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Madiba 80th Birthday Bash July 18, 1998

Desmond Tutu

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Facsimile transmittal

To: Lavinia

Fax No.: Fax: +27 21 552 7529

Date: May 12, 2003

From: Archbishop Tutu's Office (Kerri Foreman)

Re: Notes: Madiba 80th and An Authentic Theology

Pages: 2 sets

THANKS!

MADIBA 80TH BIRTHDAY BASH - 18 JULY 1998

Ten years ago in July 1988 I addressed a mammoth crowd over 250,000 strong, mainly young persons. They had converged on Hyde Park Corner in London in response to a call by Archbishop Trevor Huddleston CR to celebrate Nelson Mandela's 70th birthday, which he declared should be the last that he would have to celebrate in prison. Not bad a predictions go because Nelson was to come out of prison two years later! Several of these young people had come on pilgrimage from the different corners of the United Kingdom, from Scotland, from Wales, from England and they came in huge waves to honour a man many of whom were not even born when he was sentenced to life imprisonment. It was an extraordinary phenomenon to be surpassed later only by the massive concert in Wembley Stadium to welcome Madiba to England after his release and again it was mainly young people who let their hair down without the proverbial British reserve; screaming and yelling their heads off as if he had been one of their favourite pop star heroes.

Why all this adulation? His reputation had been growing steadily whilst he was in gaol so that he had become the most famous prisoner of conscience in the world. The world was hungry for heroes, real heroes. There was a kind of hunger for goodness, the world wanted good people, people of principle and integrity. It is a remarkable thing this, that in a world supposedly materialistic and secular, grown cynical and disillusioned, people actually do warm to those they perceive as good not necessarily as successful or rich or powerful, but good.

Mother Theresa was not powerful in the ordinary macho sense of that word - indeed she was fragile and minute. She was not even really successful as the world would compute success. She sought to give the dregs of society who often had no one else to love them, who were bereft of even the shreds of dignity, she wanted to let them have in their last moments some loving, some acknowledgement that they did in fact count for God and so she and her Sisters of Charity sought to surround their last hours with some love and decency and respect and she was a spendthrift on their behalf with herself, and the world adored her for it. The world gave her an adulation reserved only for superstars.

Because the world, despite everything pointing to the contrary, has an instinct and nostalgia for goodness, for compassion; greatness, surprisingly in such a supposedly hard-nosed cynical world, is measured by how much one gives oneself for the sake of others and how much one is ready to suffer for one's ideals.

By going to gaol since he had said there were ideals for which he would strive passionately to live for and even to die for, Nelson established himself as a candidate for being a legend even in his lifetime. His incarceration far from diminishing him, helped to enhance his stature, for he was ready to lay down his life for others; to suffer and suffering was the litmus test of one's authenticity. It established one's credentials and so his reputation grew. He became an icon and the anti-apartheid movement was galvanised and had him as the focus of its campaign. He represented the struggle and

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the call "Release Mandela" became a rallying cry they stood for "Release all political prisoners, unban the people's political organisations and normalise the political process".

But he was after all in gaol. Would this one exalted to near saintly status not turn out to have enormous feet of clay? Had distance not in fact lent enchantment to the view and that at close quarters it would turn out that he was but a mere mortal with disillusioning foibles?

Well, here we are ten years down the line after that Hyde Park celebration and if anything his stature has grown. He has been an extraordinary human being. He has been all that those young people hoped for in 1988 and more. He emerged from prison and amazed us all with his almost regal dignity, his amazing magnanimity and readiness to forgive his tormentors and jailers and the oppressors of his people, having tea with the widow of the architect of apartheid and committing himself to reconciliation in a heroic manner. Who will forget 1995 when he strode on the Ellis Park turf with Francois Pienaar's No. 6 Springbok jersey - a defining moment for uniting the Rainbow Nation?

As I write this President Jacques Chirac is visiting South Africa. Have we ever had so many heads of state eager to come to South Africa, so many wanting to be seen in Madiba's company? It is unprecedented that the European Union summit should lay on a special session so that a Head of State of a non EU country should take leave of them, as happened recently in Cardiff. He is special, so special that he joins a very select band to have been honoured with the US Congressional Gold Medal - in this century only Winston Churchill and Mother Theresa - an exclusive firmament and he shines brightly in it.

He is not perfect. He is loyal to a fault. He should have sent some Ministers packing for ineptitude and he does still wear those shirts.

We have been singularly blessed to have had him preside over our transitional process and we give great thanks to God for him

Happy 80th birthday - **MADIBA**
uKhule uKhokhobe
 (really: many happy returns)

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