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## Message for Lent 2020

### The Common Good

*“... I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so ...”<sup>1</sup>*  
*(cf. Deut. 30,19)*

Dear sisters and brothers,

Lent is a time of re-sourcing. A time to get our life’s orientation clear and pure. We can achieve this by being disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ in His life, suffering, death and resurrection. Only by imitating Christ can we gain happiness in our individual and collective lives. We should like to re-source ourselves by savouring God’s Word to the fullest, most especially the Gospel. Through daily reading of the joyful message where Jesus speaks directly to us about God’s kingdom, we come to conversion. Conversion means turning away from the powers of death and choosing life. A happy life is a life in harmony with ourselves, our fellow humans, creation and God.

In our day, the common good can no longer be seen as separate from our loving care for creation.

This Lenten message comes at a time when we are preparing ourselves for the general elections in our country on May 25, when many of us will once again have to make a political choice. Both Lent as well as the period leading up to the elections offer us the opportunity to reflect on the society in which we now live. It is also an occasion to think about how our society is supposed to be accoring to the Christian values and norms.

Furthermore, this Lenten message follows on the heels of the publication of the apostolic exhortation of Pope Francis, *Querida Amazonia*. In this letter, the pope links the common good of the whole world to the love we are supposed to have for the whole of creation, and especially for the Amazon.

#### **Church’s teaching**

The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines the common good as follows: “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily. The common good concerns the life of all. It calls for prudence from each one of us, and even more from those who exercise the office of authority. It consists of three essential elements:

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<sup>1</sup> New Revised Standard Version – Catholic Edition.

First, the common good presupposes respect for the person as such. In the name of the common good, public authorities are bound to respect the fundamental and inalienable rights of the human person. Society should permit each of its members to fulfill his vocation. In particular, the common good resides in the conditions for the exercise of the natural freedoms indispensable for the development of the human vocation, such as "the right to act according to a sound norm of conscience and to safeguard . . . privacy, and rightful freedom also in matters of religion.

Second, the common good requires the social well-being and development of the group itself. Development is the epitome of all social duties. Certainly, it is the proper function of authority to arbitrate, in the name of the common good, between various particular interests; but it should make accessible to each what is needed to lead a truly human life: food, clothing, health, work, education and culture, suitable information, the right to establish a family, and so on

Finally, the common good requires peace, that is, the stability and security of a just order. It presupposes that authority should ensure by morally acceptable means the security of society and its members. It is the basis of the right to legitimate personal and collective defense."<sup>2</sup>

### **Social unrest due to lack of trust**

We observe that there is great social unrest in our country. Confidence in politics, moreover in politicians, has dropped to an absolute minimum. Many believe that politicians do not serve the common good, but are only looking out for their private and party interests. It is undeniably true that almost everyone joins politics for personal gain, but when corruption and self-enrichment take on such gross patterns, then it unhinges the whole of society. Benevolent citizens become disheartened and frustrated. The youth are so disillusioned that they develop an aversion toward politics or become completely indifferent. Those who can no longer bear it leave the country, and others continue working with growing reluctance and drown away into a continuous lament about rising prices. An atmosphere of pent up anger, dismay and hopelessness is choking our community. This negative energy expresses itself subtly in our homes and on the street through, among other things, abuse of stimulants, verbal and physical violence, reckless driving, intolerance, spiraling sick leave and even suicide. The people are deprived of inspiring leadership and their lives are stuck at the level of daily survival. When politics become synonymous with being cunning and dishonest, then the rich and powerful discern a clear opportunity to avail themselves of and plunder the riches of the people.

Politicians have the noble task to articulate the aspirations of the people and accomplish those aspirations through prudent governing. However, instead of articulating the aspirations of the people, the election campaigns are more often than not tirades of bashing and ridicule, entertainment events meant to dull the critical mind of the people. Not only politicians have lost the people's trust, but also the trust in important institutions which are vital for a harmonious society, such as the National Assembly.<sup>3</sup> When democracy is reduced to a mere dictatorship of the majority, then every attempt

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<sup>2</sup> CCC, 1906-1909.

