

Pastoral Letter
from the Bishops of the Overseas Departments
to Christians and people of good will
in Guadeloupe, Guyane, Martinique
and Reunion Island

TO BUILD A COMMON DESTINY
TO FOSTER POLITICAL GROWTH

The following is a message from four bishops. The key words contained therein political life, civic duty, responsibility, deal with matters foreign to the life and teaching of the Church. They are, however, an integral part of life and society and therefore must involve the life and beliefs of the Church. This is why they are today the subject of a Church pronouncement.

To be fully understood, this message should be viewed in a threefold context:

Context of the local Church

Jesus Christ is the Word of God. His word is spread primarily through the bishop who is called upon, in his mission, to bring the light of Christ's Word into the life of the local community: the diocese. Hence the diocesan tone of this declaration.

Context of the Universal Church

All the bishops together are ministers of Christ's teaching to the whole Church.

Their task is therefore also to join forces, so that the Word of Christ can be reflected in all spheres of human life.

Aware of their collegiate responsibility, the bishops of the Overseas Departments, wish, in this message, to jointly shed some light on the realities which are common to our dioceses. Hence the "Overseas Department" slant of this document.

Context of the Christian witness of the faithful

The Word of the Bishops, and by extension the Word of Christ, will remain lifeless and without significance, if it is not brought to life through the witness of Christians: it is they who, in the final analysis, will give meaning and vitality to this teaching, as they share their lives with their fellowmen.

This why we would suggest not only individual reflection on this Pastoral letter, but more so study in groups, communities, movements... in short, all the cells of the Church,

A meditation guide will be proposed to help some, awaken others and to co-ordinate the meditation of all.

This is how the Gospel, through the intermediary of the bishops, will come alive in the witness and action of Christians, to become the living word of the Church.

It's up to each one to find his place, to play his role, to accept his responsibility. The stakes are not so much in words as in action and witness.

+Maurice Marie-Sainte

Dear brothers and sisters,

1. We, the bishops of the Overseas Departments, have chosen this time just before the regional and district elections to make a common appeal for civic-mindedness and responsibility. The people of our diocese have all been through the same historical stages: slavery, abolition in 1848, creation of Overseas Departments in 1946, decentralisation laws in 1982-84. Today, European integration is forcing our people to take up new challenges, in different situations but with certain similarities.
2. The Church, with members of all different political persuasions does not intend to propose a political plan or to seek power. Because it believes in God-made-man, it considers all men to be equal to God. With its faith, the Church intends to contribute to the improvement in human life, in the political as well as in other spheres. As Christians, in fact, we cannot separate love of God from love of our neighbour. For us it is both a religious and civic duty.
3. It is a religious duty. The Lord Jesus Christ said: "You must love the Lord your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength ... and your neighbour as yourself". (Luke 10:27). He goes back to the law and the prophets; he insists: "love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12). This is through the love that we have for one another, that all will recognise that we are his disciples (of John 13:35).
4. It is a civic duty. Our neighbour is anyone whom we may meet in the course of a day. As Christians, we are not a separate group in society. We enjoy the same civic rights and have the same civic duties. We would like the same humane conditions to exist for all, where each one can develop his personality. We would like to live together, in peace, truth, justice, love and liberty.

Participation in Political Life Strengthening of Democracy

5. It is often considered quite acceptable to accuse politicians of all sorts of evil practices and to seek refuge in a moralising individualism, while continuing to protest unacceptable situations. We cannot make progress in this way. Mistakes must be denounced and corrected, but no situation should be used as an alibi. Neither by the politicians themselves to gibe at their opponents' failures, nor by citizens who consider themselves uninvolved spectators. Neither can we take pragmatic approach to economic affairs, and so refuse the means to a true political life.
6. Today, throughout the world, democratic systems are viewed as the best way to ensure respect for individuals and groups. They allow political pluralism-our guarantee of freedom - and a citizenry capable of accepting different religious communities for the "common good". In a democracy, political functions are the result of a political mandate, based on a vote. These functions are like a cross-roads of decisions to bring together the natural and necessary bonds which exist between all elements of a society; to reinforce the vital cohesion of the whole, to seek the best conditions for economic development, to allow a vision of the future through long-range plans.
7. We should take steps therefore to strengthen democracy by exercising our civic duty. This brings us out of our individualism and makes us act more and more in solidarity with others. John Paul II reminds us: "Each and every one has the right and obligation to participate in political life; this participation can take many forms and vary in type, level, functions and responsibilities".
8. Even if "it is commonly thought that politics is of necessity an occasion for moral danger, (...)

