

# Peace and Progress

**A Renewed Spirit For A New Eritrea**

*Pastoral Letter to the Faithful  
and to All People of Good Will*

*24 July 1991*

**Dear brothers, sisters,  
Sons and daughters in Christ,**

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The grace and peace of God the Father and of our Lord, Jesus Christ, be with you. These, our words, come to you at a time when our cities and villages are still ringing with the echoes of the joyous demonstrations which accompanied the entrance of the liberation forces therein. Almost miraculously, after thirty years of war, famine and a great many other sufferings, a look of joy and hope, which had seemed irretrievably lost, has now returned to the faces of our people. This is a legitimate joy and one which we would like to interpret in the light of the Word of God, linking it with a short reflection on the significance of this great moment in history.

**1. The Spirit, Giver of Life**

This important and decisive twist in our history occurred whilst the Church was preparing itself to celebrate the feast of Pentecost. It is not surprising therefore that the dramatic and moving vision from Ezekiel about the “Dry Bones” should spring to mind so spontaneously. In one of the most crucial moments of Ancient Israel’s history, the prophet, having been transported by God to a vast plain strewn with a mass of dry bones, received the command: “Prophesy over these bones and say to them: Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord: I am now going to make the Spirit enter you and you will live ... The Lord Yahweh says this: Come from the four winds, o Spirit, breathe on these dead; let them live” (Ezk 37:4-5). Even before Ezekiel had finished prophesying, he heard a noise and saw a movement among the bones, which were now joining with each other, and the plain of skeletons turned into a plain filled with living men. Through the prophet, God then spoke again to Israel who had been the subject of the vision: “I am now going to open your graves; I mean to raise you from your graves, my people, and

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lead you back to the soil of Israel. And you will know that I am Yahweh ... ” (Ezk 37:12-13).

How is it possible not to read the history of the Eritrean people, particularly over the last few decades, in the moving passage of Scripture cited above. For thirty years our plains and our mountains had become a desolation covered with “dry bones”. At the end, it had become practically impossible to put a real figure to the number of human lives mown down by the war and other disasters. Perhaps still worse, death had reached deep into the hearts of many of us under other forms such as the hate, violence, and revenge which all wars kindle.

However, “The Spirit of God, who, with wondrous providence, directs the course of time and renews the face of the earth” (Gaudium et Spes, 26) has extended his life-giving breath over our land once more and given it back life, joy, and hope.

Our people, in the simplicity of its faith, did not hesitate to point out the presence of the hand of God in the circumstances that brought about the present turn of events.

This faith is genuine, finding repeated outlets even within our own hearing. By means of the simple language of our people, God is calling all of us to recognize that He is Yahweh, just as he did to Israel through the prophet Ezekiel.

This then, brothers and sisters, is our first invitation: let us acknowledge the presence of the Lord who has worked wonders for us in these events; above all, however, let us open our hearts to God in a humble and sincere act of thanksgiving for having freed us from a situation that, after so many years of war and so many attempts at negotiated settlements, seemed to offer no realistic way out.

It is clear anyway that God moves in and through history and that he leads it towards ends that he himself has established by means of mysterious but nonetheless very real inter-weaving of his divine action and that of human beings.

For this reason we recall with emotion as well as gratitude all those who in this struggle have paid such a heavy price and who were motivated by a true love of freedom and supreme dedication to the cause of seeking the highest good for their own people. Indeed very many have paid the ultimate price, that of their own lives; others, after so many years of sacrifice and self-denial, have returned and, in many cases, bear the unmistakable signs of a life lived too long exposed to the risks of death.

For those who have died we ask God to grant them that fullness of life and liberty for which they fought right up until the end, and which finds its completeness in God himself. They are our children and our brothers and sisters, for whom there will be tears and much mourning in many families. Perhaps the thought that they did not die in vain may be of some consolation.

Let us join ourselves to them in the prayerful thought that now is the time for us to forgive all those who were sacrificed for the other cause; every human life, no matter the cause to which it may dedicate itself, is always dear and sacred to God. In coming face to face with God, who is the Father of all men and women without distinction, those who have given their lives for whatever cause, can now come to achieve the sovereign reconciliation that seemed so impossible on earth.

