



## Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference

Opening Address of the SACBC Plenary  
06 August 2024: Mariannahill  
Bishop S. Sipuka

Your Eminences, Your Excellencies, Rev Fathers and sisters, Good Morning. Welcome to this 2<sup>nd</sup> Plenary meeting of 2024. Welcome in a special way to the newly arrived Apostolic Nuncio, His Excellency Archbishop Henryk **Mieczysław Jagodziński**.

The “arrival of the new Nuncio” was beginning to gain prominence in ecclesial conversations. We are glad you finally arrived, welcome your Excellency. Being glad about your arrival does not mean we have complaints about Mgrs Pavis. On the contrary, Mgrs. Pavis has served us well and has been a good company. We are impressed with his efficiency and helpfulness and thank him sincerely.

I am sure you immediately researched about us when you were appointed to this conference area. Please do not believe any of those bad things you have read about us; we are a good Conference. One feature that characterises us is brotherhood. We always look forward to our plenary meetings, where we enjoy each other’s company, discuss issues openly, and make decisions with one voice.

As you know, our conference area spans three states: Botswana, Eswatini, and South Africa, so it is multinational in its character. The obvious joy is the felt mutual support among the bishops of the three countries, but there are also challenges.

Having its headquarters here in South Africa makes the conference a foreign body to Botswana and Eswatini, limiting its engagements and interventions on social, political and cultural issues of these two countries of the conference. The massive size of the South African portion of the conference also unwittingly leads the conference to focus on South African issues and less on Botswana and Eswatini concerns.



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Presently, the two bishops and one administrator serving in Botswana and Eswatini are all foreign nationals, which, again, places some limitations on their ministry. These challenges notwithstanding, we do try, as a conference, to respond to the pastoral needs of the whole conference area and to mutually support each other.

We are very much awake to the pastoral, social, and political issues in our area. With the assistance of our various departments, we respond to these on an ongoing basis. Three years ago, we issued a new pastoral plan for the conference. Our Plenary meetings, which occur twice a year, and the joint witness with the Leadership Conference of Consecrated Life allow us to engage on current issues. We also do our best to be in solidarity with other bishops' conferences and countries facing various social and political challenges.

If you ask me, Your Excellency, what is not going well at the conference during teatime, I will tell you that we are weak with institutions, which reduces our ability to evangelise and influence society. We used to have hospitals; except for Eswatini, which still has some clinics and a hospital, we have none in the rest of the conference area. In the past, we had schools that were entirely under our administration; now, the few we have, we run in collaboration with the government, which limits us in many ways regarding evangelising through them.

We have a huge shortage of vocations to priesthood and religious life and rely heavily on priests and religious from other countries for parish supply and other ministries. In most Dioceses, over half of the priests and religious are from different countries. Catholics in our conference are in the minority, and with a lot of unemployment, our faithful are not able to support the church sufficiently; for this reason, we struggle to have enough financial resources to carry out evangelisation. For the same reason of economic constraints, our institutions of higher learning and media institutions are barely surviving.

Faced with these resource challenges and yet realising the importance of institutions in our region, we have mandated a team led by Cardinal Brislin, which we call the "future vision team", to explore possibilities of cooperation among Catholic institutions in the conference area, which will hopefully lead to consolidation of resources for maximum results.



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We also have successful fundraising initiatives by the Catholics of our area in the form of Lenten Appeal and Bishops' Foundation. So, we are struggling but trying to be creative in moving forward.

One last thing I would like to share with you, Your Excellency, is about the project for the demarcation of our Dioceses. Since the Conference's establishment, many social, political, and economic changes have rendered the present boundaries of our Dioceses impractical and irrelevant to our times. We began this project about six years ago with a lot of enthusiasm but gradually lost momentum, I guess first because of its complexity.