this in no way justifies scepticism and the absence of Christians in public life". In fact, in spite of these preconceived notions, most of us are already engaged in transforming society through various avenues: in the parish, in an organisation, in neighbourhood groups, in a job or a profession, in community life, in a union, in a political party. Some are given political responsibilities by their fellow citizens at election time.

Elections

- 9.** The coming elections are not an end in themselves. They are merely a step which allows us to take stock and to entrust persons with political mandates so they can guide our "common destiny" in every General Council and Regional Council. Since the inception of decentralisation, the responsibilities of these groups have fundamentally changed and they have been absorbed into a large political group.
- 10.** The Region's overall scope of activity will intensify with the Single Market of 1993, particularly in the realm of economic evolution. In this area, in particular, it will have an important role in dealing with problems and handling negotiations with local, regional, national and European authorities. For its part, the General Council will have to consolidate co-ordinated effort for greater political unity in the Department, while remaining aware of the changes effected by the opening of the E.E.C. The two groups, rather than being unaware of, or opposing each other, would gain by consulting each other, by unifying their efforts, in governing the same population.
- 11.** In the wake of the collapse of totalitarian regimes and collective economies in Eastern Europe, the free market system has become the rule almost everywhere. We are experiencing a world-wide unification of economies, finance, technology and the media. No country can remain isolated from the world market by relying on its own efforts alone, and moreso, areas like the Overseas Regions. In every country in the world, even before exploitation of natural resources, the development of its human resources is put in the forefront. We are heading towards "a society of voluntary labour, enterprise and participation. It is not opposed to free trade, but requires some measure of control by social norms and the State, in order to ensure that the fundamental needs of society are met".
- 12.** At a meeting in Martinique in September 1991 of the Eleventh Commission of Islands of the CRPM - Commission of Outlying Maritime Regions - island regions of the E.E.C. brought up the fact that the islands are geographically, culturally and socially different from the rest of the European Community. They called the attention of the E.E.C. to this fact so that a real political solution could be put in motion, based on the principle of subsidiaries.

A report from the delegation of the E.E.C. Senate, published on October 10th, 1991, requested that "the E.E.C. take into account the unique situation of the French Overseas region by bestowing on them specific and exceptional status within Europe".

Finally, at the Maastricht summit in December 1991, the French government highlighted the particular situation of the Overseas Departments and the possibility of their benefiting from special arrangements by nature of this fact.

It is logical therefore to expect that recognition of their specific differences as regards integration into Europe should also hold for their integration into the national body.

- 13.** This points to an immense amount of work awaiting the next group of regional councillors, at this time of great changes ... and those still to come. Along with socio-professionals, mayors, general councillors, parliamentarians, the government and the European authorities, they will

have to negotiate conditions for a viable economy, directed towards and ensuring human development. This, more than worldwide instability, puts the poorest nations at risk, since they are incapable of adapting rapidly to the changes. To be a credit to politics, our politicians will have to make economic choices which take into account the existing work force and their future.

