

CATHOLIC BISHOPS OF SIERRA LEONE

SIERRA LEONE: BUILDING A CULTURE OF RESPONSIBLE POLITICS

A PASTORAL LETTER ON THE ELECTIONS IN JUNE 2023

Brothers and Sisters in the Lord,

We greet you and we pray that the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Love of God and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you (cf. 2 Cor. 13:13).

THE CHURCH AND POLITICAL LIFE

We the Catholic Bishops intend this Pastoral letter as a word of encouragement to all who hear or read it. Our mandate comes from Christ himself when he said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord" (LK 4:18-19).

Our aim is to present an understanding of politics, as informed by the christian gospel. The Good News proclaimed by Jesus Christ is a message of unity, of justice, peace and of love. Therefore, as Catholic Bishops and Religious leaders, our desire is to infuse into our preparation for the elections this same message of Jesus Christ the Lord. We are convinced that these values will best promote the common good of all Sierra Leoneans and we urge all political parties desiring to participate in the coming elections to embrace these values and allow them to permeate all their activities. The elections in June will offer the people of Sierra Leone the opportunity to elect representatives of their choice; that is, those whom they believe will best ensure the building of a better nation. It is important therefore that they are conducted well and in the right spirit, in order to ensure peace and stability in the country.

As Catholic Bishops, we do not wish to enter into party politics or tell anyone which party or individual they should vote for. Our aim is to exhort all to carry out their political activities in a manner that would guarantee respect for the values of others in order to ensure peaceful co-existence and stability in the country. Using the words of Pope John Paul II: "The Church's contribution to the political order is precisely her vision of the dignity of the person revealed in all its fullness in the mystery of the incarnate word". (address to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: doctrinal note on some questions regarding participation of Catholics in political life, 24th November, 2002). Consequently, we cannot excuse ourselves from this earthly responsibilities by claiming: "Our home is in heaven". A good citizen should love his/her country and try to work for the common good.

THE COMING ELECTIONS

The coming elections will constitute a critical moment for all Sierra Leoneans as we will produce leaders that will guide the affairs of our nation in the next five

years. Therefore we urge all to vote for only people of high integrity, men and women motivated by the desire to serve rather than by a hunger for power and self-enrichment. Before voting, examine carefully and assess the policies of each party: Are such policies realistic? Can they be put into effect or are they unrealistic promises merely designed to win votes? Are they concerned with the common good of all citizens or do they favour certain groups within the society? To vote in elections is the democratic right of every adult citizen. But it is more than a right. It is a serious duty that should not be treated lightly. Every citizen has a duty to weigh carefully which party and which candidates are best suited to govern. When all citizens prepare to vote responsibly, there is a greater hope for a good and trustworthy government.

We encourage all parties to ensure that voting is free and fair. Violence of any kind is to be avoided. Allow everyone to express their views freely even when they differ from our own. We deplore harassment of any kind; whether of candidates or of supporters of any party whatever. Any form of threat is absolutely condemned. All should be free to express their point of view without interference, provided they respect the law. Voters too, should not be subjected to any pressures whatever to make them vote for particular candidates or parties. In a democracy voters are free to cast their votes secretly in accordance with their conscience. It goes without saying, therefore, that all forms of cheating are to be completely avoided. In order to ensure that the vote is fair, the presence of monitors, both local and international, will be necessary both during the voting and afterwards during the counting and the announcement of the results.

We now have many newspapers which represent different shades of opinion. It is of great importance that journalists and others take great care to speak and write what is true. In this context we invite all citizens to be more critical with regard to what they read and hear. Let the value of the truth guide all people in their acceptance and understanding of what is written, spoken and seen in the media.

AFTER THE ELECTIONS


The elections will be conducted in one day, except when there is a need for a run-off. However, the period which follows the election will be an important one for our country. If all citizens and politicians conduct themselves well during this time, Sierra Leone will prove to be truly democratic. Just as the adult citizens have the right to vote, so too we all have a serious responsibility to abide by the just and publicly verified results, even if they do not accord with our personal preferences. In any society there are some who are tempted to refuse to accept the democratic wishes of the majority. Such temptations must be resisted at all cost. Nothing is more calculated to promote resentment and division in our society than gloating over one's success as winners of the election. This tendency is to be avoided. We envisage a situation wherein those who will emerge as winners in the elections would be magnanimous in their victory and those who lose would be honourable in their defeat, knowing we are all Sierra Leoneans, and therefore share the same dream for a better Sierra Leone for all.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

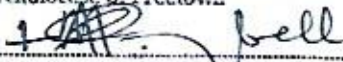
In the light of the foregoing considerations:

1. We call on all Sierra Leoneans, especially those who are of voting age, to strongly reject all acts of violence, unnecessary provocations, various forms of fraud that distort results, as well as anything that can lead to destabilization and disorder.
2. We encourage all political parties and their supporters to accept the results or outcome of the elections, should the latter be declared free and fair by the competent authority.
3. We urge the law enforcement officers to safeguard honour and loyalty to this country and its institutions, the protection of lives and property, and to maintain political neutrality in the execution of their duties.
4. We persuade political parties and their candidates to respect the electoral process, to preserve peace, to uphold the interests of the people and to see themselves in their pluralistic election as competitors, not adversaries. In fact, Pope John Paul II said, "an authentic democracy, which respects pluralism, is one of the principal routes which the Church travels together with the people..." (Ecclesia in Africa, no.112)
5. To the Electoral Commission of Sierra Leone (ECSL), your role is paramount. Do all you can to conduct a free and fair election.
6. We, the Catholic Church, make commitment to uphold, teach and preach all the tenets contained in this pastoral letter. We strongly enjoin our priests, religious, and lay faithful to promote a spirit of unity, reconciliation, tolerance and peace in their homilies, conferences and pastoral engagements.

In conclusion, we pray that Mary, the Queen of peace, continue to intercede for us so that her Son may grant us the grace and the strength to follow the light and walk in the newness of life in Christ.


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