

A MESSAGE OF HOPE: A CALL TO BE HEALED AND TO HEAL

Brothers and Sisters of the Catholic Church in Southern Africa,

"Do you want to be well again?" Jesus asked the sick man at the pool of Bethzatha. (John 5:7) Were you ever asked a similar question.

We all desire to be healed of one thing or another. The search for inner healing involves seeking a sense of well being and wholeness. Within the family one may experience the need to be reconciled, to forgive, to be forgiven and to be accepted. In the neighbourhood and broader society, there are those who seek to be reconciled, to be recognised for who they are despite race or age or gender. Some search for closure after a tragic and violent event in their lives and others search for meaning in the face of a seemingly meaningless death or physical sickness and incapacity. These are the many faces of illness and unhappiness in our lives.

- With which of these experiences do you identify?
- What are your fears?

Illness, misfortune and fear become opportunities to open ourselves anew to God.

Such experiences lay bare the deepest yearning which the Holy Spirit plants within each of us so that we truly strive to become, what St. Paul describes in the letter to the Ephesians, "God's work of art, created in Christ Jesus, for the good works which God has prepared beforehand". (Eph. 2:10).

The picture most often evoked in the Gospels is one where people sought Jesus out for healing. This is not far from our own experience and we, your bishops, feel challenged to reach out to you and those around us who cry out for healing and deliverance. We do so in the belief that as a church we are called to become a healed community which brings healing, fulfilling our own vision of becoming a community which serves humanity.

In him was life, and that life was the light of all. (John 1:4)

Jesus invites us to buy from him "the eye ointment so that (we) are able to see." (Rev. 3:18) Healing begins with seeing ourselves anew with the eyes of Christ who from the cross upon which he was raised up, viewed the world with love and compassion.

Illness and pain, and the burden of personal sinfulness most often leave us feeling alone and isolated. The experience of healing opens us in a way to God so that we are 'nolonger strangers and sojourners, but fellow citizens with the

saints and members of the household of God, a dwelling place of God in the Spirit'. (Cf. Ephesians 2:19-22)

Healing begins with an encounter with Christ

"One doesn't begin to be a Christian because of an ethical decision or a great idea, but rather because of an encounter with an event, with a Person, who gives new horizons to life, and with that, a decisive orientation." (Address of Pope Benedict XVI to Portuguese Bishops, November 2007)

The Gospel message tells us that it was through encountering Jesus that people found healing. St. Matthew in his Gospel tells us that Jesus answered the enquiries of John the Baptist with these words: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is he who takes no offense at me." (Matthew 11:4-6)

- Do you desire to encounter the Lord in the way that his contemporaries did in their search for healing and deliverance?

This encounter is fostered by a deeper listening to the Word of God who expresses himself to us in the "scriptures and the breaking of the bread" so that our hearts burn again within us. (cf. Luke 24) "Behold, I make all things new" proclaims the Bridegroom of Revelation (cf. Rev. 21).

Mary Magdalene too experienced this newness as she wept over the feet of Jesus wiping them with her hair, (Cf. Luke 7:16ff) and Zacchaeus climbed out of the tree with haste at Jesus' bidding so eager was he to begin the new life of grace offered to him through his encounter with Jesus. (Cf. Luke 19:1ff).

- Can you identify in yourself those moments of grace which the Holy Spirit has used to renew in you the image of the Son of God?

Renewed call to live Gospel values

What identified the first Christians in the early Church? Martyrdom? Or was it their passionate love for Jesus Christ? They were prepared to die in imitation of Jesus who himself died confessing those truly humanising and liberating values that he taught.

The *Didache*, also known as *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* distinguished those first Christians as those who do not abort their infants, nor share the marriage bed nor abandon their babies.

- Are these not the values of life which are under siege in our modern society?

We see daily the breakdown of fidelity in marriage, abortion on demand, the public demeaning of those Gospel values of chastity and purity of heart. On the other hand, healing brings the courage to live anew the values of truth and honesty, as Christ lived them.

- How have you opened yourself to the inner action of the Holy Spirit who brings about healing within you?

HIV and AIDS

Among the most urgent crises of our time is the HIV/AIDS pandemic which is decimating our communities. Some years back we addressed "A Message of HOPE" to you because of the hope which we have that a return to the TRUTH and the WAY which Jesus is, will bring LIFE anew. We renew our appeal to restore to our human relations the fundamental honesty and love which Jesus Christ taught us. We believed that by doing this we would reclaim those virtues of marital fidelity and promote chastity and virginity which expressed the ideals that Jesus promoted.

The AIDS pandemic continues to ravage our society. Alas many continue to fail to seize the opportunities available to us to change our behaviour? We can make choices which affirm us as people living the life that Jesus won for us.

However, we are greatly encouraged by signs that an increasing number of young people are beginning to recognise that faithful and loving sexual relations within married life is the only foolproof way of turning this situation around.

A change of behaviour is key to turning around the ills we experience in the world around us. This change of behaviour is promoted by the Conference in programmes like 'Education for Life' and the ABCD Campaign (A for Abstain, B for beware, C for Change your life, and D for Danger if one does not change one's life).

