

“Peace to those who are far off and peace to those who are near”

(Eph 2:17)

An appeal for peace and national reconciliation. Pastoral Letter of the Catholic Bishops of Eritrea. Holy Easter 2019

A summary

Greetings

May Jesus Christ who, having conquered death, has established peace and reconciliation between God and man, bless us with the light of his resurrection.

Introduction

While we remember the enthusiasm produced in all of us by the peace initiatives between Eritrea and Ethiopia, which began in June 2018, and we thank God for these initiatives, we nevertheless also call to mind those in lands of exile, in prison and in the hands of ruthless traffickers and exploiters. In particular we make prayerful memory of those who have left this world, victims of violent deaths in various circumstances. We implore from the Lord the release of prisoners, the return of the exiled people to the land of their fathers and eternal rest for all the departed.

Thinking about the severe hardships which weighed, and still weigh, on the life of people on both sides of the border between the two countries of Eritrea and Ethiopia, we pray that the demarcation of borders may be agreed as soon as possible, and that this may be done with criteria capable of generating peace, prosperity and the genuine interests of both populations, so as to hasten the consolidation of daily interactions among them, restoring the exchange of resources and leading to beginning again a shared journey.

As religious leaders, we are always completely available to offer our contribution, if requested, when useful or appropriate. The challenge that we launch to our world, so prone to and astute in the art of raising walls of division, is to be able to benefit from the potential available in everyone to break down what divides us and to build nations that recognize the values of unity and harmony. It is with this intention that we chose to entitle our pastoral letter with the words of Saint Paul: ***“He came to bring the good news of peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near”***(Eph. 2:17).

Our situation in the past and present

Over the years, because of war and other related factors, the living conditions of our people and our nation have reached dramatic and critical levels. In different ways, our young people, mothers, children and families have become victims of exile and of destabilization. Since no serious remedy and no plans were put in place to heal this situation, the massive fleeing abroad continues up to now without solution and interruption. The crisis that emerges is such to project before our eyes gloomy, and not imaginary, perspectives that may endanger our people and our nation to the point of extinction.

As long as the poisonous roots of this phenomenon is not eradicated, the escape to foreign countries is, we think, destined to last over time. Whatever its forms and expressions, these roots are true, real and undeniable. Now, for more than a century, this people lives far from a normal collective life that may be described, at national development level, as basically sustainable and peaceful. So, today, faced with the many brothers and sisters who leave this world, victims of exile and thousands of other misfortunes, we cannot but ask ourselves anxiously: until when?

How to get out of this abnormal state of affairs?

Only those who, from far and near, although marked with various and deep differences of ideas, are willing to sit around a table for a genuine dialogue for peace and reconciliation, will help to open new and unexpected ways out from this tragic state of affairs. This applies not only in relation to the people of our neighbouring country, but also within our national community. We are talking about a decisive factor so that the much acclaimed motto "**one people and one heart**" may not remain an elegant but empty slogan, but may be implemented in concrete programs and effective plans of action.

A sure path towards this goal is the proclamation, and the coherent implementation, of an all-comprehensive plan of "**peace and national reconciliation**". As "every house divided against itself cannot stand" (Mt 12, 25), so it is with a nation that is in the same condition. This commitment to peace and national reconciliation is the privileged way to close the past and open a new era, in order to build the country and the people, to lay the foundations of a Constitutional State System, to ensure the exercise of the right of the nation over its borders and ports, as well as to ensure peace and tranquillity both inside our country and outside, in the neighbouring countries. It is appropriate that what is born in a soil may grow and mature together, in unity and harmony: "If we do not want to perish as a nation and as a people, let us build peace and reconciliation among us"! This is what we would like to say in short.

Reconciliation and peace are based on truth, justice, respect for human rights and freedom of people and communities. There is no reason that the criteria of truth and peace that our fathers have developed in our tradition, to solve conflicts of less extensive and more daily dimensions, may not be applied today for the solution of our national policy issues and strategies.

In short, because the plan of God for this nation and for this people whom He loves is a "plan for peace and reconciliation," people of Eritrea: search, find and follow wholeheartedly peace, reconciliation, unity and harmony! This is the time to wake up from sleep. Arise then! Close the past with a seal of peace and reconciliation and gaze into the future, identify your path and follow it in peace and unity! This peace and reconciliation should have been even the harbour for the many problems and challenges that have made up your story in the century now spent!

Nation-building and the plan of peace and reconciliation

To pursue plans of peace and reconciliation is not for lukewarm people. On the contrary, it shows courage, determination and heroism. Those who have a healthy and full sense of self-esteem and confidence are not afraid to meet the requirements of peace and reconciliation. In particular, they qualify to contribute to the building up of the country, for the development of national unity, harmony and the promotion of the values of peace and reconciliation. We frankly say: we cannot approve or endorse nation-building schemes in which some people are privileged, at the expense of others who are ignored, marginalized or excluded.

