diaspora, but it also concerns Zimbabweans at home and people of good will everywhere. The story of the Zimbabwean diaspora is poorly known. This letter attempts to cast a little light upon an area of shadow and to give recognition and hope to those who have left our land.

1.0 Clarification of term

The term 'diaspora' requires clarification. While it has biblical resonance, it is used today to refer to the dispersion of any people from their original homeland. Such a dispersion is not recent for people of Zimbabwe. During the colonial era, as a consequence of the struggle for freedom, our people were dispersed in various camps in neighbouring countries. After Independence in 1980, a trickle of people sought greener economic pastures within the region, other parts of Africa and overseas. However in the first decade of the new millennium this trickle became a flood as 'our country (was plunged) into an unprecedented abyss characterised by economic, social, and political woes and unimaginable forms of political intimidation and violence'¹.

2. EXODUS

2.0 Dilemma

As the fabric of society weakened, and with no relief in sight, the hopes of many people faded. Efforts to break the political impasse were inconclusive. False dawns failed to deliver on hopes awakened. People lost trust in political leaders. The cry of despair was heard and continues to be heard: *What can I do? How can I help my family?* Whether to stay or to go became a painful dilemma that many a Zimbabwean breadwinner had to face. To stay for some meant risking destitution; to go involved a wrench with all one had known.

2.1 Departure

Many educated people left and succeeded in starting a new life in distant lands where English is spoken as a first or second language, especially in the UK, US, Australia and the Middle-East. This 'brain-drain' caused a serious gap within the professions in Zimbabwe, one that makes economic and social renewal all the more challenging. The vast majority of Zimbabweans, however, migrated south and their experience is a central feature of this letter. While this number included professionals, an infinitely greater number were less well-educated, semi-skilled or unskilled; dispossessed and desperate; hungry and homeless. The majority were young men, but there were also many young women - some with children, and a number of unaccompanied minors, boys and girls under 18 years of age.

¹ ZCBC, Pastoral Letter on *National Healing and Reconciliation*, Oct. 2009:4

While not wishing to abandon their beloved country, these migrants felt abandoned by it. They left the cradle that nourished them. The population of Zimbabwe was decimated in the process. The outflow was acute during times of election violence, particularly between 2002-2003 and in 2008-2009. But it has not stopped. We stated in 2011 that ‘the evolving trends in our country are worrying and, if not corrected, can lead to our loss of nationhood, the disintegration of our society and to the forming of degenerate militias with opposing loyalties’.² As long as these worrying trends remain, people will continue to leave our land.

2.2 Exclusion

As Church leaders and as members of society, we acknowledge, with a sense of humility and shame, that so many of our citizens no longer felt welcomed at home, and had to take flight. This experience of being unwanted has been worsened by the overall failure of political discourse within Zimbabwe to focus with serious intent on the exodus of its people. The greatest asset of any country is its own people. Very few politicians have visited border areas, or crossed borders to witness at first hand the situation of their fellow Zimbabweans. It is not politically expedient to acknowledge the reality of the ongoing displacement of Zimbabwean people, especially since the Global Political Agreement was signed in September 2008 and the Government of National Unity formed in February 2009. Ongoing displacement, at best, suggests political challenge; at worst, political ineptitude, division and failure. The vast majority of those who leave are seen as politically insignificant and expendable. Their only ‘merit’ is the remittances sent home to prop-up a severely depressed economy!

At times of national elections this exclusion is particularly acute. While the diplomatic corps and military personnel serving overseas are free to cast their votes, the nameless diaspora are not, as they are perceived as presenting a threat to the political *status quo*. For many in the diaspora, the perspective of Ben Sirach, advocating for the recovery of lost voices, will find an echo within them:

‘But of others there is no memory; they have perished as though they had never existed; they have become as though they had never been born, they and their children after them. But these also were godly men, whose righteous deeds have not been forgotten’.³

2.3 Embrace

As bishops, we wish to affirm that those in the diaspora are Godly human beings, made in his image and likeness. They are not a number or a statistic on some foreign shore. They are not a stateless people. They belong to the state of Zimbabwe. They are our concern. We embrace them as one of us. They must not be forgotten. This letter is a testament to our desire to acknowledge their existence, their story, their pain, their resilience and their hope.

We acknowledge the struggles you face each day in coping with the loss of job, lack of proper shelter, loss of dear ones back at home, separation from extended family, unfamiliar social fabric and legal framework of your host country, skill mismatches etc. Indeed some of you are trapped in the diaspora due to legal and asylum issues, prohibitive costs of travel to and from family back home and so on. There has been breakdowns in marriages and family life. As believers we need to face all these challenges with faith and hope.