Still, I also think it is because of our personal attachment to our Dioceses. The last time this was discussed, it was proposed that it be escalated to the Holy See to oversee it. By overseeing, we mean that consultation will still be done and broad consensus sought, but the Holy See will finally decide. Otherwise, if this project is left to us, it may not see the light of day. With your arrival, Your Excellency, we hope to take this demarcation issue further.

After the new Nuncio, the other person deserving special mention is Archbishop Nubuasah, who reached a special birthday of 75 in the last few months. Happy birthday, Archbishop Nubuasah.

We have just had elections in South Africa, Eswatini had them last year, and in October this year, Botswana will hold elections. The turnout of election results in South Africa, which did not give any party an outright majority, has led to the formation of a Government of National unity where all parties govern together, and about which there is excitement and nervousness.

Excitement because for the past 15 years, the party that has been at the helm of government has, at best, been able to facilitate only a bare minimum of conditions for most people to live and, at worst, has been on the verge of being a failing state. It has failed to deliver essential services, create employment, eliminate crime and corruption, redress past inequalities and foster social cohesion. Its focus has instead been on party matters and closing ranks when accountability is demanded, much to the neglect of the service needed for the population.



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With the establishment of a government of national unity, there is hope that the focus will shift from party interests to policies and practices that will improve the lives of the citizens. The exciting part about the turnout of the election results is that South Africans are beginning to understand and practice democracy, prioritising the common good before party loyalty.

On the other hand, we must commend Political parties, particularly the ANC, for accepting the results and agreeing to form a government according to the dictates of the results. We cannot take this for granted, especially when we consider the experiences of other African countries such as Zimbabwe, where former liberation movements give themselves the right to rule “until Jesus comes,” as one famous leader sensationally predicted. And when that right is challenged, most liberation movements resort to violence and destabilisation of the country.

While we still face many challenges, at least politically, we are stable, something many other African countries do not have. We must be grateful for this sign of God’s grace in our country. We prayed for successful elections; we must now give thanks for that success, even if it is not perfect.

Still, on the positive side of social and political development, the government has kept its word of reducing loading shedding. Except for the local municipalities that have poor maintenance of electricity infrastructure, which has led to local disruption of electricity supply, nationally, we are in the second 100 days of no-load shedding. I do not know how much this success is due to the present CEO, who happens to be Catholic. Whatever the cause of the improvement in electricity generation and supply, it is good for the life of the citizens and the economy; we congratulate the government in this regard.

There has been a cry about the failure to charge and prosecute highly placed people for acts of corruption and other wrongdoings. Though perhaps not at the rate we would like to see this happen, the recent charging and sentencing of some prominent people for alleged acts of corruption give hope that we are heading in the right direction in demonstrating a lack of tolerance for illegal activities by people in authority. If the National unity government can build on these positive developments, we will have reason to be hopeful about the future.



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One concern that has arisen is the size of the cabinet of the Government of National Unity, which consists of 32 cabinet ministers and 43 deputy ministers. The presidency alone has three ministers and four deputy ministers. This concern arises from considering the cost of supporting such a large number of ministers and the associated perks of a ministerial position.

However, if the intention of ensuring that in each department there is one or two deputy ministers from a different party than that of the minister is to ensure the pollination of ideas from different parties for better service delivery, then a big cabinet might be justifiable, let us wait and see.

Also concerning is the recent news about the presence and financial operations of individuals linked to ISIS in South Africa. I have not heard much reaction from the government about this; perhaps it deems it insignificant. The association of ISIS with the destabilisation of countries like Mozambique and Nigeria, however, raises concern because it brings a lot of suffering among ordinary people, as evidenced in Cabo Delgado in Mozambique. Additionally, a site in Limpopo purportedly used for security training but allegedly bearing signs of a military camp has been discovered.

Coupled with the rising number of armed robberies, kidnappings, armed stock theft syndicates that appear to operate with freedom and taxi groups that have organised themselves into untouchable armies. All this and other similar groups that have formed themselves into forces parallel to the state are a cause for concern, and I hope that our discussions during this plenary, will provide some clarity about these concerns.

