



CONFERENCE EPISCOPALE DU RWANDA

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A LETTER OF THE CATHOLIC BISHOPS OF RWANDA FOR CHRISTIANS IN THE EXTRAORDINARY YEAR OF RECONCILIATION

“CHRIST IS OUR UNITY” ((cf. Jn 17:21))

INTRODUCTION

Brothers and sisters in Christ,

1. The program of three years that we had set is almost at the end. In the year 2016, we celebrated the year of God’s mercy, in 2017 we celebrated a hundred years ’jubilee of priesthood in Rwanda and as we told you, this year 2018, we have started the year of reconciliation.
2. Reconciliation is a long journey that requires time, careful discernment and Spiritual formation. It is our desire to maintain the good step that has been made in this process, and then keep going towards: reconciling ourselves with God, reconciling with ourselves, reconciling with our brothers and sisters, and even with our environment as Pope Francis asked us to do.

PART ONE

RECONCILIATION IS A LONG JOURNEY WITH GOD’S GRACE

Brothers and sisters in Christ,

3. In human history, including our own history in Rwanda, and especially in the 20th Century, for a long time people lost the sense of love. There was terrible injustice based on discrimination, oppression, murder, war, exile, violence and hatred which came to 1994 genocide against the Tutsi, the greatest crime in the history of man. The 1994 genocide against the Tutsi was a measure which showed how much People had lost the sense of humanity and Christianity in Rwanda. Many People indulged themselves in that crime, others were just watching, and did not do anything

to stop such injustice. Human life was completely degraded to the point that killing was seen as something normal.

4. This year of reconciliation is a special grace that God has bestowed on us out of his great love. We were created in God's image (cfr Gen 1:26). When man fell into sin, God sent us his only son to save us. *"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life"* (John 3: 16). The Son of God gathered us into one family and broke down the dividing wall of enmity, through his flesh (Cfr. Ephesians 2:14). He went as far as dying for us on the cross after giving us his body as our spiritual food. The Eucharist is a pact of unity that Christ gave us.

5. We thank all those who were courageous enough not to break their baptism vow and the Eucharist they shared, for being courageous enough to tell the truth. We also thank those who stood up and denounced the evil though they knew they were risking their own lives.

While preparing ourselves for 25 years' commemoration of the genocide against the Tutsi, it is right to look back and see how far we have gone in process of genuine reconciliation leading us to a reliable and lasting relationship fit for God and man.

6. In order to reach this goal of brotherly relationship, everyone must be helped to work hard for the reconciliation of Rwandans: the perpetrators must be helped to confess and ask for forgiveness, the Victims on the other hand must be helped in their journey of forgiving.

7. In order to continue the journey of building reconciliation during this year, there is a need for truth and new mind set so that one does not remain a prisoner of his/her personal sorrowful history and cannot understand the suffering of the others. As Pope Francis says, if a person is closed in himself, he/she has no room for others or for God in his heart or in his life. (EG 2)

PART II

THE ROLE OF THE WORD OF GOD AND THE TEACHINGS OF THE CHURCH IN THE PROCESS OF RECONCILIATION

8. In this process of reconciliation, the word of God and the teachings of the Church have priority in showing us the right thing to be done. The word of God reminds us to reconcile ourselves with God our Father.

9. Sin isolates us from God, and destroys our relationship with him. To live without God makes us face the consequences which can sometimes lead to death (cfr Romans 6:23). To turn away from God and to be unfaithful in the promise that we made to him make us live in fear, constant crisis and anxiety. In his love God does not want us to continue living in fear, nervous and without peace of heart. *“For I find no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies—says the Lord GOD. Turn back and live!”* (Ezekiel 18:32).
10. God is always calling us back for reconciliation whenever we go astray. It was God who made the prodigal son regret the kind of life he was leading, and then made a great decision of going back home to his father (cfr Luke 15:11-32). It was Jesus who looked for Zacheus, and gave him a heart of repentance and then reconciled with the people he had hurt. It was Christ who appeared to Paul and stopped him from being a persecutor and murderer, and be reconciled with him (Cfr. Galatians 2: 20). Today Christ is equally inviting us to repent and become the true witnesses of unity and reconciliation. He says, *“Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, [then] I will enter his house and eat with him, and he with me”* (Cfr. Revelation 3:20). God is looking for us so that He may bring us back in the right way of life, so let us all be reconciled with God (Cfr. 2 Cor 5:20)

