

Zimbabwe elections 2013 and the God of Second Chances
Pastoral Letter by the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference
On the National Processes in the Year of Faith 2013
Friday, 15 March 2013

Introduction: Addressing the Israelites, Moses put before them a clear choice, life or death: "See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. . . . Choose life so that you and your descendants may live" (Deut 30: 15-20). The 2013 national elections in Zimbabwe are as important in determining the destiny of the nation as the elections at independence in 1980. In 1980 the country closed the door to colonialism and opened another to independence. In 2013 the country needs to close the door to political intolerance, violence, impunity, lack of transparency and accountability, intimidation, corruption and open another to a true democratic dispensation in conducting free and fair elections that respect the will of the people and uphold human dignity.

In our Ecumenical Discussion Document of 2006 on "The Zimbabwe We Want" we wrote, "At the dawn of independence in 1980, a nation was born out of a protracted armed struggle and many years of pain, suffering and oppression. The ideals of the liberation war, of one person one vote and the yearning for freedom: freedom from oppression, freedom from racism, freedom from human indignity and violation, freedom from poverty and hunger, ignorance and disease coupled with the urgent and pressing need for the recovery and restoration of the land were the driving force behind the fight for liberation. Our new found national status amongst the family of nations created high hopes and expectations for a prosperous life. It was these ideals that fired our vision of a new Zimbabwe and unlocked the energies of people to work for a better Zimbabwe.

In the first fifteen years or so of post-independence, Zimbabwe made tremendous strides in almost all spheres of life. It was a country full of promise and indeed the envy of most of the countries in Africa south of the Sahara. . . . Zimbabweans enjoyed a great sense of patriotism and earned a great deal of respect from their peers on the continent and the world at large.

Yet in 2005, Zimbabwe celebrated its Silver Jubilee of independence under the throes of a crisis, which persists to this day. The patriotic fervor, national pride and the once lofty and romantic ideals of independence seemed to be lost, at least in the considered view of many of our nationals, in the stark reality of a nation divided, traumatized and impoverished by this political, economic and social crisis. . . . This has manifested itself in the denudation of professionals and skilled personnel through a massive brain drain into the diaspora, . . . decline in agricultural and manufacturing productivity, . . . escalating corruption, flight of foreign investments, . . . declared and undeclared sanctions and dwindling tourist arrivals. These negative indicators have inflicted a heavy toll on the generality of the population." (The Zimbabwe We Want).

The country only started to recover from its woes in 2009 with the formation of the Government of National Unity (GNU), which brought back some measure of economic stability and successfully mobilised consensus around a new national constitution. It is our sincere hope that the new dispensation will enable the holding of free and fair elections in 2013. Our elections since independence in 1980 have been marred by violence, reaching its darkest moment in the period leading up to the presidential run-off elections of June 2008 where many were maimed and killed.

A Second Chance: Pope John Paul II said, "For a stalk to grow or a flower to open there must be time that cannot be forced . . ." (ZENIT 4/12/2012). Zimbabwe has been growing through good and bad times since independent in 1980. The events of the past decade or so have left many people wishing for a new dawn for the country. This is the same aspiration with which many entered the new year, 2013.

Zimbabwe has scheduled important national processes in 2013, which include a national referendum on the proposed new national constitution followed by general harmonised elections. Zimbabwe has held several elections since independence, which in most cases proved controversial. Many are hoping that the elections in 2013 will be free and fair, to enable the rehabilitation of the country into the international community. Free and fair elections should be possible with a new constitution and the necessary reforms in place. 2013 offers Zimbabwe a second chance.

The significance of the 2013 elections in Zimbabwe is aptly captured in the 2013 New Year Zimbabwe Council of Churches pastoral letter, which states: "Today the nation of Zimbabwe is at a cross-roads; a decisive moment, commonly called KAIROS in theological terms, when God's people are faced with making life-changing choices as they seek God's guidance. It is similar to what confronted the nation of Israel at the sight of the Red Sea during Moses' Leadership. Moses led the people to consult God's plan and purposes for them, and the times we face today do require the Church to do the same. Such times call for pragmatic reflection, looking back and forth, with the intention of transforming our faith into concrete practical actions, as we face an uncertain future, which only God knows." We join the rest of the Christian Body in praying that Zimbabwe does not slide back into its violent past but that as we observe this Year of Faith we may do what is right and just before God.

As the Church, we call for and demand a peaceful environment in 2013 before, during and after the elections. Memories of the violence that was unleashed on the nation in the 2008 presidential elections run off are still fresh in our minds. The experience makes many apprehensive at the mention of fresh elections. However, the untenable situation of the past decade emboldens many to want to move boldly forward. The Church has been empowering communities with peace building capacities as a way of healing the wounded from the June 2008 elections and also as a way of preventing a recurrence of violence. This will have to be an ongoing exercise. Communities have been hurt over many years and it will take years to heal and cultivate a culture of peace. More concerted efforts continue to be made towards comprehensive national healing and reconciliation but this has been limited owing to a non-conducive environment and new instances of violence.

