

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN SEYCHELLES



PASTORAL LETTER: CHRISTMAS 2024

Pastoral letter for Christmas 2024.

'GO IN THE PEACE OF CHRIST.'

1. At Christmas we celebrate with great joy the birth of Jesus, *the Prince of Peace*. On this occasion, I invite you to make this prayer, by the mother of an autistic child, our prayer: *'May my heart be, O Jesus, your Bethlehem.'*
2. Indeed, dear brothers and sisters of Seychelles, everything starts from the heart, 'the deepest centre of the person'. Let us welcome in each of us, in each of our families and in Seychellois society this peace, Jesus, which is God's greatest gift offered to humanity, torn apart by so much hatred and division. 'Let Christ dwell in your hearts through faith; be rooted in love, established in love', the apostle Paul exhorts us. Ephesians 3 vs 17.
3. So, how can we be peacemakers with and through Jesus, both personally and as a community - diocese, parish, family, movement, service - in this year 2025, when Seychellois society will be experiencing such an important moment with the election of the President of the Republic and the members of the legislative assembly for a 5-year term?
4. The peace we have received - Jesus - challenges us in our way of living politics, in living the electoral campaign, in order to be consistent between our words and our actions, our prayer and our attitudes, our faith and our daily life.
5. Our commitments, including political ones, have their source in Jesus, the Risen One, whom we welcome in a special way at Mass. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, communion with Jesus - the bread that came down from heaven - reconciles us with God our Father, with each other, with ourselves and with creation.
6. At every Mass, we discover with gratitude (Eucharist) that we are all, regardless of our political colour, the colour of our skin, our profession etc., invited around the same table to share the same meal, being all brothers and sisters in Christ and children of the same God and Father. This is not just a figure of speech! Indeed, 'There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all', says the apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians (4 vs 4). So, in the name of our common source, we can never consider our political adversaries as enemies. 'Annou pa viv latitid Kaen vizavi nou frer.' If we want to be in keeping with our Christian vocation, we cannot cultivate feelings of hatred and contempt for those who hold political views different from our own. We must not tear apart the social body of Seychelles in the name of electoral ambitions. The aim of politics is noble: it is to promote a vision for society. Adversary with different choices yes, enemy no, because we are brothers and sisters in humanity. What unites us - 'One God and Father' but also belonging to the people of Seychelles - is far more important than our political differences, even if they are legitimate.
7. *Kyrie eleison* for our verbal and physical violence and for many other provocations

that tear apart the social body of our society and the communion of the Church.

Christe eleison when we consider those who do not share our political opinions as enemies and when we erect barriers between us, even within the celebration of Mass.

Kyrie eleison for news published on social networks that does not advance the legitimate debate necessary in a democracy, but simply aims to damage the reputation of our opponents, their families and their private lives.

8. Listening to the Word of God, listening to one another, even when we disagree, is at the heart of the biblical faith.

Of course, the Word of God does not give us instructions on who to vote for. That's why the Church respects each person's conscience in their choice. Everyone's conscience is sacred. No-one, no political party or association, can manipulate or buy a person's conscience, for example with money or alcohol / drugs. While Church teaching forcefully reminds us that voting is a duty for every adult citizen, there can be no voting instructions from the hierarchy (bishops, priests and deacons) or from the leaders of Church movements and services. Voting, which is a civic duty, is a personal decision, made freely and conscientiously, that is, without being subject to any pressure. I invite all parishes, movements and services of the Catholic Church to be vigilant regarding the free choice of each individual. Those directly involved in politics have a duty of discretion to withdraw from their ecclesial responsibilities during the election campaign. I'm thinking of those who have responsibilities within economic or pastoral councils, as well as within services such as liturgy, charities or training.

9. On the other hand, the Word of God, contextualised by the teaching of the Church, is a precious source of enlightenment that educates and enlightens our conscience, offering us points of reference and requirements for promoting, through politics, a more just and fraternal society. The Holy Scriptures provide us with teachings, but above all they enable us to contemplate God's way of acting, especially that of his only son, at the heart of human history as we journey towards the Kingdom.

- 9a. Thus, the Holy Scriptures warn us against the various forms of idolatry. *'You shall have no other gods besides me. You shall not make any idols.'* Exodus 20 vs 3-4a. Politics is certainly very important in the life of any human society because it organises the life of a country through legislation and good governance. According to Pope Pius XI, *'Politics is the highest form of charity'*. Let us thank the men and women who engage in politics in order to put themselves at the service of society. Let us encourage Christians, especially young people, to become involved in politics in order to embody Gospel values in full human form. However, under no circumstances can politics become a religion, and even less so can it take the place of God. Didn't Jesus tell us: *'Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's'*? Luke 20 vs 25. *'Politik i enportan me i pa kapab vin nou bondye.'*

- 9b. Every person, especially the lowly and the poor, is of inestimable value in the eyes of the Lord. God cares for his people, as the Bible tells us: *'He surrounds them, he nurtures them, he guards them like the apple of his eye'* (Deuteronomy 32 vs 10). Every voter must be vigilant to ensure that candidates and their political programs, without demagoguery, promote social

justice, a policy that protects the family and our traditional values, the right to a good standard of education and health care for all, thus respecting the rights and dignity of the human person from conception to death. Under no circumstances *pa kapab enterese zis avek ganny vot bann dimoun aze, vilnerab e frazil, san ki zot enterese osi pou pran byen swen avek sityasyon ki sa bann dimoun i ladan, sirtou ler zot dan bann moman izolman e lasoufrans!*

- 9c. The parable of the Good Samaritan tells us how he stopped and cared for a man left half-dead by the side of the road by robbers. His compassion was translated into concrete actions: he gave emergency care to the injured man, put him on his own horse to take him to an inn, and made sure he was looked after until he recovered. This Good Samaritan is ultimately Jesus himself! We are all called, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to be the heart, the mouth and the hands, the courage and the will of Jesus, and so fulfil our human vocation.