To those who have returned, or are about to return, to their homes and villages after the fight, we offer, along with our gratitude, a wish that is also a prayer - that the Lord may heal their psychological wounds, help them to forget past horrors, allow them to look towards the future with serenity, and give them the strength to contribute to the rebuilding of the country with the same dedication and selflessness that characterized their previous choices.

## **2. The Lessons of the Past: War - Never Again!**

No-one doubts that what we are living through at the present time is a great historical moment, unique in the history of our country. Only with the passage of time will we be able to understand its true significance and dimensions more

fully. For the present, we extend an invitation to live this moment as a precious occasion through which to look back at the past in order to learn its lessons, and thence to look to the future and to the practical foundations upon which we can begin to build an authentic society, one that is truly worthy of our humanity.

The history of our country, especially its most recent history, is marked by an ever increasing recognition by the people of their own cultural, social and political identity. It was a necessity in the historical evolution and the political development of the country in this century, that the road to legitimate independence should both logically and naturally be opened up. Unfortunately, differing political aims, party interests, and many other internal and external factors extraneous to the real good and genuine interests of the people multiplied the obstacles along that road to independence and fatally set up the conditions which provided for the crisis that was to follow - a thirty-year-long war that took Eritrea to the very brink of total destruction.

We leave the following question to the consciences of those who either caused this war to start, or who did nothing to prevent it nor stop it - why was it so necessary to impose such an appalling sacrifice on a people still so poor and so innocent?

This experience teaches a great lesson to the country that is about to be reborn from the ashes - the absurdity of war as a means to resolve conflicts and differences. After all that we have seen and lived through in these years, no-one can escape from the truth of the message proclaimed by various Popes in the darkest moments of the recent history of the world - *“War is but useless slaughter” (Pius XI); “Nothing is lost by peace, everything can be lost by war” (Pius XII); “Not war but peace must guide the destiny of humanity” (Paul VI); “War is an absurd phenomenon and always unjust” (John Paul II).*

We bring up this message once again at the beginning of this new chapter of our history, so that the principle of war may be definitively relegated to the sad

history of our past where it may act as an ever present warning against this option, so that the future generations of our people may be spared its destructiveness.

### **3. An Unfinished Campaign**

Our deep satisfaction at the achievement of this new stage in our history does not, however, distract us from noting the fact that whatever has been achieved recently is but a first step towards the complete political independence of the country. The military victory still lacks legal and formal endorsement. This must be the second (complementary but indispensable) stage. And let us not fool ourselves into believing that its attainment is going to be either easy or without risk. Nonetheless, we believe that the agreement reached at the recent Conference of Addis Ababa concerning our people's just and historically justifiable right to self-determination constitutes a great step forward.

We recall the words of Pope John Paul II, who over a year ago, when addressing the Diplomats accredited to the Holy See, said: *"It goes without saying that any solution (to the Eritrean question) must take into account the legitimate aspirations of our beloved Eritrean people who have already suffered so much,"* (*"Discourse to the Diplomatic Corps, in "L' Osservatore Romano", weekly edition, January 29, 1990"*). As spiritual guide to a section of the Eritrean people, we ask that the international community, and in particular U.N.O. finally move out from their unjustifiable position of silence in regard to this country, and give justice to a people that has already suffered too much to tolerate yet further delays and procrastinations. We ask that the necessary legal apparatus be put into operation so that this transitional stage may come to a close as soon as possible and that normal conditions may be quickly established such that the people may dedicate themselves whole-heartedly to re-building their country.

#### 4. For an Authentic Civil Growth

Even though aware of the difficulties which remain along the way, we maintain that the present events have set in motion an irreversible process leading towards the formal independence of Eritrea. With some relief, we may now say that there can be no turning back. It is therefore permissible to envisage the future order of the country.

It is not our task, as pastors of the Church, to provide “political” formulae. And it is further our impression, after our first contacts with the leaders of the liberation movement, that the country, in this delicate moment of transition, seems to be entrusted to persons with clear ideas and a steadfast commitment.