<sup>3</sup> The name of the parliament in Suriname.

at earnest dialogue is nipped in the bud and party interests are placed above the common good. Recovery of the deeply violated trust in the Central Bank of Suriname will be a strenuous and painstaking process: much more than financial capital we need social capital in the interest of the common good.

### **Positive experiences**

Fortunately, we also have positive experiences of enormous generosity and goodness. For example: at the restart of the shelter for abused children<sup>4</sup> we experienced an overwhelming goodness. Out of a situation of destruction and decay there arose something new because of people who chose life. This is resurrection in daily life. There are enough social institutions in our country which, despite the lack of government subsidy and support, still dedicate themselves to the common good.

Where does all this generosity and goodness come from? The generosity and goodness reside in each individual human being. As Surinamese we are socially inclined and generous, and in our hearts we nurture high moral values and norms. In times of scarcity of primary consumer goods we got creative and shared from the little that each one of us had. In times of oppression and curbing of our right to free speech, we expressed our displeasure in humorous way. We are a peace-loving nation with a deep desire in our hearts for a democracy where there is respect for everyone's opinion. We want a government that will fairly distribute the riches with which God has so abundantly blessed us among all. A fair distribution means that groups that cannot take care of themselves properly will get extra attention from the government. We acknowledge that no government will ever be able to solve all problems. A government can merely issue legislation and make provisions that bring order in social life. It is the citizens with their neighbourly love, who turn social institutions into a success and elevate the common good.

### **Wellbeing and welfare<sup>5</sup>**

There is a world of difference between wellbeing and welfare. Welfare does not automatically lead to wellbeing. Wellbeing has to do with a harmonious living of the human person with himself, his fellow man, creation and God. Even though as a country we have earned so much more money in the past ten years than in ten years before that, our wellbeing has not improved. This is not only the result of squandering and unjust distribution, but also because of growing individualism and materialism. We are dragged by the world into craving ever more welfare, which finds expression in an accumulation of luxury. We have ended up in a throwaway culture, with which we inflict great harm to creation. With our inordinate desire for more economic growth we trample on the rights of indigenous peoples. The common good entails equal opportunities for all groups in society to their own development, according to their own traditions and customs. Where there are conflicts of interests between groups in society such as timber merchants, gold

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<sup>4</sup> The diocese took over management of a shelter for children who are victims of sexual abuse. This shelter was closed in 2016 due to lack of funding. The bishop managed to recruit a number of willing Catholics to take over management and raise funds for a total renovation and refurbishment of the shelter, which ultimately amounted to almost two million Surinamese dollars (approx. US\$ 235,000.00).

<sup>5</sup> The emphasis here is on the differences in meaning between 'being well' and 'faring well.' The Dutch equivalents – 'welzijn' and 'welvaart' – have to do resp. with the integral wellbeing of the person and with being prosperous in the economic sense.

miners, and the indigenous and tribal people living in village communities, the government needs to have a regulatory role to promote the common good. Sadly, the indigenous tribes usually get the short end of the stick and are overrun by the powers that be. With this manner of living we not only threaten the forests and cause irreparable damage to nature, but we also place ourselves on a path of self-annihilation and death. The Pope urges us to abandon this path by cherishing the Amazon. This demands a radical conversion, a reorientation of our values and norms.

### **Resurrection faith**

As Christians we have an indestructible faith in the resurrection. God places before us the choice between life and death. If we choose life, then we choose for the wellbeing of the next generations. Choosing life requires conversion. Daily reading of God's Word and praying with it is an indispensable exercise for conversion, which we should really take to heart during this Lent, both individually as well as in groups. Let us therefore fast by resisting the urge to accumulate engagements and appointments which place so much stress on our lives; by renouncing the urge to keep checking our mobile phones for the latest news, slander or gossip on Facebook or Whatsapp. If we can do away with these urges, we are left with an abundance of time to retreat and read God's Word, by ourselves or together with others.

I wish all a blessed Lent.

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