

Bishops in southern Africa take fight against corruption into the pews

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The bishops of southern Africa said corruption is rampant in the region and called on all Catholics to take a pledge not to pay or offer bribes.

"If you experience corruption, report it," the bishops of South Africa, Botswana and Swaziland urged in a pastoral letter, noting that "bribery, collusion and all other forms of corruption thrive in conditions of secrecy and concealment, and they persist because we allow them to continue."

Corruption "destroys our trust" and harms the community, they said, noting that "when bribery becomes a way of life for civil servants, business people or church personnel, their real responsibilities are put aside in pursuit of making money for themselves."

The Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference letter, "A Call to Examine Ourselves in the Widespread Practice of Corruption," was read in churches in mid-October and forms part of the conference's program to expose corruption.

Statistics highlight the "very serious problem we have regarding corruption" in southern Africa, the bishops' letter said, noting reports that "almost half of the citizens in our countries of southern Africa admit to having paid a bribe, mostly to police officers and government officials."

Everyone "must do something within their power to tackle corruption," it said.

A "change of heart" is required as well as examination of "our own attitudes as citizens within the family, society and the church," the bishops said.

Corruption is theft from the poor," they said, noting that "money diverted into the pockets of corrupt people could have been spent on housing for the homeless, on medicine for the sick or for other needs."

The bishops urged Catholics to "pledge to ourselves that we will not pay a bribe or offer one, no matter how serious or important it may seem to be at the time."

Whenever someone pays to jump the line for housing or for a permit, everyone else is pushed back, "especially those who are defenseless: the elderly, young children, refugees, single mothers," they said.

Corruption "is not the government's problem alone, it is our problem," the bishops said, noting that they aim to "give greater attention to the damage caused in society and in the church by rampant corruption, and encourage all to work towards its eradication."

Corruption "leads us to become cynical about each other, to distrust the very people we regard as our leaders and as honorable people," they said.

All of South Africa's major infrastructure projects "smell of corruption," Dominican Fr. Mike Deeb, director of the bishops' justice and peace department, said in a telephone interview Monday from Pretoria.

Corruption has "become normal for many people," Deeb said, noting that "we seem to have a culture of 'if you can't beat them, join them.'"

Bishop Abel Gaba of Kimberley, South Africa, chairman of the justice and peace department, said inadequate oversight over funds used for South Africa's new toll-road system is leading to corruption and fraud.

"Although some of this corruption has been exposed by the limited investigations" conducted by the state's competition commission, "much more needs to be done to uncover who benefited from the implementation of this costly and highly inefficient system," he said in a statement Friday.

The toll-road legislation allows for the electronic collection of tolls and the prosecution of those who fail to pay.

"Our appeals to government to investigate the source of this 'bad smell' have fallen on deaf ears, leading many to suspect that the rot and decay has permeated our public institutions," Gaba said.

He called on South Africa's political leaders to abandon "this scheme that has seized control of the main arterial routes that link our centers of commerce and industry -- allowing only those who can afford to pay to continue using them."

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