



OUR PEOPLE YEAR FOR DEVELOPMENT

Lenten message 2022

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The constitutional independence of Suriname held a promise of freedom, prosperity and happiness for a nation that yearned for development. Forty days prior to the celebration of the Resurrection of Christ - who conquered the powers of death - it is a proper time for a resilient nation that has been tried and tested for more than forty years, to allow itself to be inspired by the hope that arises from faith. This Lenten message reflects on how we can journey together in order to get Suriname back on its feet. In a world characterized by selfishness and competition for commercial gain, it is not possible to rely on the solidarity of others. We will have to do it ourselves, as unified as possible, to utilize the potential of our country. It will not be easy, but with the help of the Almighty, every challenge can be overcome, as the Gospel of the first Sunday of Lent reminds us.

No challenge is too great

Jesus spent forty days in the desert and when He got hungry, the devil put Him to the test. “The devil said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread.’ And Jesus answered him, ‘It is written, *Man shall not live by bread alone.*’”¹

Jesus knew what was going to befall Him² when He fasted in the desert in order to take on a superhuman challenge rather than letting the cup be removed from Him.³ For our salvation, He died on the cross. Let us too, be it in the humble way of a mortal, turn the upcoming forty days into a time of reflection so as to rescue our nation from the false paths of selfishness, egotism, avarice and malice, which lead us to the abyss. A society driven by charity, justice, solidarity and compassion will find the way toward peace and harmony for a happy nation, as one big Surinamese family in a blessed country.

Almost half a century of independence has proven that money, natural resources and elections do not warrant progress when social justice, human dignity and moral values are not the pillars of politics. Instead of having matured, with each election Suriname witnesses how democracy is twisted into a dictatorship of the majority. Pope Francis has called the church worldwide to become a synodal church: a church where we journey together, where we listen to one another and where all can learn from each other. The structures of the District and Ressort Councils are not functioning. Democracy is not a snapshot, but an ongoing discussion.

The combination of narrow minded party politics and an unjust world in which colonialism is now shaped by ruthless economic expansion of rich countries at the expense of poor countries is the real reason why Suriname struggles with serious problems, moves from one

¹ Luke 4:3-4.

² John 18:4.

³ Matthew 26:39; Marc 14:36; Luke 22:42.

crisis to the next and no longer has any faith in our political leaders. Immense traumas resulting in moral decay on all fronts have led to immeasurable suffering, to which all of us have fallen victim, but even more our youth, our women, the less fortunate and our indigenous people. Our society is increasingly losing its joy in life, many are burdened by great worries, look with gloom to the future, are close to despair, and fear for the loss of harmony in our peace-loving country. Eight years before our independence, Pope Paul VI wrote in his encyclical *Populorum Progressio*⁴ that development is the new name for peace. It is this development that our people yearn for, but in which they are sadly disappointed time and again.

As long as power is the end goal, rather than a means to help our nation move forward, rivaling political organizations will do whatever is in their power to have the resources and facilities of the state at their disposal. This is disastrous for a country in a world marked by skewed economic relations which have given rise to as a new form of colonial rule. In such an unjust world, the greatest strength of our small country lies in the unified endeavour to mobilize our full potential without excluding anyone.

Sustainability and Development

In a time of deep crisis with yet no end in sight, the beginning of Lent offers us the right moment to reflect on the responsibility of our society, of each one of us, and especially of our leaders, to reverse the current downward course towards true human development. Suriname belongs to all of us and is not the property of temporary political rulers, their supporters and their families. Over the past decades, we have as a nation oftentimes elected people to lead our country to a safe harbour, but time and again they have failed in the national task of laying a solid foundation to bring our own potential to fruition. We now find ourselves in rough seas, and our mother ship Suriname is in great peril of being shipwrecked.

Lent, as a precursor to Good Friday, teaches us how self-sacrifice can be the impetus for liberation. Abstinence from food touches the source of life. Lent is therefore a good time to reflect on what we make of ourselves, how we treat others and how we treat nature sustainably.

God's commandment in Genesis 2:15 is the most emphatic description of sustainability, which cannot be misunderstood: "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it." The earth was given to us, even after the Fall, to reap its benefits, not only for ourselves, but also for later generations. If our ancestors had managed the land as recklessly as we do, we would not be here. Nor do we have the right, for the sake of a comfortable and enjoyable life for ourselves, to jeopardize or even erase the existence of future generations.

The Amazon rainforest, perhaps the last vestige of Paradise on Earth, the home of the indigenous peoples who take good care for it, is in serious trouble because of plunder and irresponsible exploitation driven by the extreme pursuit of profit. This is what Pope Francis dedicated his encyclical *Laudato Si* to, and warns us again in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*. "The worship of the ancient golden calf (cf. Ex 32:1-35) has returned in a new and ruthless guise in the idolatry of money and the dictatorship of an impersonal economy lacking a truly human purpose."⁵ In his post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Querida Amazonia*, the Pope,

⁴ Pope Paul VI, Encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, 1967.

⁵ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013; 55.

together with the Amazonian bishops, writes that “the history of the Amazon region shows that it was always a minority that profited from the poverty of the majority and from the unscrupulous plundering of the region’s natural riches.”⁶

This deliberate sin against the divine mandate compels us in Suriname to quickly bring radical changes to the destructive logging for the export of roundwood, even in illegal containers, and the environmentally destructive gold mining which poisons our rivers with mercury. We must ensure that we won’t commit the same sin with our vast oil reserves, which are a blessing for a country ruled by harmony and justice, but which, as the Christmas message⁷ said, can also be a curse when the selfishness of elites, who collude with transnational oil giants and destroy countries with vast oil reserves by stirring up internal conflicts and even (intentionally) provoking civil wars.