Having said all this, we have then to ask ourselves: what values and what behaviours are our new generations inheriting from us? Since, as regards young people, the opportunities that we have missed are many, our responsibilities towards them are not less. It is time to allow ourselves to be forgiven, we their fathers and elders, of our faults towards them and to accompany them on the way towards new and higher goals.

We should not close the past and move towards the new replacing evil with evil, but replacing the bad with the good. The plans and paths of peace we undertake should not be manoeuvres or strategies to promote narrow individual interests. They must rather be broad and inclusive spaces in which all the true seekers of peace and goodness take part. This requires that everyone should renounce claiming to be or setting himself up as a pattern or a criterion for everything and everyone. We need willingness to listen and accept ideas and suggestions of others.

The precondition for the success of the peace and reconciliation plan is the recognition of the injustice and violence done by those who had any role at any level: namely, that the perpetrators admits their responsibilities with honesty and truth and that the victim, on the other hand, be ready to forgive, and that the one and the other may commit themselves to shape new paths and new perspectives. In fact, where there is no justice, even peace cannot be there, and because truth is the strength of true peace and lies can only generate violence and hatred, it is essential that people be told the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, regarding the events of their recent past, the reality of the present situation and the policies in their making. We need not fear the truth: "**You will come to know the truth, and the truth will set you free**" (John 8.32).

Only in this way peace can be possible. Reconciliation and mutual forgiveness are the inescapable prerequisites for the birth of a social order full of peace and tranquillity. To respect other people's freedom and rights means to assure peace and serenity for oneself. In fact, one who is deprived of his rights and his freedom, will seek them also by means which will not bring peace.

Suggestions for a concrete plan of peace

It goes without saying that a plan for peace and reconciliation requires a constant and far-sighted campaign that could include, among other things, also the following points:

1. A proclamation and an overall planning of peace and reconciliation;
2. The establishment of a National Commission entrusted with the campaign for "truth and reconciliation", with clear and precise objectives and methods of work. Its main task should be the removal of the factors of tension and the promotion of dialogue and compromise among all the stakeholders.
3. The purpose of the above is to help achieve a comprehensive peace through reconciliation and forgiveness, closing and handing over the past to history and opening the way to a new future of hope.
4. It is essential that, during these steps and beyond, in the mass-media of communication and in the educational institutions at all levels, there be definitely banned terminologies and expressions of hatred, violence and revenge, and that "a grammar and a vocabulary" of peace, forgiveness and reconciliation prevail.
5. Above every other consideration, as we have already said, peace and reconciliation being a gift from God, we should implore it bowing before Him. As the King and the people of

Nineveh returned to him in prayer with repentant heart, we too should go to the Lord with the same spirit of sincere repentance.

“True peace therefore is the fruit of justice... But because human justice is always fragile and imperfect, subject as it is to the limitations and egoism of individuals and groups, it must include and, as it were, be completed by the forgiveness which heals and rebuilds troubled human relations from their foundations”(No peace without justice, no justice without forgiveness:. St. John Paul II, Message for the world day of peace, 1 January, 2002, n. 3, 15).

Conclusion

Our final appeal to all the Eritrean men and women is, first of all, to put all their trust and hope in the Lord. At a time like this, when the country goes through severe tests, it needs more than ever an intervention of God. He, who in the past has already shown in various ways how He loves this country and this people, if invoked with deep faith and humility, will not fail to turn his merciful regard towards us. As long as our prayer and our faith are enduring, He is the giver of all peace and it is He who heals and saves his people, because He wants that everyone "**have life and have it to the full**" (John 10.10).

At the same time, we encourage our people to ensure that, in the midst of the sufferings of the present time, a journey of justice, peace and a new order of things may start. We need a spirit of discernment to recognize what God has reserved for this country and for his people, just as we need prayer and unceasing effort to adapt ourselves to what God would like to tell us.

Just so, and not otherwise, we will see the fulfilment of our dream of an Eritrea united, reconciled and founded on peace and justice. Finally, in stormy times such as these, let men and women of our time, and especially our region and our country, savour the gift of a true and lasting peace, the fruit of justice and mercy.

We too, then, can repeat with the psalmist: "*I will sing of faithful love and judgement; to you, Lord, will I make music*" (Ps 101.1).

“Faithful Love and Loyalty join together, Saving Justice and Peace embrace. Loyalty will spring up from the earth, and Justice will lean down from heaven. Yahweh will himself give prosperity, and our soil will yield its harvest. Justice will walk before him, treading out a path ” (85, 10-13).

May the Lord bless our country and keep her,
turn his face towards us and give us peace,
let the light of his Resurrection shine on us.