The word of God helps a person to reconcile with himself/herself

11. To reconcile with God is the first step of reconciling with yourself. The human conscience has contradictory ideas. But to love God makes a person get Clear understanding of how to go about it. The Almighty God who knows us more than we know ourselves created us with a purpose (Psalm 139). Moreover, God was with us in all that we went through, although there was a time we thought that he abandoned us. To reconcile with yourself is to accept who you are, your origin, your family of origin, region, your ethnic group, without being a threat or a burden to others. Paul embraced his origin but found out that all was a loss compared to knowing Jesus Christ (Cfr Philippians 3:4-7). There can is nothing greater than the unity we have as a community of believers. *“For all of you who were baptized in Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no Jew or Greek, there is no slave or free person, there is no male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus”* (Galatians 3:27-28). Here in Rwanda we can now say that there is no Hutu, no Tutsi, no Twa, no Munyanduga, no Mukiga... because we are all one in Christ. We must do away with that kind old mindset, and welcome a new way of thinking.
12. To reconcile with yourself is to accept all that hurt you, and offer them to Christ, for he calls you to do it when he says: *“Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest”* (Mt11:28). Your sufferings, your injuries and all troubles were taken by Jesus himself on the cross, and his wounds brought you Salvation.

“Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will anguish, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword?... for I am convinced that no creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:35.39). To reconcile yourself with your sorrowful history is to understand that your suffering was not a loss when you consider it with suffering of Jesus Christ that brought salvation to the world. These are included in the message that the Blessed Virgin Mary come to reveal to us at Kibeho.

13. Our brothers and sisters who were killed, and are now with God, wouldn't like us to remain in perpetual sorrow because God takes care of orphans, brings justice to widows, gives permanent home to the lonely and sets prisoners free (Cfr Psalm 8: 6-7). Moreover, they are praying for their brothers and sisters, and even for their perpetrators that peace, unity and reconciliation may prevail so that such evil may not happen again to anybody, somewhere there is hatred, we sow love; where there is sadness, joy; where there is fear, true peace; where there is an intention of revenge, we promote desire for respecting life, and then to uproot that evil by doing good; where there is despair, we promote hope; and, where there is shame we encourage confidence and the dignity that a man has before God.
14. To reconcile with yourself is to acknowledge all good things God has done for you, all good things God has done for others, and then glorify him always. To be always characterized by the fruits of the Holy Spirit who makes you a real Child of God.

The word of God helps a person to reconcile with others

Brothers and sisters in Christ

15. *“The reconciliation is the restoration of relationships between people through the settlement of differences and the removal of obstacles to their relationships in their experience of God's love.”* (Africae Munus n.20). *“Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Settle with your opponent quickly while on the way to court with him”* (Matthew 5:23-25).
16. Christianity should lead us to genuine brotherhood: We know very well that *“the table of the Lord gathers together men and women of different origins, cultures, races, languages and ethnic groups. Thanks to the Body and Blood of Christ, they become truly one. In the Eucharistic Christ, they become blood relations and thus true brothers and sisters, thanks to the word and to the Body and Blood of the same Jesus Christ. This bond of fraternity is stronger than that of human families, than that of our tribes. “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brethren”*

(Rom 8:29). The example of Jesus enables them to love one another and to give their lives for one another, since the love by which one is loved is meant to be shared in deed and in truth” (Africae Manus N°152).

17. In order to reconcile with another person, you must first of all be able to see the goodness in that person. The goodness that God created him with, and forgive him without considering all the injuries he has caused you (Cfr. Luke 11: 2-4) so that the injuries may be overwhelmed by goodness and kindness (Cfr. Romans 12: 19-21). This requires great effort to distinguish the offence from the offender, and this means that you hate the offence the person has committed, but you love the person despite his weakness because in him you see the image of God.
18. Jesus taught his disciples how to pray saying: *"and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (Matthew 6:12)*. There are two major points in this prayer of our Father which we pray often. The first point is that we are all sinners, and need to be forgiven by God. The second point is that God asks us to forgive our brothers when they hurt us. To forgive is to be like God. Therefore *"Be merciful, just as [also] your Father is merciful" (Luke 6: 36)*.