We shall therefore limit ourselves to recalling a few essential principles of universal value that the Church, in her social teaching, proposes to all men of good will who wish to build a society that favors the authentic development of man both as an individual and as a member of that society. The second Vatican Council affirms that, “According to the almost unanimous opinion of believers and unbelievers alike, all things on earth should be related to man/woman as their centre and crown” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 12). If for unbelievers the priority of the human person is given through a postulation of an ethical conscience sited in the heart of every man, then for us who believe in God that same priority springs from a more transcendent concept: “Man/woman was created in the image of God . . . and was appointed by him as master of all earthly creatures . . .” (*Ibid.*).

Thus man is the measure of every social, political and economic initiative; and all the structures, organizations and functions of society have but a single aim - the creation and the on-going adaptation of circumstances such that the greatest possible number of people may be able to develop their talents and satisfy their legitimate need for greater perfection and happiness.

We hold it to be opportune to recall these concepts at this time, since there is the danger that in the enthusiasm engendered by the task of rebuilding the

nation it is possible, even without being aware of it, to sacrifice the value of the individual to structural, organizational and technical exigencies. Any such result would over-turn our value system and become a new form of slavery, manipulation, and exploitation.

Clearly the priority of the person finds its most vital and essential expression in the enjoyment of our *basic human rights* - be they ethical (respect for the person), cultural (freedom to search for the truth and to express one's own ideas), educational (right to schooling), religious (right of free public and private worship according to the dictates of one's conscience), economic (right to work and to free enterprise), political (right to active participation in public life and affairs), and so forth. It is precisely through respect of these rights that the structures and functions of society can come to be of service to man. Conversely, to ignore them would mean that man will become the servant of those same social structures and functions. To build a society that afflicts man rather than blesses him would appear to be a contradiction in terms!

Care for the human person and for his rights finds its natural and ideal context in care for the common good. These two principles are not mutually exclusive since the common good *"Is the sum of those conditions of social life which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily"* (*Gaudium et Spes*, 26). So we are dealing with two complementary elements. Thanks to the principle of the common good, society provides the space in which individual and particular groups may live and bring to fulfillment their respective roles. On the other hand, it is equally clear that, in striving for the common good, there must be some balance between the individual's needs, desires and interests and those of society and/or its parts.

The field of the relationships between private and public interest can produce tension and conflict, which can, if pushed to the extreme, result in a sick and finally disintegrating society. The regulating principle of social life cannot therefore be exercised through fights between individuals, groups, or classes but



through constant efforts at co-ordination through social co-operation. This is the *principle of solidarity* which is based on the common nature of men and their common hopes, and which responds to the plan of God who has always sought the unity and brotherhood of all men. Solidarity is *“Not an emotion of vague compassion or superficial sympathy for the sufferings of so many other persons, nearby or far away. On the contrary, it is firm determination and perseverance in the struggle to work for the common good, whether by that we mean the good of all or the good of each, so that we may all be truly responsible for each other”* (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 38).

The promotion and defense of the common good in all its implications, at the individual and societal level, is the greatest responsibility of the public authorities, a responsibility which constitutes *“The whole reason for the existence of civil authorities ... (and therefore) they should respect its essential elements, and at the same time conform their laws to the needs of a given historical situation”* (*Pacem in Terris*, 54).

The same great document of the Church goes on to say: *“Assuredly, the ethnic characteristics of the various groups are to be respected as constituent elements of the common good”* (*Ibid.* 55). In an ethnically pluralistic society like ours, this principle is very relevant. It demands that such characteristics be preserved and promoted, and that they do not become moments for discrimination in the exercise of political, social, or cultural rights: *“It is a question of building a world where every man, no matter what his race, religion or nationality, can live a fully human life, freed from the servitude imposed on him by other men”* (*Populorum Progressio*, 47). Rightly enough the Charter of the United Nations is based on the recognition of this same principle of the *fundamental equality* of the individual and of society in what they may reasonably expect from each other. All, therefore, have the right to actively participate in the process of development (*Cf. also Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 33). This too is another lesson that we must learn from our own history if we are to avoid repeating the mistakes of

the past - how much suffering, oppression, and war may have been avoided had there been less selfishness in the struggle for power, and less racism in decision making!