The principle of subsidiarity

- 14.** The development of a true civic spirit is taken for granted in making these economic choices. Hence the necessity for politicians to encourage and deal seriously with all the intermediary bodies: municipalities, districts, consular chambers, professional associations, youth groups, family associations, sports teams, organisations, religious communities ... By holding continuous dialogue with these bodies, they will become aware of their needs and aspirations. By helping those who are working on their own projects, they will encourage them to take responsibility. The social fabric will become more humane, through a collective consciousness in which the common good will be placed first.
- 15.** This is the principle of being a subsidiary: to give communities the power to manage whatever they can by themselves, without consulting higher authorities on every matter. In politics, this ensures that you do not transfer to national or international bodies what can be dealt with by a departmental or regional body. Our zest for life is manifested in a whole range of different circumstances. But, at the same time, our desire to live together requires that we find a reason, show a willingness to adapt the human experience to local conditions and to open it up to the outside through a choice of values and behaviour. The recognition of individual regional identities leads to a dialogue between cultures.
- 16.** Our instincts prevent us, both as individuals and in groups, from withdrawing into ourselves. This would paralyse society, result in a string of ghettos and condemn us to death. To live among people means enriching the lives of others by social contact. We must strive towards a "common destiny" which will seek to spread its influence, along with the national body and Europe, through the natural geographical limits and also on the international scene the future lies in this direction. Consequently, we are obliged - in the framework of the economic plan - to seek regional coherence where no one will hide behind outdated ideas, nor behind assimilative integrations.

Adjustments and Challenges

- 17.** The world is evolving and we must evolve with it. Our philosophy of responsibility is based on the dignity of the human being, capable of taking his individual and collective destiny in his hands. Let us discuss the principle of subsidiarity with the meaning of solidarity, Let us change our mentality and our life styles to build a local economic fabric in which "countrymen" will be the primary actors of their own growth. The political function, in the service of human development, is expected to do everything possible to make the necessary structural adjustments:
 - a) To stop our Overseas Departments from playing the role of "consumer colonies", which maintain a clientele who would paralyse creativity and a better sharing of wealth.
 - b) Aim for a two-fold integration: integration of the outcasts in society, by work and solidarity; integration of each C.O.M. into international economic competition. Integration will be more easily accomplished if work is the main source of revenue.
 - c) Revitalise our little "open economies", by satisfying certain internal trade

- d) requirements and actively seeking export markets for goods and services.
- e) To use French and European solidarity to reduce as far as possible our economic inequalities; to emerge from being dependent to place ourselves in an interdependent position in the large world-wide circuit.

18. A society's evolution is a long-term affair, but on a day-to-day basis you find people in difficulty, unable to keep up with the cycle of evolution in society, finding themselves unemployed in spite of themselves, feeling useless. These necessary adjustments must also include handling certain challenges which seem to take top priority:

- a) **The family:** to give top priority to this microcosm of society as the primary source of individual interaction and doorway to the outside world. Responsible parenthood, aimed at happiness through fidelity, will also help to control the population explosion. To be prepared to look after suffering AIDS victims.
- b) **Young People:** To show them genuine love and understanding. They welcome evidence of truth. They form the major part of the population of the D.O.M. Let us give greater importance to anything which might improve their training and development. They are the future.
- c) **Schools:** To ensure the transfer of knowledge by learning how to teach; educate for freedom and responsibility; plan training in conjunction with business places, aimed at the transfer of values and preparation for life ... in whatever part of the world it may be. Make provision for qualified teachers in sufficient numbers.
- d) **Housing:** Allow different age groups to find suitable housing, in an environment supplied with the necessary services and fulfilling the requirements of the Regional Development Scheme (S.A.R.)
- e) **Solidarity:** Increase community life as a link between the general public and the administration. Work towards the creation of social ties between individuals and groups, in preparation for reintegration in to the economic sphere of training and voluntary services.
- f) **Agriculture:** To give full support in this area so that farmers can live on what they produce, while at the same time preparing them for changes in the farm-produce industry. Men of the soil keep our societies in contact with the beginnings of life (their roots).
- g) **Business world:** To stop the practice of making deals by being courageous enough to fight against the lies, scheming and pressures which penalise honesty, spoil relationships, distort the economy and kill democracy.
- h) **Artisans and tradespeople:** The reduction in social security changes would result in regular hiring and discourage moonlighting and illicit activities.
- i) **The Environment:** To learn to respect it as the setting in which natural elements interact continuously with the future of mankind.
- j) **Culture:** To seek to understand oneself better in relation with others, to root oneself in local reality and to be open to the outside world, temper modernity by mastering languages and technology, to appreciate humanity's masterpieces and to enrich the world-wide artistic heritage insofar as we can.
- k) **Mobility:** Assist those who want to leave. The world is shrinking. It will become a village with the increase in air transport. the intermixing of populations will increase. Family exchanges and job searches on a planetary level will become commonplace. Let us open our eyes and open ourselves to the world.