The past decade has seen the politicization of the whole country, including Churches. We long for a day when Zimbabweans can begin to live their normal lives again as brothers and sisters and not primarily as political and politicking creatures. We need to move beyond the ailments of the past decade that includes partisan governance, corruption, economic meltdown, mass emigration, HIV and AIDS and new sicknesses, hate speech, tribal and ethnic divisions, etc. In 2013 Zimbabwe becomes 33 years old since independence in 1980 and we need to find our soul as a nation, with a common vision to which the Churches started to contribute in 2006 with the publication of the discussion document "The Zimbabwe We Want."

We can take all the past developments, good and bad, as the birth pangs of a new democratic nation. Perhaps the process could not be rushed, but now the nation is weary. Blessed John Paul II mentions time as an indispensable factor. We are hoping 2013 will be the fulfilment of such time for Zimbabwe when, finally, the flower will blossom.

A Credible Electoral Process for a Responsible and Accountable Leadership: In our pastoral letter of August 2004 with the same title as the subtitle above, we pointed out that the way elections have been conducted in our country since 1980 has been controversial and marked by serious violence. It is not our intention to dwell on the past but to focus on the imminent electoral processes and the hope they offer for lasting peace.

An election is not an event confined to a window period of registration of candidates, days of balloting and counting the votes. An election is rather a process which takes place over a considerable period of time. This process embraces the social, political and economic climate in which the technicalities of electing political leaders take place. This climate exercises a major influence on how the voting

population decides who will represent them. An electoral process that aspires to be technically free and fair must be based on a moral integrity that alone makes freedom and fairness a reality. Without such moral integrity, an electoral process will lack authenticity and credibility, becoming a source of violence, controversy and ostracization.

The Church is non-partisan. Christians may belong to various parties but the Church as such though political as is the case with most institutions, does not align itself with any single party. In fact, the Church looks beyond the parties and derives its ethos from the eternal Kingdom of God, a kingdom of love, truth, justice, freedom and peace. What we shall be in the hereafter is what the Church seeks to prepare humanity for in the present by building the foundations here on earth of the Eternal Kingdom. The Church aspires for Kingdom justice in the here and now.

Individual Christians can make their own decisions as to which party comes closest to the Christian ethos and their aspirations in this life and vote accordingly. The Church respects each individual decision and this reality is evident in all congregations composed of members belonging to all existing parties. While the institutional Church must not get involved in party politics, this does not apply to individual Christians. They have a right to join a particular party of their choice and to promote its policies and activities in a peaceful manner which respects the rights of others to hold their own views too (campaigning, recruitment of new members, fund raising, etc.) Within that political party, however, they must act as salt and light. There must be “a firm commitment to justice and solidarity by each member of the people of God. Catholic professionals and teachers, businessmen and civil servants, lawyers and politicians are especially expected to bear witness to goodness, truth, justice and love of God in their daily lives” (Church in Africa, nos. 105 and 108).

Elections: In the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Africae Munus*, On The Church In Africa In Service To Reconciliation, Justice and Peace, Pope Benedict XVI writes, “. . . elections represent a platform for the expression of a people’s political decisions, and they are a sign of legitimacy for the exercise of power. They provide a privileged opportunity for healthy and serene public political debate, marked by respect for different opinions and different political groupings. If conducted well, elections call forth and encourage real and active participation by citizens in political and social life. Failure to respect the national constitution, the law or the outcome of the vote, when elections have been free, fair and transparent, would signal a grave failure in governance and a lack of competence in the administration of public affairs.” (*Africae Munus* no. 81)

As we head towards general elections, we would like to remind Zimbabweans of the importance of credible electoral processes. As your Shepherds, we are very much concerned about the atmosphere that prevails before, during and after elections. A peaceful atmosphere should prevail throughout. Be reconciled to God and to one another.

Before Elections: The period before elections is as important as the period during and after elections. All campaigns done by all political parties should be done peacefully. Political parties and individuals should be free to campaign. This is important because it helps voters to judge which political party will best serve their interests. People should, therefore, be free to attend political party meetings of their choice. It is not a crime to belong to any political party. On the contrary, it is actually healthy to be citizens that hold various political opinions. We call for tolerance among members of different parties.

Coercion and harassment of political opponents and prohibition of political meetings are incompatible with democracy. The violence and intimidation that have been witnessed in the past dishonour our democratic aspirations as a nation. Violence and intimidation breed fear and tension in the citizens. No freewill can be exercised under fear. As a result the elections may not be free and fair. We call upon all contesting parties to sign up for The Zimbabwe Political Parties Code of Conduct, Engendering Peaceful Free Political Choices, Engagement and Activities. We implore Government to make the Code of Conduct compulsory for all contesting political parties.

Political parties that contest in the forthcoming elections should have equal access to State media coverage. The electorate have a right to be fully informed before they make their political choices.

