

## **GREETINGS AND ADDRESS**

**The President, The Honourable THABO MBEKI**

### **Introduction by Bishop Mvume Dandala:**

President Mbeki is known to all of us, a man committed to the renewal of the continent of Africa, the man committed to the renewal of South Africa. Mr President, Sir, I present to you over 4 000 Christian leaders from various sectors of our life in South Africa. Church leaders are wholly represented here. Leaders of various sectors who are Christian are here to pray and for us to think together about the contribution that Christians need to be making in order for this country to become, indeed, what we believe is God's dream for this country in order for us to make a contribution to what should be the total renewal of our beloved continent. We are very grateful for your presence here today. We are very conscience of how tight your schedule is and the fact that you have been able to be here at a time when the African Union is meeting tells us something about your own commitment to ensure that the religious communities fulfil their role in partnership with all the people of goodwill in ensuring that we become what God would have us be. We welcome you, Sir, and I now invite you to come and address us.

### **The President:**

Thank you very much, Bishop Dandala, and distinguished leaders of the Christian faith, our distinguished guest, Mrs Museveni, delegates and ladies and gentlemen. I am truly pleased to be part of this historic conference of the South African Christian Leadership Assembly. I found this on the chair when I was about to sit down and I had a quick look at it. And I want to say thank you very much, on behalf of our government and on behalf of our people, for what you have met here to do. This message is "Turning South Africa Around, Crossing the Divides, Hope for the Future, Commitment to Action, Being Real Christians in the Real South Africa." I think this is the kind of leadership that our country needs. Thank you very much indeed for that.

In 1979, when you met for the first time - that is almost 23 years ago - the founding philosophical basis of this assembly was partly prompted by, and was in response to, the dehumanising and anti-Christian system of apartheid. That system, inhuman in conception and design, was decidedly meant to create and enforce inter-human hatred and divisions predicated and justified on the basis of a false faith. It was derived from a crude and a vulgar misreading of the Word of God, and its architects drew on any number of fictitious justifications they could think of from the Bible which they imposed on multitudes of well-meaning congregations every Sunday. Quite rightly, many of you had the courage of your convictions to stand up against that system, a system that stood against everything that was against the basic tenets of Christianity.

In challenging the fallacies and the falsifications of the quasi-religious system, you are responding to the Christian call never to run away because of danger or shed your responsibilities to combat the false prophets. Many even sacrifice their lives for this cause. Today, your conference is taking place in a different, and indeed quite opposite, setting to the one 23 years ago. You are meeting in a period marked by an unprecedented process of entrenching democracy and a culture of human rights, a period in which the seeds of non-racialism, of non-sexualism and a new set of values that affirm the humanity of us all, are beginning to germinate. It is a time when freedom of religion, like all other constitutionally guaranteed freedoms, is part of the pillars of our democracy.

But, equally, this is an era replete with challenges and difficulties whose origins reflect our collective past. Some of these include the challenges of housing shortages, of unemployment, of crime, of poverty, of illnesses such as Aids and TB. These challenges still face our growing democracy despite the impressive advances that our peoples and government have made.

We all recognise the significant role that Christian leaders have played historically in helping to overthrow apartheid and correct past injustices in our country. Yet the past is still with us, and your support and

involvement to overcome the legacy of that unfortunate past is required now more than ever before. What is required is that, indeed, we would plan and act together.

As we all know, the legacy of apartheid has ravaged our country in very profound ways. We are still confronted by the need for reconciliation among our people. Part of our new struggle is to reconstruct and develop our damaged society. Clearly we cannot say the task of national reconciliation has been completed simply because the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has submitted its final report.

There are still many in our country who, nine years after the demise of apartheid, still do not accept the need for active and a conscious effort to reconcile our peoples. To these people, apartheid has been defeated and there is no need to talk about racism even as its legacy continues to characterise the lives of all of our people. We need to recognise the profound impact that racism has had on our society, materially, psychologically, spiritually and morally. We need to recognise that many South Africans are still hurt and still feel the pain and consequences nine years later. If we deny the fact that we have not dealt with the century-old effects of racism fully, then we would not be able to respond adequately to our challenges. As a result, these consequences may very well be with us for a long time to come.

I believe that, as religious leaders, it would be important to take an active part in that fight to address that legacy, ensuring that to find practical ways and means of reconciling our people and communities such that we would speak in reality about a united and non-racial and a non-sexist society.