TO RECONCILE WITH OUR ENVIRONMENT

Brothers and sisters in Christ,

19. Before God created man, he first created the environment for him, the sun, the moon, Stars, water and land, animals and plants. He made the earth beautiful in which man would reside and subdue it (Cfr Genesis 1: 1-28). However, the sin of Adam and Eve made the beautiful earth to become bad and the relationship between man and other creatures was ruined.
20. As you know during the wars that happened, and during the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi, people attacked their fellow human beings and killed them, tortured them, houses were rooted and burned down, others were burnt, domestic animals were slaughtered, rivers and bushes were filled with corpses, land was soaked with blood of human beings, domestic tools were turned into weapons for killing people. Reconciliation then, is to bring back harmony among People and all the creatures of God like Prophet Isaiah says *"Then the wolf shall live with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat; the calf and the young lion shall browse together, with a little child to guide them. The cow and the bear shall graze, together their young shall lie down; the lion shall eat hay like the ox. The baby shall play by the viper's den, and the child lay his hand on the adder's lair."* (Isaiah 11: 6-9).

THIRD PART

WHAT WE APPRECIATE, WHAT WE ASK FOR AND WHAT WE ARE PLANNING TO DO.

- 21.** We thank God for the good progress that has been made in the process of reconciliation among Rwandans. The fact that Rwandans believe in God and many of them became Christians, their faithfulness to God enabled them to go through such difficult times and continue to live.
- 22.** After the genocide against the Tutsi and its consequences, prayer had become for many Rwandans a means of meeting their God, and looking for ways of reconciliation.
- 23.** We would like to thank all Christian Communities that have built unity and reconciliation here and there in Dioceses, Parishes up to small Christian Communities. Starting from the extraordinary Synod of 1997 up to 2000, the pastoral activities helped in the healing of their wounded hearts and putting together the then scattered and destroyed families, by promoting peace and justice as a way of helping the survivors of 1994 genocide against the Tutsi.
- 24.** We are grateful for the work done by the Commission of Justice and Peace, Caritas, and other Church structures in helping people reconstructing themselves and building the country.
- 25.** We are grateful for the good guideline the Government put in place in helping Rwandans to reconcile. We thank the Government for stopping the genocide against the Tutsi, the killings and preventing revenge, for introducing Gacaca courts as a way of justice that reconciles, for establishing the Commission for Unity and Reconciliation, for taking care of and assisting the survivors of genocide against the Tutsi and other vulnerable people, for receiving refugees back and resettling them, for establishing the Commission to fight against genocide ideology, for the education for all without discrimination, and for other structures of leadership that built unity and reconciliation of Rwandans. We thank all NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) in general, for the initiative they took in helping Rwandans in this journey of reconciliation.
- 26.** We thank the Christians and other people with good will who sacrificed their lives for others, and became light in the darkness of the difficult times that we went through. Again we thank all Rwandans who made an important step forward in asking for forgiveness from the family members of their victims, and those who forgave the perpetrators.
- 27.** In this journey of building unity and reconciliation of Rwandans we are asking the leaders of our country to continue supporting the process of reconciliation, promoting

truth, justice and peace among Rwandans. We are asking the government to continue helping Rwandans to grow in their mindset so that they can be able to reject evil and dissociate themselves from anybody who would like to use them as tools for doing evil. The Government should find ways of helping people living with injuries and grief because of not being able to bury their people. We are asking the government to remain firm on real justice, to fight against corruption wherever it may be, to be committed and to strengthen human rights, to defend the poor and the vulnerable, to respect human life and dignity and to promote education that promotes human and spiritual values.

28. We are asking priests and religious congregations to be the model of reconciliation, and to be the first ones to mobilize those they are entrusted with. We are asking Christians and other people of good will to support this journey of reconciliation especially by not listening to any person who wants to mislead them into evil ways.
29. During this year of reconciliation, the Catholic Church in Rwanda has decided to continue doing different activities of healing the wounds caused by our history that reached the point of the genocide against the Tutsi.
30. Among the planned activities we intend to try to reach the real understanding of our history and to accept it with Christian faith. We will continue listening to those who are in need. We will form small groups for mutual healing and enable people to share and understand the suffering of each other. We shall again look at the resolutions of Extraordinary Synod on the problem of ethnic divisions in Rwanda and use them in order to build on truth and love.

Brothers and sisters in Christ,

31. We entrust this extraordinary year of reconciliation to the Blessed Virgin Mary Mother of the Word, Our Lady of Kibeho, who calls us to repent, to pray without hypocrisy and to love one another with brotherly love in this journey.

We invoke upon you all God's blessing.

Kigali, January 18th, 2018

Your bishops

The original text in Kinyarwanda translated in English by the General Secretariat of the Episcopal Conference of Rwanda