Concerns have also been raised about corruption and money laundering involving some high-ranking leaders in Eswatini. I am curious to understand the extent of this problem, how it affects the people, and how the Churches, particularly the Catholic Church, respond to it.

At the international level, the situation between Palestine and Israel appears to be escalating into a regional crisis as we hear reports of serious counterattacks between Israel and other Middle Eastern countries.



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The support by powerful countries and blocks of either side of the conflict has the potential to suck the whole world into this conflict. The South African Council of Churches has embarked on an initiative to facilitate a joint engagement in this conflict by world Abrahamic faith leaders. As a member of the South African Council of Churches, the Conference is also involved in this initiative.

We also keep in mind other war situations similar to the Middle East that are not covered in the media. We appreciate the pastoral solicitude of Pope Francis, who visited Sudan, where the situation is not at all different from that of Gaza.

We are following with interest the unfolding of the Olympics in France, where all three countries of the conference are represented and support our participants there. The only damper has been the blasphemous depiction of Jesus and the disciples at the Last Supper as drag queens. Drag queens are people who dress across their gender, mainly men dressing as women to entertain and to mock. More abominable is the naked man wearing only a thin string of flowers sitting on the table where Jesus would have put bread and wine, replacing what we consider holy with obscene nudity. This is a vilification of the worst kind of what we believe about the Last Supper.

The explanation, therefore, that this piece of theatre was meant to include everybody does not hold because the Eucharist, of which the last Supper is its foundation, is something that we take very seriously as Catholics and cannot allow people to make a mockery of it. We, therefore, add our own voice to many other voices in expressing our displeasure and hurt about the ridiculing and insulting of an event so central to our faith. We call upon all Catholics not to be discouraged but to continue to hold firm in their faith about the Eucharist, even in this act of being ridiculed.

Let me note some pastoral issues before I sound like a political analyst. Some of us bishops on our social media platform raised concerns about the high consumption of alcohol by our Catholic youth, even at church gatherings, something that, as one bishop noted, is not happening in the youth of other Churches. I wonder, though, if the apparent alcohol abstention by the youth of other churches is not due to the prohibitive tradition of those churches against alcohol, whereas drinking is not forbidden in the Catholic tradition.



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We can discuss this and perhaps come to a decision to forbid Catholics from drinking liquor, given the damage it is causing to the young people, families and society.

My view, though, is that heavy drinking by our youth is due more to the broader societal problem about alcohol in this country than the inherent Catholic tendency for excessive indulgence in alcohol. Alcohol and drug abuse in South Africa is systemic; it is a culture and a way of life that has harmful consequences not only for our youth in the Church but also for the nation. I believe that Botswana's cases of drug abuse are growing more and more concerning among schools with the use of a newly discovered drug called CAT (Methcathinone).

Indeed, we must teach our catholic youth against the abuse of alcohol. However, given that, at most, we have only two hours with them on a Sunday and the rest of the time, they are with their families and live in a society where regular and episodic drinking and using drugs are a way of life, our effort would be insufficient if we do not address this problem at the societal level as well.

Given this cultural pervasiveness of liquor and persistent drug abuse, talking about it, writing pastoral letters and setting an example by becoming teetotalers will not be enough. We need to advocate for the promulgation of stringent laws against the liberal sale of liquor and against drug lords.

In 2016, the cabinet approved a bill that argued for restrictions on alcohol availability, including restricting advertising of alcohol on public platforms, raising the legal drinking age from 18 to 21 years, regulating specific trading days and hours for alcohol to be distributed and placing liability on alcohol retailers and manufacturers for harm related to the contravention of Laws governing liquor distribution and availability. This bill, however, never saw the light of day; it was opposed mainly for its foreseen adverse effects on business, but the main reason put forward was that it was unconstitutional.