Finally whilst still speaking about the construction of an authentic society, worthy of our humanity, we cannot fail to mention an element essential to the unity of society, i.e, the collective and full development of man; *“Development cannot be limited to mere economic growth. In order to be authentic, it must be complete, integral; that is, it has to promote the good of every man and of the whole man... What must be aimed at is complete humanism. And what is that if not the fully-rounded development of the whole man and of all men? A humanism closed in on itself, and not open to the values of the Spirit and to God who is their source, could only achieve apparent success. True, man can organize the world apart from God, but without God man can organize it in the end only to man’s detriment. An isolated humanism is an inhuman humanism. There is no true humanism but that which is open to the Absolute and is conscious of a vocation which gives human life its true meaning”* (Populorum Progressio, 14 and 42).

In our specific context, openness to spiritual values is a characteristic of the make-up of our people, and it has found its expression in a long tradition and a very rich and very original spiritual inheritance. This reminder then is not an accusation against a growing tendency, but rather a warning to be on our guard against a temptation to which developing peoples are often exposed: *“Less off-well peoples can never be sufficiently on their guard against this temptation which comes to them from wealthy nations. For these nations all too often set an example of success in a highly technically and culturally developed civilization; they also provide the model for a way of acting that is principally aimed at the conquest of material prosperity... Developing nations must know how to discriminate among those things that are held out to them; they must be able to assess critically, and eliminate those deceptive offerings which would only bring about a lowering of the human ideal, and to accept those values that are sound*

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*and beneficial, in order to develop them alongside their own, in accordance with their own genius” (Ibid. 41).*

Here briefly then, brothers and sisters is an outline of the civilization and humanism that we desire for our people. We wished to recall these things not in order to assume the role of teacher and to dictate laws, nor in order to monopolize on any spiritual authority which is anyway shared with the other Churches and religious faiths that belong to our country. We offer this reminder simply and humbly because we feel ourselves, as Church, to be in solidarity with the men and women of our land, and so we wished to express and interpret our common aspiration.

The above principles are objectively valid in themselves, independently of their having been presented by the Catholic Church.

## **5. What Role for the Church?**

At this point, however, it is both just and necessary that we give a reply to the question - How would our Church like to serve or to contribute to the common good in the circumstances of today?

We present ourselves once again to this country, as it struggles to come to terms with its new historical position, in the way assigned us by the Gospel. Our particular mission is *to serve*. Such service essentially consists in *“Furnishing mankind with the saving resources which the Church has received from its founder under the promptings of the Holy Spirit” (Gaudium et Spes,3).*

Being part of this universal mission of the Church, our Eritrean Church community also declares its willingness to put *“the resources of Salvation”* at the disposition of our brothers and sisters in this land. In more concrete terms this means that we are ready to co-operate in any project what-so-ever that intends to promote the well-being of the whole person.

We are motivated in this task not by earthly ambitions, nor by desire for prestige, nor by any concern to proselytize, but, as we repeat, only by the desire to serve. We take to ourselves the words of Vatican II: *“The Church is not motivated by an earthly ambition but is interested in one thing only - to carry on the work of Christ under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, for he came into the world to bear witness to the truth, to save and not to judge, to serve and not to be served” (Ibid., 3).*

The fields in which the Church is able and desires to offer its contribution are many and extensive. This is not the place to describe and analyze them all, and anyway the unfolding of circumstances and needs will stimulate us in our concrete options for service. This does not exempt us, however, from indicating the most essential and basic elements of our mission, particularly in the light of the needs of our country at the present time.

Our land has greatest need of ethical, moral and spiritual renewal and up-building. Even if, over the last few years, there has been an undeniable deepening of the sense of the religious and the need for the holy, one still can not ignore the spread of indifference, practical materialism, and ignorance of religious values in certain sectors of society - hardly surprising, given the previous situation of disorder and social disintegration.

The Church's role in remedying this position is of the highest priority. In fact this is the primary and most explicit vocation of the Church - to preach the conversion of heart (*Lk 24:47*).

Faithfulness to this mission is the best service that the Church can render to our country. The inner renewal of our people is assuredly the greatest guarantee for the erection of a healthy, reconciled and united society. Institutions and social, political and economic structures cannot hope to achieve their real aim - the true good of the people - if they are not animated by hearts and spirits that are renewed.