We live in the most forested country, but our worries now seem as great as in an arid desert. It is with deep sorrow that we witness our forests being destroyed in the search for gold and timber, the profits from which make the rich richer and leave the poor to their fate, as the Christmas message, *The Gap Between Rich and Poor*, underlined. In the spirit of “tilling and keeping the earth, it is our duty, to make our contribution to safeguarding the Amazon paradise for ourselves and for future generations.

The encyclical *Laudato Si* translated this into the *A Prayer for Our Earth*: “Bring healing to our lives, that we may protect the world and not prey on it, that we may sow beauty, not pollution and destruction.”

A New Way

Justice, equality, right development opportunities, solidarity, community spirit and development are not merely worldly concepts, but the pillars of all religions, woven around the fundamental principles of ethics and morality. Especially those who are asked to carry the standard of leading our country politically should, upon entering their own respective places of worship, ask themselves whether they are carrying forward these deeply cherished moral values in their actions. They should remember that Jesus drove the merchants out of the Temple when they turned God’s house of prayer into a den of robbers.⁸

Suriname should be led by honest and true Surinamese who place the interest of the country and the people first and use the best manpower we have for our development. Present and past rulers were also recipients of the salvation which stands at the heart of Lent, but what did they do with it? What will their countenance be when they look to the Resurrection after this Lent, now that Suriname wallows in great misery?

As a nation we must also take a good look at ourselves, because we are not exempt since time and again, we elect the false prophets with the most beautiful promises, who divide among themselves the wealth, land, resources and development opportunities of Suriname, instead of leading our country with good governance, while the majority of our people look on from the sidelines as spectators. If we do not put an end to this, Suriname will never be built up and will

⁶ Pope Francis, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Querida Amazonia*, 2020; 16.

⁷ Bishop Karel Choennie, *De kloof tussen arm en rijk. Overweging bij Kerstmis*, 2021;

<https://www.bisdomparamaribo.org/nieuws-rss-feed/454-overweging-mgr-karel-choennie-bij-kerstmis-2021>.

⁸ Matthew 21:12-13.

perish in conflicts between rivalling fortune hunters who do not hesitate to incite ethnic groups living in harmony against each other for their own personal gain.

Each Surinamese citizen is co-owner of Suriname and has a duty to ensure the survival of our country. We will have to solve it together, because no one from outside will do it for us. Constantly laying blame on others for something which we are collectively responsible for will only sink us deeper.

Reflection

No one is perfect, but striving for perfection is a virtue. Let us, therefore, during this Lent reflect on how we can cleanse and rebuild our country, torn apart by so much injustice, corruption, violence, human rights violations, humiliation, resentment and moral decay. We can do so with our heads held high, knowing that the help of the Almighty will multiply our strengths a thousandfold, without any mortal intimidating us, least of all those who have allowed us to digress this far and who lack the moral authority to look us in the face.

Present day Suriname is not the country we chose, the country we want and to which our children are entitled, a country where moral integrity reigns and the interests of our people are paramount. What keeps the people's representatives of our people, the president, vice-president and ministers from solemnly renewing their election promises every year and turning them into a mantra or a daily prayer? The promise, pledged under oath, to lead our country honestly and fairly, to place the interest of the nation first and to keep themselves from dividing nation's wealth and means among partisan allies. Democratic elections should no longer be a contest for power hungry political adventurers, but should become a celebration of our people to shift our development in high gear. If we fail to do so, we won't ever be able to leave behind a livable Suriname for our children. Having strayed far away from the biblical message, humanity today faces the great challenge of restoring to a dehumanized humanity the human face given to us by the Creator. If we unite human consciousness and conscience in a deep sense of justice, we will be better able to reject evil and cherish the good.

We must find the right balance between discovering the beauty of the world, preparing our own societal independence to find a path in life, and upholding moral values. The most effective prescription for a balanced growth of ourselves and our society is to be found in the combination of asceticism as a spiritual discipline, which protects us from excess and overindulgence, in development that mobilizes our potential and brings it to maturity, and social justice that affirms our humanity. Lent, characterized by simplicity, abstinence, penance and prayers, is a beautiful expression of this.

Prayer and Work for Suriname

Lent offers us as Church and faithful, the opportunity to bring nature, justice, evolution and development into a harmonious relationship with Creation. We do not need to destroy first in order to build, for if we nurture good it will naturally overgrow evil. Instead of combating weed, we plant the tree of life which will deprive the weed of water, light and nutrients.

Forty days is a sea of time to pray for another Suriname. This can give us the strength to come into action in order to restore Suriname with patience, tolerance, respect, community spirit and solidarity, but at the same time without fear and with determination, with the toolbox of moral values, charity and social justice. These are the pillars of harmony, peace and development,

upon which we can build the new Suriname with unwavering confidence in the support of the Almighty.

Our national anthem begins with a prayer, “May God be with our Suriname, may he exalt our glorious land” and at the end it reminds us that “God is our guide.” A guaranteed, secure and joyful future for our children in a country blessed with more wealth than we need is within our reach if we profess democracy not only with our mouths but ensure that the voice of the people also determines the destiny of the people.

Then the despair of today will give way to hope; hope for new life as in the resurrection of the dead which we commemorate at the end of this Lenten season. God gives us love and always brings hope; hope from Jerusalem to Calvary, hope from Golgotha to the Resurrection, and equally hope for Suriname, however bleak the prospects may seem. In this Lent, let us pray for Suriname, and for those who suffer unbearably, but above all let us pray that our people will find the strength to come out of the darkness to make Suriname, with God’s help, a dignified and blessed country in which we as a people will see the development to which we and our children are entitled.