The constitution has saved this country from various kinds of fascism, ensuring that leaders do not become more important than the population. Yet, there are elements in it that need to be reviewed because they do not serve the common good.



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One of them is the clause relating to the distribution and availability of liquor, which gives preference to business over the well-being of society.

The election results have made everybody realise that no one person, group, or party has an answer to South Africa's challenges and that we must all work together through national dialogue to find solutions. I hope that during this plenary, we will debate and agree about the value of national dialogue and about issues that we want to bring into this dialogue. Given the detrimental effects of liquor distribution and availability in the countries of our conference, I propose one of them should be a review of the clause in the constitution about liquor.

As has been noted repeatedly, the synodal process in which we are is not so much about topics for consideration but a way of being a Church and acknowledging the gifts of everyone for the mission of the Church. However, one topic that is up for discussion is the ordination of women to the diaconate. In the synthesis of our response to the synod question, I do not know to what extent in terms of the number of proposals, but a call for its exploration was made.

My point of reflection about it is its need and urgency. The question we need to ask is, at this point in the life of the Church, what material difference will the ordination of women to diaconate make? If women are doing practically everything that a deacon is doing (except presiding over marriages, of which there is no abundance of them) and doing baptism (of which there is not much demand), why clericalise them to do what they can do without being ordained? Why do we want to draw women into clericalism when we are having so many problems with it?

The second consideration is that if we eventually decided in favour of ordaining women, that decision should be informed by the felt need of the Church, as was the case when it was first established in Acts. 6:1-6 and then explore how that is possible or not possible from theological considerations. Once the need has been identified and theological grounds established, then the process of discernment, which includes dialoguing or “synodaling” about it to avoid divisions in the Church can begin. Candidates can then be identified and formed because not everybody who wants to become a deacon is necessarily the right candidate.





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The focus must be on responding to a genuine need rather than pursuing it for the purpose of affirmative action because men also do not have a right to ordination; to be ordained is not a right; it is for service. This is just my little contribution to the discussion.

The other discussion that has been ongoing for decades concerns the ordination of matured and proven married men, known as *virī probati*. In the Amazonian Synod of October 2019, the discussions concluded with a vote of 128 in favour and 41 against. The Pope did not grant the request, but he has been talking about it.

This discussion needs to continue because there is a need for it. As noted already, our Conference area has a huge shortage of priests. A viable solution is needed, and part of that solution must include consideration for *Viri Probati*. Bishop Lobinger, quoted by the Pope some time ago on this subject, has written a book of over 200 pages, theologically motivating for the ordination of *Viri Probati*. But as bishop Lobinger would argue, this should not be done solely because of the shortage of priests because 'If the shortage of priests were the actual reason for ordaining community leaders, then we should discontinue the practice as soon as we have sufficient priests' (Lobinger 1998:86).

Before we went for the Ad Limina last year, I proposed that the ordination of *Viri probati* be one of the topics to discuss with Rome. As was rightly observed, however, we had not discussed it first here at home, and so it was not tabled. I propose that we begin to discuss it because there is a need for it.

In rural Dioceses, some outstations get visited by a priest once a month, which means that if they are lucky, they get 12 Eucharistic celebrations a year, and when some mishaps occur and the priest cannot travel to these communities, they get less. Yet we affirm the Eucharist to be the source and summit of Christian life and a significant feature of our faith that is characteristically catholic, and we wonder why our Catholics are not Catholic enough. How can they be Catholic enough when they are deprived of the major source of Catholic identity, the Eucharist?

So, the primary reason for this proposal is the felt need accompanied by viable theological grounds with existing cases of married priests in the Catholic Church.



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While the *Viri Probati* concept is not original to us, the version Bishop Lobinger proposes is uniquely local and homegrown.

It would be good to share with him as he embraces the sunset of his life that we are building on his thoughts for a possible solution to the felt pastoral need of providing variation of priesthood for a vibrant church.

With these thoughts, I welcome you all and declare the plenary meeting open.