In our Seychellois context, how can we fail to think of so many of our brothers and sisters on the sidelines of our society, deeply affected by drug addiction?

How can we put the brigands who are the drug barons (gro pwason) out of business? How can we take care of our brothers and sisters who are enslaved by drugs and wounded by life, through therapy and rehabilitation? How can we support them and their families to help them escape this hell? These are the questions facing society as a whole. It is a complex and difficult battle, because this drug mafia has very powerful financial resources, capable of corrupting the souls of so many people tempted by the lure of easy money. These are questions with no simple answers. Let these vital issues be at the heart of the debates during the next campaign, by asking the different candidates and parties for concrete commitments over the next 5 years so as to clean up our society.

- 9d. The Social Teachings of the Church, including Pope Francis' encyclical "Laudato si", remind us that the earth is a gift from God for all people. We are the custodians, not the owners, of this earth in order to develop and protect it. In Genesis 2 vs 15 we read that *'The Lord God took the man and led him into the Garden of Eden to work it and to care for it'*. Yet we sometimes act like predators to the detriment of the respect for our environment. A country's development cannot be measured solely by its economic results, even if these are important indicators. This is why any policy worthy of the name must promote an integral ecology. The common good is superior to the interests of individuals or influential groups. A major challenge for the Seychelles archipelago is to manage the land and islands so that every Seychellois can live in a favourable environment. It is also essential to protect this exceptional heritage for future generations of Seychellois. *Ki Seselwa pa vin lokater dan son prop pei !'*

Wouldn't it be important to provide green spaces, playgrounds and meeting places in every district? We need to get away from the logic of everything being built in concrete. We are therefore invited to ask the candidates and political parties about their land use programs.

- 9d. I This is how we understand the profound meaning of the offertory at Mass. We offer the bread and wine, fruits of the earth and of human labour, to be transformed. The earth is thus, through the power of the Holy Spirit and the

work of humans, in the process of giving birth to the Kingdom that came through Jesus who died and rose again.

10. The tree of the cross indicates the passage toward a world where everything is consecrated. (D. Rimaud) Jesus, broken, bread, gave his whole life on the cross. By listening to the teachings of Jesus and contemplating his way of exercising power, we are invited to live power, including political power, as a service. Jesus, the Lord, the King of the universe, washed the feet of his disciples on Maundy Thursday, and he continues to wash the feet of all humankind, regardless of their beliefs or religions. *'The Son of Man,'* Jesus tells us, *'did not come to be served but to serve.'* Mark 10 vs 45. Let us ask the Holy Spirit for true discernment and vigilance to ensure that the candidates we vote into political office have this sense of service, especially towards the poor and vulnerable. Let their accession to political power not be a springboard for their own glory but a service to the common good, that is to say the welfare of all. We, the electorate, must never use our vote or our influence to obtain personal advantage and thus encourage the corruption that plagues so many societies.
11. 'Let nothing be lost.' At the multiplication of the bread, we see that Jesus is attentive to the hungry crowd - hungry for teaching and hungry for bread. By soliciting the contribution of a young boy who had 5 loaves and two fish, Jesus was able to feed a crowd of 5,000 people by sharing. He invited his disciples to work by gathering the crowd into groups of about fifty, distributing the loaves and fish and collecting what was left so that nothing would be lost.

A democracy is dynamic if everyone is asked to contribute. A society thrives if work and effort are valued over handouts and laissez-faire. In Seychelles we have the opportunity to vote every 5 years. However, a living democracy requires that citizens are regularly consulted and involved as much as possible in the decision-making process, in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity. This way of involving as many people as possible, especially the voice of the poorest, depends not only on politicians but also on citizens, who are all too often passive. Another pillar of a living democracy is the independence of the judiciary, but also of intermediary bodies such as the Central Bank, NGOs, trade unions, etc. Freedom of the written and spoken press is also essential for a living democracy, so that anyone can express themselves freely and without fear of reprisals or ostracism. On all these aspects, I invite voters to inform themselves, to question the candidates, before making their choice in good conscience. Let us make sure that nothing is lost in the democratic process.

12. The last words of the bishop or priest presiding at Mass celebrated by the whole community are: *'Go in the peace of Christ'*.
 - 12a. This means: you who have partaken of communion with Jesus through the word and the bread of life, through this moment of fraternity and common prayer, be with him and follow in his footsteps, with the breath of the Holy Spirit, builders of peace, especially during the forthcoming election campaign, and this by your way of speaking and acting, respecting others.
 - 12b. This also means that by partaking the body of Christ we form one body, as the apostle Paul tells us, that is to say one family. Go and may our Christian communities be prophetic signs of this communion by working for harmony - the fruit of peace - throughout this election campaign. Not by watering down

debates and sweeping differences under the carpet, but by accepting differences, by living political debate with respect for the dignity of each person and the diversity of political opinions.

In this way, we will be 'Pilgrims of Hope on the road to peace', as Pope Francis invites us to be during the Holy Year, which will take place throughout 2025.

These are my wishes for the people of Seychelles for the new year 2025.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read '+ Alain Harel'.

+ Alain Harel
BISHOP OF PORT-VICTORIA

21st December 2024