Our Appeal

- 19.** Thus, in the midst of the difficulties which the Overseas Departments are undergoing, as Bishops we wish to make our contribution to the reassertion of the value of political work. We refuse to give in to an attitude to doom and gloom. We want to help find practical ways to reduce the distance between the fundamental aspirations of the human heart and an ideal of society which should not be confused with ... a frenetic and suicidal consumerism.
- 20.** Jesus Christ wants us to live through the power of his resurrection. As Christians, we must follow him so that, strengthened by his Spirit, we can help our society to take charge of itself and transform itself little by little. If we say "Give honour to politics", it is because "political action has a fantastic stake: to strive towards creating a society in which every human being will recognise his brother, in any other human being, and treat him as such".

This is why we are now making this appeal:

- 21.** To Christians: Take your political life seriously and particularly the upcoming elections. It is an event to be experienced with faith, to be regarded as the humanising of our society in the spirit of the Gospel. Get together in groups, become informed, gather information. Read, re-read and study closely the great works of John Paul II on "Man and His Work", "Problems of Society", "Towards a Society Worthy of Mankind". Ask those around you to take an interest in the elections. And after having prayed and reflected: VOTE!
- 22.** To the Media: We invite you to write regular reports on the stakes in the district and regional elections. You have the means to education for civic-mindedness in an appealing way, to awaken the collective consciousness to their responsibility. Try to raise human dignity in all that you write or publish. To engage in gossip mongering or to stoop to campaigns of systematic denigration in order to increase circulation or widen your audience is to derail democracy.
- 23.** To Candidates and their Opponents: No one will be elected to serve himself... or his party. Every elected person will be responsible along with his colleagues, for the Department and the Region. How do you see the stakes of a policy for the Department or for the Region? Speak out publicly. This is of primary importance, before the politicking measuring out for the constitution of a possible majority or a short-list. Then, within each of the respective bodies, always remember the good of the whole, according to your choices and your leanings. The value of an idea is not linked to whether it is approved by the majority or a minority. In your electoral campaigns, do not be a demagogue, do not allow violence, condemn it first by your exemplary conduct... and then by what you say. Insults are not arguments, but an admission of weakness.
- 24.** To the Government: Decentralisation is becoming more and more the norm. To improve its effectiveness, steps should be taken towards a more practical and efficient decentralisation. In this way you will encourage a true partnership between the State and other groups and between the groups themselves. Initiative will be encouraged in a more flexible, swifter and more suitable way. Nevertheless, to strengthen the ties between our communities and foreign communities of our natural geographical zones, it is important to develop regional decentralised co-operation.

Conclusion

- 25.** So, the coming elections lead us all to an "examination of conscience". How can we, as a general rule, participate in the improvement of social conditions which would permit individuals and groups to commit themselves more full and more readily to a "common destiny"?

- 26.** The time is past when politicians were classed with a false salvation ... and made into scapegoats. We must together assume responsibility for ourselves, step by step, day after day. Let us emerge from our individualism. Let us work alongside others, as far as our capabilities, our means and our network of acquaintances will allow us.
- 27.** Let us develop fundamental values such as respect for human life, a reaching out to others, family unity, oneness of the human community, solidarity, the feeling of working towards self-fulfillment through creativity, improving our country through hard work, sharing of the wealth created through allowing necessary investment, the protection of the environment and its ecological balance.
- 28.** And politicians will perform their functions in a true spirit of service. They will be held in high esteem. Within the respective assemblies and among assemblies, they will consult with each other to solve in the most competent and efficient manner our social and economic problems. They will ensure that we retain values in our economic system. We shall encourage them to pursue regional togetherness which will open the door to hope. And for all of us, there will be no future unless we become people enriched by lasting values, bearers of a new future.

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