Religious organisations, I am convinced, are uniquely placed to work with government to accelerate the process of fighting poverty and helping our society to work for real reconciliation. Twenty-three years ago you bravely, and at great cost to many among you, chose to chart a path through a contextual understanding of your mission. Once again, your mission calls for a reappraisal on the basis of real conditions that face all our people.

Our common base of a sense of South Africanism calls for the intensification of the Church's historic ministry to the poor so that together we can strengthen the values and orientations on which the future of our country depends. These include the values of sharing, of solidarity, of compassion, of sacrifice, of service to the people and deep commitment to work and assist the weak and the poor. Of importance is that we need to work together to infuse these attributes to all our people so that we begin to create South Africans whose main characteristics are honesty, integrity, service to fellow human beings. Together we should strengthen the work that we are doing, like the ongoing campaign of vukuzentele (rise up and do it for yourself) and letsema (voluntarily working in co-operation with each other).

In the past, the Church has produced many outstanding leaders. Should the Church stop playing this role, our future would, indeed, be poorer. As leaders in various fields, your service to all our people remains of critical importance, and we are very happy indeed that you continue to play this crucial role and we affirm and applaud your dedication to programmes that continue to better the lives of the people.

I am confident that SACLA will continue to look at ways of collaborating with many sectors of society, both within the Christian fold and outside it, and find mechanisms of engaging government and other organs of civil society so as to increase collectively our impact on nation building and the transformation of our society. Further, we would like to urge the Church to maintain an open line of communication with the government and to continue to be vocal on moral and national matters of importance.

Many of the leaders here were part of the processes of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. As I have just said, that report has now been handed over to the government which is acting on those recommendations from the commission. But, at the same time, the process of reconciliation has not ended with the finalisation of the work of the commission. We would, therefore, urge our leaders in the Christian faith to lend a hand as we continue with this challenging task. We make this request confident that it will find resonance within the ministry of the Church and that the various congregations that make up your membership have many committed and able leaders who are ready to take this work forward.

Reconciliation is a process, and so is healing, especially when multiple victims of apartheid shared time and space with their former tormentors. The spiritual deliverance we are capable of effecting to ease the state of our nation is immeasurable.

I appreciate indeed your kindness for affording me the opportunity to share this brief moment with you and

wish the Assembly success.

Thank you very much.

Prayer for the President (By Bishop Bethlehem Nopece):

Blessed Lord, you are a wonderful God. You govern our world and you have given authority to people at various times and in various places in our history. I ask you now to pour your blessings upon our President. Grant him wisdom, grant him understanding, grant him innate discernment. Grant him, oh Lord, that inner strength which he needs in order to fulfil and accomplish his duties. Grant him, Lord, the spirit of knowledge and the spirit of true Godliness and Lord, the Spirit of your Son, Jesus Christ, that he may continue with his task. Make him safe by night and day and protect him as he goes out and as he comes in, so that, Lord, this country may be a better place to live in. Bless those who work with him and bless those who advise him, and grant them the same wisdom so that Lord, in this country, everyone may enjoy good life through their efforts and also through our assistance, co-operation and fellowship. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Thanks to the President:

It has already been said, Mr President, that it is a great honour and privilege for us to have you here today and, indeed, we appreciate it. A leadership which has eyes for all various sectors of people is greatly appreciated. We really appreciate your leadership in South Africa today and especially in the way you conduct things and in the burdens which you carry. You have said here that it would be good for the Church to plan and act together with the government, and in your conclusion you said the lines of communication between us and the government should be kept open. This we promise and we shall take an undertaking to keep this intact because the truth is that we are building together.

And we want to thank you so much for calling us to continue the process of reconciliation. Yes, indeed, as you saw on the paper which was on your chair, it is our burden to reconcile our people, so that everyone can live together in peace, and that colour may diminish among us. Not only that, but also that mutual respect and honour, which is due to one another, may be given, and that this country may be built in its economy so that people may have food, jobs and houses, schooling, access to medicine and that they may feel safe in the middle of the night. It is our burden even as it is your burden.

As the Lord gives us this opportunity of moving on together, we want to assure you as this assembly, that this we will undertake to do under God, and, indeed, when you said we must be vocal in moral issues and also in other issues that affect us, we thank you for that recognition, because the power to prophesy and the opportunity to do so, and the privilege which God gives us is great and belongs to Him alone.

We wish you and all your entourage safe journey back to where your duties call you today. In our churches, there is a slot where we pray for the President and we provide for those in authority.

May God continue to pour His blessings upon you, and that you may increase all the more and in transforming not only South Africa but Africa as a whole. We are behind you, Mr President.

God bless you.