

UNION OF THE CATHOLIC AFRICAN ADDRESS
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SCHOENSTATT, CAPE TOWN

KEY NOTE OPENING ADDRESS

Thank you very much for this opportunity to address you. It is absolutely wonderful to be with you all this morning at the opening of this very important conference. The theme is most important: The Role of the Media in the Promotion of Integral Human Development. Perhaps before I go further and can introduce what I am going to say, I should apologise for the time of Holy Mass this morning. I see in the programme that Mass was scheduled for 6 am this morning, but I received a different programme which put the Mass at 8.30am. This is a normal mix-up, but in a light-hearted way it is an indication of the world we live in today in which people try to present “alternative news”, or “alternative facts”. Frequently they are trying to deflect from the truth and sometimes their “alternative facts” are downright lies.

If we are going to talk about Integral Human Development, the very basis for integral development is truth and so it is important for us to try and capture this elusive reality which is called “truth”. At this stage I would like to know from you who is in South Africa for the first time? If you could just put up your hand....That is a fair number of people. And who is in Cape Town for the first time? Thank you very much, that is quite a number of people.

Now I would like you to look out of the windows. It is an absolutely beautiful day and as you look out into the garden you are also looking onto Table Mountain – you see this beautiful, beautiful scenery. Cape Town is an absolutely beautiful city, with beautiful resources. We have this wonderful mountain coming straight out of the sea, we have the peninsula and the sea surrounding Cape Town. Looking across this garden – and there are so many gardens like it in Cape Town, as well as forests and spectacular scenic drives – we have an abundance of flora and fauna which are unique to this area of the world, found nowhere else in the world. It is a beautiful setting of natural beauty and resources blessed by God.

Keep on looking out into the garden. Now let me tell you that Cape Town is ranked among the ten most dangerous cities in the world – if I am not mistaken it is ranked as number 8¹. Can you believe that, as you look out there? So where does the truth lie? If you come to Cape Town and only see that beauty, you will go back and say that Cape Town is the most beautiful, tranquil, peaceful city that you have ever been to in the world. Realities differ. One of the reasons why we rank among the most dangerous cities in the world is because of gangsterism. Many parts of this city are plagued by gangsterism and are very dangerous places because of the gangs. And the main motivation behind the gangs is drugs – drugs are their business. There is also a lot of other substance abuse that is life for so many.

And we might say, “OK, these gangs – who are they?” Again, if you look at the surface of things, just as we looked out the window at that beauty without seeing beyond it, you might be tempted to say, well they are the Coloured people (“coloured” in South Africa means mixed race). You may say that because, by and large, the gangs are made up of Coloured people, although not absolutely true, and they seem to be the main drug runners. But, if you want to look beyond the surface of things then you might say “well...why, why has this happened in this way?”

And eventually you will come to the conclusion that the reality that is behind all of this is the fact that South Africa had a political system called ‘apartheid’. And communities that were peaceful, that were harmonious, where people cared for each other, looked after each other, looked after each other’s children, were totally disrupted because they were considered to be in an area that would be for “white” people – which means a person like me. Of course, there is no such thing as a “white” person, or purity of blood. It is a myth. They were considered to be in an area that was for “whites” and so they were forcibly removed and put into various different places where other people who had also been displaced were dumped, and so the whole social fabric of our society was broken down.

But if you do not look beyond the superficial, then you will think that these gangs and the violence exist because of the “Coloured” people. You will think that there must be something wrong with them, with that particular group of people, if you like. It would be like looking out the window and saying that Cape Town is the most peaceful and tranquil city in the world – but if you scratch beyond the surface you find a different reality.

1 <https://www.escapehere.com/destination/10-most-dangerous-cities-in-the-world-to-travel/3/> or also see <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/most-dangerous-cities-in-the-world.html>; and also <https://camissapeople.wordpress.com/2013/05/18/the-story-of-camissa/>

When I was growing up in South Africa, as a white South African, we learnt a particular history. Of course, not only whites learnt this history but, because the government controlled education - “black” education, “coloured” education and “Indian” education, all the classifications we used to have – everybody learnt this history. We learnt that basically South African history started in 1652 when Jan van Riebeeck arrived here in Cape Town as part of the Dutch East India company and they decided to set up a refreshment station for those ships of the Dutch East India company going to the East – they needed to stock up on water, they needed to stock up on vegetables and fruit. Of course, we also learnt that the Portuguese explorers, like Bartholomew Dias and Vasco da Gama, had passed through the Cape before then. They had erected the typical Crosses, and so on. But according to the history we learnt, not much happened between those stop-overs and when the first settlement occurred in 1652. That’s when South African history began, or so we were taught.

Of course that is not the reality at all! There were people living here, there have been people living here for centuries. They are the Khoi people. The Khoi speak a very difficult language. I don’t know whether you have ever heard the Khoi language – I wish I could speak a sentence so you could hear what it sounds like. It is made up of many clicks, a whole series of clicks. Many South African languages have been influenced by the Khoi language and some of the clicks have been adopted – for example in this area, people speak Xhosa and use a number of clicks – this was due to the influence of the Khoi people.

