



Dear friends,

Another Christmas. What is the difference with last year's? Is there more peace and happiness in the world and in South Africa? I would say 'not', looking at the present situation: civil war in Syria, ongoing turmoil in Libya and Egypt, no real peace yet in Soudan even after the division And so on. Also South Africa is still plagued with the same evil of bad governance resulting in many service delivery protests and corruption highlighted by an ecumenical campaign in which also the Catholic Church in South Africa joined. The second African Synod came out with a strong invitation for justice, peace and reconciliation but it seemed to have fallen on deaf ears. In former president Nelson Mandela, who passed away just recently, we had an icon of leadership – together with some of his other companions in the struggle against apartheid – and a beacon of light, but, unfortunately many of the present leaders do not follow suit.

What is then the good news about this Christmas? It is about the Christ-child born in Bethlehem lovingly received by Mary and Joseph, opening his arms to embrace the whole world.

Also Bethlehem Diocese got its blows. The tragic death of Fr. Tshepo (which means hope) Motaung, who had only 5 years of Priesthood, hit us all: his family, the Bethlehem Priests, the parish community which he served and the whole Diocese, myself included. I had just made a few transfers and re-opened a second parish where Fr. Tshepo was working. His death forced me to make another transfer which especially affected one Priest very much. This young Priest had been already involved in the first transfer and now had to move again. Next to that, there were and are many other challenges. One of them is the conversion of an independent school (which can no longer survive financially) into a public (government) school on church property while still trying to keep its Catholic ethos. Negotiating with government structures is a very slow and at time frustrating business.

There were of course also some very joyful events like the closing of the Year of Faith ceremony in the park in front of the cathedral. We first had planned to have it in a stadium but at the very end the deal with the municipality fell through as a soccer match had to be played there the same day. But after all, the park in front of the cathedral was much more convenient. The weather, though very threatening – there even fell some big drops while we were doing the procession with the Blessed Sacrament – did not let us down. We were even honored with the presence of the Apostolic Nuncio coming all the way from Pretoria.

This year I could manage to visit all the parishes usually starting on Friday evening till Sunday afternoon. It helped me to have quite a good picture of the diocese with its strengths and weaknesses. It was also an occasion to meet the Priests personally and encourage them in their pastoral work. This year my message to the parish congregations

was about the nature of the Church as family using the vision of 'stewardship' with the notions of time, talents and treasures, using them well not just for one's own profit but for the common good both in the natural family as in the new family of the Church.

On Bishops' Conference level I was asked to chair the department of Evangelization which is now involved with a gradual preparation towards a new pastoral plan for the Church in Southern Africa in the form of an interdiocesan consultation. In this department there is also a family desk which will have to develop more as from 2014 onwards there will be a big focus on marriage and family life, 2014 being the international year of the family and the Church having an extra-ordinary synod on marriage and family in October.

One year has passed; another year begins and the mission, which the Lord has entrusted to all of us, continues. With our renewed 'yes' to His call, and, endowed with His grace, there is hope that 2014 will bear good fruit.

In 2014 the Bishops of Southern Africa are all invited to meet the Pope just after Easter. After this visit I shall prolong my stay in Europe having my home leave until Pentecost.

A blessed Christmas and New Year,

+Jan De Groef, M.Afr

Bishop of Bethlehem, South Africa