

Responsible Preparation for the South African Local Government Election.

A Pastoral Letter of the Catholic Bishops of Southern Africa to the Catholic Community and people of goodwill.

4 March 2011.

The forthcoming municipal elections present us once again with an opportunity to influence the direction our country is taking. We are grateful to Almighty God that we can confidently anticipate a free and fair election process, the eighth in our 17 years of democracy.

Every citizen has the right to vote, to participate in the choosing of public representatives, and to give a mandate to those entrusted with governance. But it is more than simply a right – it is a duty which rests on every eligible voter. Each of us must use our vote wisely and thoughtfully, in order to help ensure that our cities, towns and districts are run by honest and competent people, to the benefit of all, especially the poor and the vulnerable.

When we vote in a municipal election we are in effect passing a judgment about the way in which some of our most basic needs are being met. Are we satisfied with the provision of services such as water and electricity? Are our streets and public facilities clean and safe? Are we treated with respect and courtesy by municipal officials?

The answers to these questions can help us to decide whether to vote for the same people or party as before, or whether it is time to give different candidates a chance. As we said before the national elections in 2009, 'our first loyalty must be to our fellow citizens, and to the good of our country as a whole, not to a specific party or leader.'

In these elections people living in cities and towns will be able to vote both for a party and for individual candidates standing as ward councillors. These are the people who should be in very close touch with your day-to-day concerns and living conditions. They should have a strong track record of community involvement and service and should be people with high moral standards and integrity.

Unfortunately, many public representatives in South Africa choose to enter the world of politics because they want power, wealth and status, and not because they are committed to serving the public. This tendency harms our democracy and results in us as citizens not enjoying its benefits. It leads to corruption, nepotism and self-advancement, at the cost of service-delivery and the well-being of our communities.

Such people do not deserve our support. If we continue to vote for them, we will have only ourselves to blame if our municipal services crumble and our neighbourhoods are not properly maintained.

Some questions may be useful in helping us to decide which party and ward candidate to vote for:

0. Has your existing ward councillor held a public meeting in your area? Were you invited to it? Has he or she ever explained to the community what work they have done to benefit the neighbourhood? Have things improved or got worse in your area since the last municipal election?
0. Who are the candidates for your ward in the forthcoming elections? Have any of them visited your house or dropped off a pamphlet or other information?
0. Which political parties have made the effort to visit your area? Have any of them asked for your suggestions and comments on the way your council is operating?
0. Do the various candidates live in the ward where they are standing for election? Do they have a record of service to the community and involvement in its affairs? Have they shown that they really understand and care about the needs of the community?
0. Have any of the candidates been involved in corruption or other crooked activities? Have they changed parties a number of times, simply in order to hang on to their jobs? Do you think any of the candidates have been put forward just because their party 'owes' them a position?

The answers to these questions will tell us which candidates genuinely want to serve us, and which ones only want to serve themselves and advance their own political careers. The answers will also help us to see which political parties truly have our interests at heart.

Let us reflect prayerfully on the opportunity that we have to make South Africa a better country. Let us remember that our brothers and sisters in many places on our continent are still denied the right to vote freely and fairly; it is not something that we should ever take for granted.

Finally, let us place these elections, and the well-being of our nation, in God's hands:

Lord, we pray that our forthcoming elections may bring about a deepening of our democracy, and that we will carry out our duties as citizens responsibly and with respect for the rights of others. May the choices we make bring hope to the poor, unity to all our people, and a brighter future for our children. Through Christ our Lord. Amen

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