- Do you accept that decisions that are honest and caring ultimately bring a new sense of freedom and inner wholeness?

We are called to become a Church which celebrates health and wholeness

Jesus showed by numerous signs and works and by ultimately giving his life that each person is called to be fully alive. He calls us to come to him and drink of the fountain of life, a life which we share with each other when we show compassion and concern; when we -

- care for orphans and vulnerable children;
- care for families in difficult situations;

- restore to family life the dignity which makes of it the fabric of a healthy society;
- minister to families caught up in violence and abuse;
- tackle the causes of crime and murder in our society;
- affirm the values of life in a society where easy access to abortion has become normal;
- choose values which affirm another's humanity rather than pursuing selfishly what one wants;
- assist people living with HIV and AIDS to improve the quality of their life;
- defend those stigmatised because of HIV and AIDS

Our modern society cries out to be healed. We have therefore requested the different departments and agencies of the Conference to prepare guides for study and reflection on the different issues noted above so as to promote the fundamental values which bring us new life and healing.

As a Church which celebrates health and wholeness, we are called to care for the environment.

There is a new emphasis on care for the environment and the resource which is mother earth.

- How does one make this more than just a topic for discussion?
- What can we do to more diligently care for the earth that is our home?

The scriptures attest to God's care for the earth and the psalmist calls out "send forth your Spirit and renew the face of the earth." (Cf. Psalm 104:30) God, by becoming man, chose to make his home among us and fulfilled in a unique way the praise of Psalm 8: "... you have made him lord of your creation, subordinating everything to him ..." (cf. Psalm 8:4-6)

The Lordship of Jesus gives us hope that not only we but "that creation itself would be set free from slavery to corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the children of God." (Cf. Romans 8:19)

Through our baptism we have been incorporated into the Body of Christ so that in us Jesus Christ continues to save and make whole. With St Paul we are therefore able to say that "We know that all creation is groaning in labour pains even until now; and not only that, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, we also groan within ourselves as we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved ... we hope for what we do not see, we wait with endurance." (Cf. Romans 8:19-27)

- What is your contribution to caring for the environment as one who is a son and a daughter of God?

Furthermore, we are called to be a Church which values honesty and truth

- Look around at the state of our society; what do you see and hear?

We hear a lot about rights but little about obligations. Can we honestly say that each and every citizen meets the obligation to support country and nation in addition to family and neighbourhood by honest work?

- Do we pay only lip service to the values enshrined in the Ten Commandments?
- Do we accept the Ten Commandments as the fundamental building blocks of a just and ordered society?

In living the Ten Commandments we espouse those values which go counter to the growing incidence of corruption and the tendency to accumulate personal wealth and power at any cost, even to the point of disregard for human life.

- Do you refuse to take part in corrupt practices and withdraw your support from those who engage in such?

Make Jesus the light that shines in the darkness, a light which the darkness cannot overcome. (John 1:5)

We have asked the department for Christian Formation, Liturgy and Culture to lead us in the renewed celebration of our new life in Christ by helping us rediscover the Risen Christ in the sacramental celebrations of the Church. We foresee that a revival in the frequency with which we approach the Eucharistic table of the Lord, the observance of the Sunday as the day of the Lord, a spirit of prayer and seeking reconciliation through the sacrament of confession to be vital ways of opening ourselves to encounter the risen Christ in his Church.

- Do you see the regular reading of the scriptures in family and neighbourhood groups to be important for the revival of the spirit of faith and hope in our communities?
- How do I become the light of Christ in the world?

People who seek health, strength and protection in the face of illness and other evils need to be accompanied by wise and grace-filled leaders and guides. They want to see their way forward by the light of Christ which we in the Church can offer them. For this reason we have asked the same department to take up as a matter of urgency the promotion of Catholic customs and rituals which will assist people to encounter the Lord who came that we might have life to the full.

- Can you relate how you were touched anew by the Gospels?
- When did you meet Christ anew and find health and life in him?

In a time of growing appreciation and re-discovery of our cultural diversity, it is wise to keep in mind the advice of the Apostle Paul: "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things ... and the God of peace will be with you." (cf. Philippians 4:7-9)

In conclusion we call upon Mary and our ancestors in the faith

In recalling our ancestors in the faith, Mary the Mother of God, the saints and those men and women related to us, the letter to the Hebrews places Jesus at the head and the rest as witnesses to him who is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."

(Hebrews 12:1-2)

Dear Brothers and Sisters, the Apostle urges us to be persistent in prayer and to pray without ceasing and with thanksgiving in our hearts. (Col 4:2).

We urge everyone to deep and fervent prayer in which we open ourselves to be renewed by the Holy Spirit and to support each other in being healed and delivered.

We also urge each of you to study with fervour and hope the documents of the different departments of the Conference which will follow on from this letter through which we hope to reflect on and understand the many different sides to this cry for healing and deliverance. "For those who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God ... and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if only we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him." (Cf. Romans 8:14-17)

Pray also for us, your bishops, that God give us the opportunity to announce his Gospel (Col 4:3).