This task calls us, the ecclesial community, with impelling urgency to prepare and equip the pastoral service of the Church, whose central activity is to enlighten, guide and nourish men's and women's consciences in all truth and justice.

The above task, even if of first priority, does not exclude commitment in other fields of activity in the effort to help in the re-building of our land.

The promotion of the "whole man/woman" is also a task that the Church assumes as part of its mission; it does not restrict itself just to a few specific areas of activity. The proclamation of conversion, therefore, must be integrated with the task of liberating man/woman from all the forms of servitude that hinder his self-realization.

In our specific context, our people, already politically started on the road to liberty, still suffer from various other forms of slavery, a left-over from decades of oppression, abuses of power and natural disasters. And here we refer specifically to the problems of poverty and ignorance.

In line with its limits and possibilities, our Church is committed to continue, to deepen, and to qualify its contribution to free our people from these forms of slavery.

In fact, *"By virtue of her own evangelical duty the Church feels called to take her stand beside the poor, to discern the justice of their requests, and to help satisfy them"* (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 39).

## **6. The Renewal of the Inside of the Temple**

In view of the tasks that await us and the needs of the country, we cannot let this occasion pass without extending an invitation directly to our local Church. We urgently need to start a process of reassessment and reflection in order to renew all our ecclesial aspects. We shall be unable to carry out our part in the renewal of the country if first we don't renew ourselves. Let us think back, once again, to that

moment in Ancient Israel's history when the people returned home from exile: they built the temple and purified their worship. Enthusiasm and euphoria were the order of the day. Then God sent the prophet Zechariah to them: "*Tell this people ...*" What? To tell them that it was all very well to rebuild the temple and the other things too, but before all else it was incumbent upon Joshua, the high priest, to be freed from his sins and dressed in festive attire (Zc 3:1-4). This biblical text speaks of the *inner* renewal of the priesthood, after the exile, as the jump-off point in the renewal of the whole people of God.

We, both pastors and Christian communities, all stand in need of renewal. The long, critical years through which the country has passed have left their signs even on the life and activity of the Church. We don't say that we ran short of either effort or good will in serving our people during these years of difficulty and suffering, but there was a certain weakening in our resources of energy, discoordination of effort, uncertainties regarding priorities in actual works and proposed projects, a lessening in our use of the means to achieve unity as well as inadequate recourse to internal communication.

Renewal in all these sectors demands long and systematic re-evaluation and reflection which we hope to initiate as soon as possible. For the present, we cannot avoid pointing out that, at this crucial moment in the history of our country, the Church cannot be in a position to offer that service which we have outlined above, if she does not seek to be herself, through a return to a deeper inner life intensely motivated by the Gospel, and through a comprehensive revision of those methods, and means by which we seek to be of service to our brothers.

## **Conclusion**

In concluding this message, we once again appeal to all men and women of good will in our country to foster *reconciliation* - an undertaking vital to the moment we are presently living.

Peace is not the mere absence of war. Peace is above all reconciliation. Firstly reconciliation with God. After so many years of war, it is possible that we have harbored certain feelings and assumed certain attitudes - such as despair, hate, revenge - which have fractured our communion with God. Let us reconcile ourselves with Him in order to regain our dignity as his sons, and become new creatures (*2 Cor 5:17*), redeemed from that internal and external disintegration that has sin as its ultimate root. After reconciliation with God, we may then be released to realize our reconciliation with, and forgiveness of, other men/women, in whom, because of Christ, we can rediscover our brotherhood. The love which results from this choice opens up the way for us to live and work together serenely and sincerely as men and women of this land with no distinction of religion, language or culture.

From all the faithful in particular, and from all believers in general, we request the help of your prayers, since, as Pope John Paul II has put it, "*A nation which honors God cannot but receive the blessings of God. Even when difficulties arise, your faith in God will be the guarantee that you will overcome those obstacles, and that you will build a nation where unity and love may reign, where brotherhood and peace may flourish*" (*Speech on his departure from Kenya, 1980*).

May Christ, prince of peace, confirm our hearts in peace, justice, and love.