



Southern African Catholic Bishops Conference

PHASE II of the Inter-diocesan Consultation.

On Pentecost Sunday the bishops wish to launch Phase II of the Inter-diocesan Consultation which at present is scheduled for next year. In this Phase, which will consist of a series of reflections, the objective is to encourage all members of the Church to rediscover and strengthen their own personal relationship with the Lord Jesus. Following on that is the voyage of discovery of the Church and their role in the mission of Jesus. The theme of Phase II is the nature of the Church of which we are all members and witnesses. The letter of Archbishop William Slattery is self explanatory. Every parish, individual, every sodality and organization is invited to participate individually and preferably in the company of others to reflect and share on their understanding of their Catholic identity and what it means to them to be called to witness in their sphere of life to their love and faith in the Lord.

Archbishop William Slattery's Introduction to Phase II

Introduction

Six weeks ago we celebrated the Easter, recalling the passion and resurrection of the Lord and today we celebrate the Feast of Pentecost. This feast recalls the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles, gathered in the upper room and still fearful of the Jews. With the coming of the Holy Spirit they are in a sense set on fire with the boldness and wisdom of the Holy Spirit and begin the work that they will do for the rest of their lives, namely, proclaiming salvation in the name of Jesus the Lord.. Pentecost has rightly been called the birthday of the Church.

What is the Church

Two themes come to mind. The first is the Church itself. Born from the Holy Spirit and the preaching of the Apostles. What is the nature of the Church? That is our theme for Phase II of our Inter-diocesan Consultation There are many ways to answer that question. For example one could say that the Church is the prophetic voice of the Lord, or the Church is the voice of the voiceless. Pope Pius XII called it the Mystical Body of Christ.

The Church exists to evangelize

But the Vatican Council and later Pope Paul VI and John Paul II said that the Church is missionary by its nature. The Church exists to evangelize. The reason for the existence of the Church at all is that it has to continue with the work of Jesus in the world.

The Church is the instrument of salvation in that it continues to preach that Jesus is Lord and that through the saving life and death of Jesus we are all reconciled to our Father in heaven.

Who is the Church?

Who is it that has to continue with the mission of Jesus? The Church comprises every person who is baptized. Through our baptism we are in a sense called and commissioned to be witness of Jesus in our lives. We become instruments of salvation for others by our lives of faith. We are all the Church together. And all of us have this privilege and responsibility to be a missionary, to be the person who witnesses to our faith in Jesus. There was a perception that evangelization or witness to the presence of Jesus in our lives was the work of priests only. No, everyone is called. It is just that we do it differently. We all have our own part of the vineyard. Recall the parable of the landowner and the labourers in the vineyard. All are called.

How do we witness

That brings me to the second point. How do we witness to our faith in Jesus as Lord and Saviour. We know how the apostles did it in their time. They went out and preached to whoever was prepared to listen to them. They wrote the gospels to tell people about Jesus. They wrote letters to encourage people and to set them straight about their lives, conduct and practice of their faith. They wanted to warn them of difficulties and dangers.

It is much the same in our case. We too have been given the Spirit. We all have been gifted by the Spirit to help us in our lives to witness to our faith. For example, we can witness to compassion in our concern for others, be they sick, homeless or whatever. We even have organizations and groups which people can join if they feel called to this type of witness or apostolate. Others are called to witness in a special way to love like those working with abandoned children. But everyone is gifted. We are gifted, not for ourselves alone but for the good of others. We build the Kingdom of God by building relationships between people.

Phase II then about the nature of the Church is really about us. Are we the people who are doing the work of Jesus? Are we showing, manifesting the power and gifts of the Holy Spirit in our lives. That is to say, within the family is there an atmosphere of the love of God. Is there respect and tolerance? With others at work or wherever, is there an air of peace and serenity that come from the knowledge that Jesus is Lord of our lives. Have we put Jesus first in our hearts or have we put him out on the margins of our lives.

New Hope and New Life

The message of Easter was one of Hope; the message of Pentecost is one of New Life. During Phase II we want to reflect on the new life given to us by Jesus. As Catholics we are called to witness to a life style centered on Jesus and his teachings. We want to revive our commitment to the values and attitudes which are part of our Catholic identity. We want to strengthen our resolve to be confident credible witnesses to the faith which has come to us from the Apostles. We want to stand up and be counted among those who acknowledge Jesus as Savior

A series of reflections has been developed and will shortly be made available. It is intended that everyone will make use of them, individuals, groups and sodalities, Sisters and Brothers, Small Christian Communities and neighbourhood groups. In short, everyone. I pray that the reflections for Phase II will be of benefit to all to see how in the little moments every day there are opportunities to understand and witness to the Lord.

+ *Archbishop W. Slattery.*
Pretoria