² ZCBC Pastoral Letter, *Let us Work for the Common Good, Let us Save our Nation*, 2011, Par. 1

³ Ecclesiasticus 44: 9-10

3. A PEOPLE IN EXILE

3.0 Rights of migrants

'The migrant is a human person who possesses fundamental, inalienable rights that must be respected by everyone and in every circumstance.'⁴ These noble words of Pope Benedict XV¹ acknowledge that each person possesses intrinsic rights which are personal and precious. The most fundamental right is the right to life. Jesus reminds us that he has come that we 'may have life and have it to the full'⁵ - not half-life, or quarter-life. Already denied the right to the fulness of life in the land of their birth, Zimbabwean migrants dared to hope that their rights as persons might be respected elsewhere.

Unfortunately, for the majority, this respect proved elusive. No 'red carpet' awaited them outside the borders of their land. The efforts of Church bodies, some government and NGO groups tempered matters in an alien situation. Yet, at various junctures of their outward experience, a culture of exploitation, opportunism and indifference confronted them. Four consistent features of this experience - crossing of borders, accessing shelter, legalising one's status and searching for work - have been observed in the southern diaspora and are noted below.

3.1 Borders

While the exit story of a minority included air or road passage through regular borders with proper documentation, the story of the majority who moved south has been very different. Christ warns that 'at the Last Judgement (he) will consider as directed to himself everything that has been done or denied to one of the least of these'.⁶ What has been done, and is still being done, to a good number of the vulnerable who cross alien frontiers, is cruel indeed. Christ continues to suffer in the members of his body.⁷ They have been attacked, beaten, raped and robbed while crossing frontiers. Below are the words of a nurse in the border town of Musina in June 2009 which give a hint of common experiences:

'Last night we learned of a large group of women and children who attempted to swim across the crocodile-infested Limpopo River to reach South Africa, only to fall prey to local bandits known as 'gumaguma.' Five of the women who crossed were raped, and two babies were literally taken off their mothers' backs and thrown into the river to drown.'⁸

No national leaders came to console these mothers who were raped. There were no state funerals for their children. These human beings were not seen as national heroes; they are part of a nameless mass.

As well as crossing the river, other groups passed through the vast expanse of the Kruger Park, walking over a number of days in groups of fifty to seventy in order to seek protection from wild animals. Not all escaped this experience unharmed!

3.2 Shelter

Those who reach the other side safely find that access to shelter is very difficult. Temporary shelter provided by Churches and NGOs in border towns is inadequate to deal

⁴ Message of Pope Benedict XV¹, World Day of Migrants and Refugees, 2010

⁵ Jn. 10:10

⁶ Message of Pope Benedict XV¹; cf. Mt 25:40, 45

⁷ I Cor. 12:26-27

⁸ Medecins Sans Frontieres, *No Refuge, Access Denied, Medical and Humanitarian needs of Zimbabweans in South Africa*, June 2009, P 16

with the large numbers seeking it. Many migrants remain in border areas living in poor conditions in overcrowded townships, in rented accommodation or in dilapidated buildings. Those who succeed in reaching the 'bright lights' may find matters no better. For example, the Central Methodist Church in Johannesburg, a mecca for Zimbabwean migrants, at one stage accommodated up to two thousand people at night in unhygienic conditions on pews, stairs, and the hard church floor with as many more sleeping outside on cardboard boxes!

3.3 Legality

Each state has a duty to its citizens to document foreign nationals within its boundaries. The documenting of Zimbabweans in South Africa has been a very demanding process, due to the huge numbers involved. At one stage, a window period (September to December 2010) was provided when relaxed conditions made it somewhat easy to apply for permits (work, study and business). This improved the situation for those who received these permits but others continued to remain undocumented. Workers on commercial farms benefit from being listed on corporate work permits. Many more Zimbabweans have received 'Asylum-seeker Temporary Permits'. This is an expedient arrangement to deal with a humanitarian issue; the vast majority of Zimbabweans are economic migrants who do not qualify for refugee status. While it is the wish of the South African authorities to register Zimbabweans rather than deport them, deportation has taken place to add to the strained situation.

3.4 Work

Because of their good knowledge of English and their capacity for hard-work, Zimbabweans are highly appreciated by employers. A good number progress to levels of middle-management on commercial farms and in businesses. Workers on smaller farms, domestic workers, labourers, etc. - especially those without valid documents - are open to exploitation, often receiving poor remuneration for heavy work and long hours. Many others languish with very little access to work; at best - a day's 'piece-work' here and there. As in any situation of uncertainty and exploitation, it is women and children who suffer most.

3.5 Xenophobia

An added uncertainty experienced by Zimbabweans is the threat of xenophobia. In May 2008, xenophobic violence broke out in a township near Johannesburg and soon spread to other cities and provinces in South Africa leading to the deaths of 62 people. 670 more were injured and approximately 100,000 foreign nationals were displaced, including large numbers of Zimbabweans. The threat of xenophobia is real for Zimbabweans in certain communities. Tempering this threat, through promoting good community relations, etc., is an ongoing challenge.

