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Diocese of Penang

A Message in preparation for the 13th General Elections from Bishop Sebastian Francis, Diocese of Penang to the Catholic community in Kelantan, Kedah, Perlis, Perak and Penang and all the people of God.

I begin by citing from the speech by Pope Francis' during his public audience with journalists held a few days after his election. He said "The Church is a spiritual, rather than a political institution". The Pope also added, "No one can understand the Church without understanding its spiritual purpose" and that "Christ is the pastor of the Church but his presence passes through the freedom of human beings."

To me, this means that, although the Church does not involve herself in party politics as such, she has the duty to speak up on all areas of human life, including politics. It also means that being spiritual, the Church, as people of God, has the right and responsibility to speak up for a just society. In all religious traditions, spirituality is primarily a personal relationship between God and the individual. However, spirituality will also have consequences on the human, social, political, economical and religious dimensions of an individual. Therefore, this is a God given right given not only to institutions, but also to every person.

The Church must act and safeguard this right which allows for the freedom of conscience, responsible freedom of expression and freedom of religion. Freedom of conscience, which is formed by divine teaching, freedom of expression and freedom of religion are supreme gifts given by God Himself and the reason why all people can and must speak up.

And why does the Church have to speak out for a just society? Again I quote Pope Francis. In his homily at the inaugural Mass, he said the Church must exclaim and "embrace especially the poorest, weakest and the least important..." She does this because she represents Jesus Christ in the world today.

The upcoming 13th General Election is critical and important for the growth of the democratic structure in Malaysia. The last general election in 2008 and the ensuing 5 years have shown us its importance of having multiple choices which serves as a check and balance.

In the last few years, and more so, in recent times, people have received much gifts and money from the government of the day at both Federal and State level.

Please exercise your duty and freedom of conscience as formed by divine teaching, which transcends all financial, economic and social benefits offered to you. Therefore, I join all groups, movements and organisations, whether political, social and religious, to speak up for a free, just and fair election.

We must also pray seriously for the nation at this crucial point of time. I pray that God will provide us with a government made up of political leaders who are just, honest and incorrupt. I quote from the recent circular by the Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM) dated 18th July, 2012 entitled "VOTE WISELY; VOTE FOR A BETTER MALAYSIA":

"We appeal to all Christians to remain faithful, that in our exercise of leadership and stewardship in obedience to God's Word, that we exercise our duty to nation building to vote as well as to soak in prayer the nation's well being; ahead, during, and after the general elections."

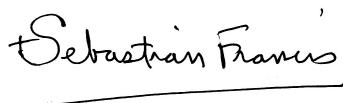
As such, your vote should not only be secret but sacred as well. The guarantee of your secret vote is that no human power should manipulate it for any reason. For this reason, the Election Commission has the legal and sacred responsibility to ensure that it is independent, credible and accountable. The sacredness of the vote however, is also the responsibility of all the people of God as individuals based on the freedom of conscience which is a God given right.

In conclusion, the 13th General Election is critical in the nation's history. The Church must work for and live out a spirituality that serves all humankind. As stated in the Vatican II document, *Gaudium et Spes*:

"There is no human law so powerful to safeguard the personal dignity and freedom of man as the Gospel of Christ entrusted to the Church; for the Gospel announces and proclaims the freedom of the sons of God, it rejects all bondage resulting from sin, it scrupulously respects the dignity of conscience and its freedom of choice..."

(Gaudium et Spes 41)

Wishes of Grace and Truth,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sebastian Francis". The signature is written in dark ink and is underlined with a single horizontal line.

Rt. Rev. Sebastian Francis
Bishop of Penang
7th April 2013