But the presence of the Khoi people and their history was never conveyed to us in our history lessons - our history as South Africans began in 1652. We also learnt that Jan van Riebeeck and the Dutch found the Khoi people rather impossible to work with, they were described as being smelly, dirty, uncooperative and untravelled. Of course, now that South Africa is a free country we now know that this history is distorted and inaccurate.

We know from records² that ships were passing Cape Town frequently from at least 1601. I am open to correction, in the 50 years between 1601 and 1652, more than a thousand ships had passed through the Cape. Interestingly enough, from some of the records of those ships, the Khoi are described as being very helpful, cooperative people who were willing to help. Some even travelled

2 See for example: <https://camissapeople.wordpress.com/camissa/> Most of this part of the talk is taken from this article.

on the ships to other parts of the world. The original people of Cape Town are the Khoi who, sadly even until this day, remain quite marginalized even in our new dispensation.

The Khoi had a name for Cape Town. Jan van Riebeeck being Dutch, of course, called it “Kaapstad” - but Cape Town was originally called “Camissa”. I wonder if you have heard the name “Camissa” before? It means the place of “sweet waters”. This is because Cape Town, in those days, had four rivers and 36 springs. Cape Town is built around Table Mountain which literally rose from the sea. Any cold front moving in from the ocean would hit into Table Mountain and the clouds and mist would condense and thus provide an abundance of water. It is ironic that we have just been through this incredible water crisis in Cape Town. We were warned that “day zero” was coming – that was the day that Cape Town would run out of water. Previously we were using something like 800 million litres of water a day. This has been brought down to something like 560 million litres, I think. So we’ve had this massive water crisis and we took this at face value. Yet we hear that about 8.8 million litres of water is going into the sea everyday. The explanation for this is that when the British took control of the Cape after the Dutch, the rivers and springs became very polluted – people were chucking their rubbish and garbage into the rivers. They became stinky, smelly and the water somewhat unusable. In the 1860’s there was an outbreak of bubonic plague and the British authorities believed that the polluted rivers were the cause of the plague. So they made the decision to build up the city over the waters, to cover them in underground. So they built up over the waters and channelled the water into the sea. If you care to come back to Cape Town in the future there are tours that take you down so that you can walk along and explore these now underground streams. They pass right under the city, near to the station and Castle. The waters still come from down the mountain and flow into the sea³. The Dutch used the rivers and streams for their own needs, but also for the gardens they created to grow vegetables and fruit for the ships passing through, as well as to fill the water tanks of the ships. They also created waterways to transport people and goods – these were called “grachts” and many of the names in Cape Town still reflect that era of the waterways, such as Buitengracht Street, Heerengracht, and so on. There is a movement today to try and restore these waterways which now, of course, would be underground. If they succeed we will have an “underground” or “metro”, that consists of boats rather than trains!

In any case, we’ve had this tremendous crisis in Cape Town of a shortage of water and the danger of running out of water. Yet at least 8.8 million litres of water was running into the sea. Some

3 <https://www.capetownmagazine.com/cape-towns-underground-tunnels>; <http://www.reclaimcamissa.org>

companies/enterprises have made use of the water. When the Cape Town stadium was constructed for the 2010 World Cup, water was taken from the underground streams. These streams still provide water for the Stadium, the Greenpoint Track and the Mouille Point beach area. The Wooltru building in Cape Town taps into the streams for their aircon and toilet needs. The Mount Nelson, a well-established and somewhat colonial style hotel, also makes use of water running down from Table Mountain.

In presenting all of this, I am simply trying to make the point that things are not often what they seem to be on the surface. It is a bit like walking through the streets of the city centre and being unaware of the quantities of water running beneath our feet. We can't take things on face value, we have to scratch deeper, to find the real problems and the real causes of those problems. "Truth" is something very elusive – we can never capture truth in its entirety. But in this era of "dumbing down" when comments, opinions and thoughts are contained in a tweet, on facebook or blogs, they are very often superficial, with little substance, thought or depth.

I hope you enjoy your stay in this beautiful city of Cape Town. The city is beautiful and the people are beautiful too. I hope you will appreciate how God has blessed us with such amazing natural beauty. And yet, our society and our people are scarred. The reality of our society is a distorted reality. We have superbly wealthy people and incredibly poor people living side by side. Amidst all this natural beauty, our society is scarred because of drug abuse, alcohol abuse, gangsterism, violence and murder. The "murder capital" of South Africa is just a few kilometers from here in a place called Nyanga, where we have St Mary's parish – it has the highest rate of murder in the country.

Please reflect on this because I think there is a lesson in it. Reflect on how God has given us so much, so many good things, wonderful resources but it is we, humans, who scar it, distort it and destroy it. This is true of the environment, for example, the way in which we waste and abuse water. It is true of how we treat our fellow human beings – how we degrade people, treat them as second-class citizens. We wound them, strip them of their human dignity and their sense of self-worth, We as a Church and you, as journalists, have such an important role to play in order to bring truth to people, as best we can, not superficially but scratching beneath the surface. To do so is to work for the restoration of creation as God meant it to be. It is to work for Integral Human Development.

I wish you all God's blessings for a successful Conference and I hope that you will enjoy your stay in Cape Town.

+Stephen Brislin
Archbishop of Cape Town

10th September 2018

This key note address was transcribed from a voice recording