Qualities of the Candidates: As Church, we are not there to tell people which political party or candidate to vote for. People choose their leaders on their own. But we encourage citizens to choose leaders with good leadership qualities. Most of the voters are deceived by sweet-tongued politicians whose true colours only come out when they come into power. Such leaders tend to forget people who voted them into power as they chase after their own personal interests. The period before elections should be a period when citizens closely examine the candidates' profile and policies of contesting political parties. We encourage voters to look for leaders with the following qualities:

Selfless service – A good candidate is willing to serve. In the cabinet, we have ministers for various ministries. To minister is to serve. A minister is a servant - a servant of the people. A good candidate is not selfish. He or she has the people who elected him or her at heart. The interest of the people comes first before his own personal interest. Some are selfish. They don't serve. They appear only during election time when they solicit votes and never come back to the constituencies to give feedback or to plan with the people who elected them to power. Jesus said, whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant (Mk 10:43). Examine whether the candidate or party you want to vote for is interested in your needs as a community. Does the candidate or party accept different ideas? Is the candidate or party only after power for the sake of power or for the sake of service? The assessment and decision is up to the voter. Those who will be leaders should use persuasion not force.

Responsibility – Does your candidate have a sense of responsibility? A responsible leader sets goals and makes a follow-up in order to see that those goals are fulfilled. A lot of promises for the communities are made during political campaigns. However, irresponsible leaders do not usually care about fulfilling promises they make to the people.

Accountability – An accountable candidate is ready to explain to the people the motives of his or her directions and performance. He/she has no problems with being transparent when it comes to handling public funds. He/she has nothing to hide from the people in the way he/she conducts business or his/her personal life. Zimbabwe has a lot of God-given natural resources, but questions have been raised on their governance. Similarly, Members of Parliament were given Community Development Funds in 2011, but again, there were questions on accountability, transparency and involvement of the communities or voters over their use. Lack of accountability and transparency has seen our country land into the deep pit of corruption. A government that is only accountable to itself is not democratic.

Truthfulness – A good candidate is truthful. A good leader does not necessarily need to be perfect. A leader who admits failure wins respect among the people because he admits the truth. People value honesty and truthfulness. It is important for Zimbabweans to vote for a candidate who considers truth to be of value. Such a person can impart this value to the whole of our society.

Respect for human dignity – This is a fundamental quality that a leader should have. A good leader should have respect for human dignity. All human rights such as right to life, decent accommodation, freedom of worship, etc. are based on the need for respect and promotion of human dignity. Candidates or political parties that subject citizens to abusive treatment like torture, killings, abusive language or threaten people with torture if they don't vote for them are not good leaders. Such leaders create perennial fear in the citizens. Good candidates or political parties treat all citizens with respect and would want to offer all citizens equal opportunities as much as possible. Jesus speaks to us all when he says, "So always treat others as you would like them to treat you; that is the law and the prophets" (Mathew 7:12).

Every situation is an opportunity to observe and realize God's intention for us. In the words of the Lord Jesus Christ, he says to us today: "You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart and all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Mt. 22: 37-39). Let this electoral period in the Year of Faith help us grow in the love of God and neighbour. As a nation, we are confident we can fulfil this commandment in all its demands including justice and charity.

During Elections: We make the same appeal as we made in our pastoral letter of 2004, for the authorities to make sure that all those wanting to cast their vote do so without difficulty and in doing so are able to express their will freely.

We also repeat our request for regional and international monitors and observers. Opening up our electoral processes to all will validate our resolve as a nation to do what is right and underline that we have nothing to hide and that there is nothing we shall do which cannot pass the test of public scrutiny. Most Zimbabweans have lost trust in the leadership and the electoral system. Adequate Monitors and Observers can help restore people's confidence in the plebiscite.

After Elections: Be magnanimous in victory, gracious in defeat. After elections, like Nehemiah, we should all be able to say, "Come, let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer disgrace" (Nehemiah 2:17-18).

Conclusion: We have written this pastoral letter for Easter 2013 when we remember the death and resurrection of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. May our country rise to new life in the Lord and move forward to the Kingdom future he promises. We invite all Christians and people of good will to commit themselves to promoting peace in Zimbabwe and overcome the culture of intolerance, intimidation and political violence. As Church we will endeavour to facilitate forgiveness, national healing and reconciliation in the years to come. The country has endured many years of violence and will take many years to heal. In his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Africae Munus, On The Church In Africa In Service To Reconciliation, Justice and Peace*, Pope Benedict XVI says, "It is important for the present and for the future to purify memories, so as to build a better society where such tragedies are no longer repeated." (*Africae Munus* no. 21.)

We invite you all to pray for our country at all times and during all occasions particularly at this important time in our life as a nation. At the same time it is also very important that all who are eligible to vote must register and exercise their responsibility as citizens by casting their votes on the due date, including Priests and Religious.

We thank the God of second chances for bringing us to the elections of 2013. However, we are also fully conscious that the God of second chances has a day of judgment (Mt. 25:31-46). Second chances are not forever. Let us make the most of the present opportunity to redeem ourselves in faith; there may be no other chance. May God Almighty bless the nation of Zimbabwe and grant it the faith, the vision and the courage to build a Zimbabwe that is free, tolerant, peaceful, prosperous and God fearing.

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+Robert C. Ndlovu, Archbishop of Harare

+Alex Thomas, Archbishop of Bulawayo (ZCBC Secretary/Treasurer)

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+Albert Serrano, Bishop of Hwange

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