4. REFLECTION

4.0 Hard truth

Reflection on the experience of Zimbabweans in the diaspora and their ongoing displacement will not be helped by tempered tones that deny the reality. Christians must 'speak the truth in love'⁹. In this case the truth is hard and cold. The necessary, noble, and often heroic work of Churches and NGOs outside the borders of Zimbabwe in supporting, and advocating for Zimbabwean migrants is largely 'band-aid' - putting bandages on a festering sore without being able to treat the wound. The wound lies within the borders of Zimbabwe itself. The wound of the Zimbabwean political crisis has been painful for decades.

⁹ Eph. 4:15

In our pastoral letter on 'National Healing and Reconciliation, 2009,' we, as a body of Bishops, wrote about the challenges and demands of healing and reconciliation in Zimbabwe. These challenges and demands remain. The task of healing and reconciliation is not helped by the ongoing culture of intimidation and abuse of human rights. Genuine engagement in a process of national healing and reconciliation must become real rather than notional. Without this engagement the festering sore will remain and Zimbabweans will continue to leave their country in significant numbers.

4.1 Assessment by History

A question must also be asked: when the history of Zimbabwe is being written in a future, reconciled society, how will its authors look back and view the phenomenon of a displaced people? Currently the diaspora experience is treated as little more than an embarrassing footnote to the dominant interpretation of history.

There should be an inclusive view of history based on principles that prioritise 'human dignity, the common good, option for the poor, human rights and responsibilities, participation, subsidiarity, solidarity, economic justice, stewardship of God's creation and the promotion of peace'.¹⁰ These ten basic principles, central to Catholic Social Teaching, also offer a perspective on citizenship, patriotism, heroism; statehood, sovereignty, governance, etc. This perspective honours the sacrifices made in the struggle for liberation by so many. But the ideological agenda is not the dominant discourse. A much wider agenda is offered which, if it had been accepted in recent times, would have prevented a major exodus to the diaspora and the suffering of countless numbers. To embrace this higher agenda requires intellectual honesty, integrity of life and moral courage. It means recognising what we have said many times before, that 'our crisis is not only political and economic but first and foremost spiritual and moral'.^{11 12 13}

The flight of the diaspora cannot be treated as a footnote to recent historical experience. It is an effect of the core failure within Zimbabwe to move beyond a narrow ideological mindset to a more inclusive view of life. Regarding the writing of history, three inter-related points should be noted:

- the history of Zimbabwe will be incomplete without the diaspora story being told;
- this story should occupy a central chapter;
- it must be understood in relation to its ideological context.

5.0 CONCLUSION

In conclusion what can we say directly to you who have left our land? We understand your plight. We know why you left. You are not to blame. While we wish you grace and blessing in your new land, we hope that one day you will consider coming home. Yet we cannot expect you to return to a land without welcome, opportunity and reconciliation. As we said before and say again, 'real genuine healing and reconciliation can only take place when the environment is open, free and democratic'.¹⁴ This is 'currently not the case'.¹⁵ Sadly, this statement still remains true.

¹⁰ *Let us Work for the Common Good*, Par. 2

¹¹ ZCBC, *God Hears the Cry of the Oppressed, Pastoral Letter on the Current Crisis in Zimbabwe*, Holy Thursday, 5 April, 2007:6.

¹² *National Healing and Reconciliation*, Par. 1

¹³ *Let us Work for the Common Good*, Par. 6

¹⁴ *National Healing and Reconciliation*, Par. 5

¹⁵ *National Healing and Reconciliation*, Par. 5

Yet we do not lose hope. As St. Paul says; "Rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us" (Romans.5; 3-5). Find consolation and strength in the Lord by reflecting on Scripture passages like Psalms 23 and 121. In your pain and emotional struggles find strength in each other especially in the Church. Encourage each other to find a home in the Church by praying together, sharing the Word of God, joining various associations and worshipping as a family away from home.

Be assured that there are people - within government, civil society and the Churches - not least ourselves, who are committed to the road of national healing and reconciliation, to the common good and to creating a better society for all people. Be patient with current efforts which require so much energy and take so much time. Know that you contribute to these efforts by your continued vigilance and advocacy in foreign lands. Know also that we can only overcome hatred with love, falsehood with truth, fear with courage.¹⁶ This is the gospel way. It leads ultimately to freedom, truth and the fullness of life. It is the only way we know and wish to follow. Journey with us as we journey in spirit with you.

With our paternal blessings.

+Angel Floro, Bishop of Gokwe	(ZCBC President)
+Robert C. Ndlovu, Archbishop of Harare	
+Alex Thomas, Archbishop of Bulawayo	(ZCBC Secretary/Treasurer)
+Alexio Churu Muchabaiwa, Bishop of Mutare	(ZCBC Vice President)
+Michael D. Bhasera, Bishop of Masvingo	
+Dieter B. Scholz SJ, Bishop of Chinhoyi	
+Albert Serrano, Bishop of Hwange	
+Patrick M. Mutume, Auxiliary Bishop of Mutare	

¹⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, Message for World Day of Peace, Jan. 1., 2006