



Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference

The Catholic Bishops call for an end to violence and looting.

As we join other Religious Leaders in calling for calm, we wish to draw attention to the caution by Pope Francis during his visit to Mozambique in 2019 that, sometimes, it takes small steps of violence for a nation to descend into full-fledged anarchy, an endless spiral of violence and massive bloodshed. The Pope said: “No family, no group of neighbours or ethnic group and even less - no country has a future if the motor that unites them, brings them together and resolves their differences is composed of violence and vengeance.” (Pope Francis, 2 September 2019).

Presently, certain parts of our country, namely, Kwazulu-Natal and Gauteng are engulfed by violence and looting that started off as protest against the incarceration of former president Jacob Zuma, with fear that this might spread wider. Let us not allow the difference of opinion on political matters to be hijacked by criminal intentions to create anarchy in our country that will result in worse social and economic situation than we presently find ourselves in.

We condemn in strong terms the glaring criminal elements that are taking advantage of this situation. We call upon individuals who are involved in vandalism and thuggery to give a thought to the livelihood of many people that they are jeopardising by destroying their places of employment. We must also remember that we are in the height of Covid-19 pandemic that thrives in the conditions of disorder that we see, and that the longer these conditions prevail, the more we put ourselves and others in danger of infection that will be difficult to deal with.

To those who incite this violence and looting for political ends, we call upon them to rise above political interests, to protect life and to preserve the common good. Eventually, it was dialogue and not violence that brought us to the present democratic dispensation. As we navigate some difficult routes of this democratic journey let us continue to choose the path of dialogue to settle our differences as brothers and sisters united by the love of our country and the desire for its prosperity for the good of all who reside and work in it. The path of dialogue is long and arduous, but it is the only one that can help us to “keep our attention focused, to penetrate to the heart of matters, and to recognize what is essential” (FT50).

We also realize that the current crisis is due in no small measure to extreme economic inequalities as well as economic hardships suffered by the poor during the pandemic. These are issues that our government, business and the corporate sector over the years have failed to address in a comprehensive manner. What started off as difference of opinion has sparked off a wildfire of violence and looting because the “dry grass” of poverty has been left to “overgrow” over decades. A big contributing factor to this “dry grass” of poverty is the lack of efficient leadership in government and unethical practices in business. We call for a return to efficient leadership at all levels of government that will see service being delivered to the people and business enabling all to participate meaningfully in the economic system.

Our society has normalized the use of violence and vandalism to get the government to listen and be serious in addressing economic concerns of the poor. We need a shift in mind-set, a collective conversion of heart and mind, which affirms that violent protests and destruction of property can never be a just response to the current economic hardships and economic injustice. We reiterate Pope Francis' call in Fratelli Tutti, reminding all that: in face of political and economic problems there is always a possibility of choosing constructive engagement over violence.

As many people in our country continue to suffer because of business collapse, job losses and other impacts of the pandemic, may the Lord grant our nation "politicians (and businesspeople) who are genuinely disturbed by the state of society, the people, (and) the lives of the poor" (Pope Francis, 01 May 2013). In these tempting times for violence, we invite all to make a choice for life which will manifest in a desire to "cooperate, build and dialogue, pardon, grow, respect sacredness of life, the dignity and freedom of others, and loving commitment to the welfare of all" (FT 285).

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