

COMMEMORATING THE 30TH ANNIVERSARY OF ‘*LIVING OUR FAITH*’

Pastoral Letter of the Catholic Bishops of the Episcopal Conference of Malawi

Lent March 2022

INTRODUCTION

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

This year, we commemorate the 30th Anniversary of the Catholic Bishops’ Pastoral Letter, ‘*Living Our Faith*’ issued on 8th March 1992 which encouraged democracy, the rule of law, participatory government, transparency, accountability and the fight against corruption among other matters.

As a community journeying in faith and hope we recognize and accept the Lord’s invitation to repent and believe the Good News proclaimed again in this time of Lent. On Ash Wednesday, we received ashes with the words: ‘Repent and believe the Gospel.’ These words of Jesus introduce the period of Lent when we enter once more into the saving mysteries of the Lord’s death and resurrection.

Christ began his public ministry by proclaiming: “Repent and believe the Gospel” (Mk 1,15). In this proclamation he states the programme of his ministry; to call all humankind in and through His life, death and resurrection to conversion and witness. People in every age and culture are called to this conversion and to respond in commitment and faith.

In this conviction, our predecessors were courageous enough to stand up and call a spade a spade by naming what was contrary to the Gospel of Christ in our country. With the same conviction we, your present leaders in the faith, after prayerful reflection on the current situation in our country, can ask, is this the Malawi we all aspired to and dreamed of 30 years ago? What should we be doing to secure a brighter future for all? We wish to offer our honest and sincere reflection on the current situation guided by the 1992 Pastoral Letter, ‘*Living Our Faith*’. This will accord us the opportunity to celebrate and re-live the powerful message of that Pastoral Letter. We place these reflections under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the patronage of Mary, Queen of Malawi and of Africa.

PART 1: OUR REFLECTION ON ‘LIVING THE FAITH’

1. The dignity of the human person and the unity of humankind

The Catholic Bishops in 1992 wrote about how man and woman are created in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1, 26) and how every person is sacred. They called for the unity of the human race and for institutions to respect the dignity of every human being.

As we reflect today, we observe that this call is as relevant and necessary as it was then. The present environment, in which the people of Malawi live, can be described as very dehumanizing. Vast numbers of men, women and children are today, like Lazarus in the Gospel (Luke 16, 19-31), languishing in abject poverty while wealth and luxury are enjoyed by a few who are unconcerned about these dehumanizing conditions of the majority.

2. The Church and Society

The Catholic Bishops in 1992 pointed out how the Church as part of its mission is called to comment on and participate in matters that affect human beings. They thanked the government of that time for providing an atmosphere where peace and stability prevailed. They strongly affirmed that it would be a failure on their part if they kept silent on matters which affected the day to day lives of human beings in the situation prevailing at that time.

We can now echo again the same words spoken by our predecessors. Malawi is a nation that has generally enjoyed peace. We thank God for that. With the advent of multiparty political dispensation, we see that an attempt has been made to grant the populace a certain degree of freedom. However, it must be pointed out that here and there, we seem to be regressing and going back to where we were. It is even evident today that some groups and cliques of people are not comfortable granting freedom to the Church to comment on social matters that affect the lives of Malawians. Unfortunately, we might even say, and sadly so, attempts are continuously being made to muzzle the voice of the Church.

3. The aspiration to greater equality and unity

The Catholic Bishops of 1992 bemoaned the following: the growing gap between the rich and the poor, the reality of many workers' failure to buy basic necessities because their meagre wages rendered them unable to afford minimal material needs, the prevailing existence of bribery, nepotism, tribalism, apartheid, regionalism and divisions. They then called on Malawians to embrace good values which foster justice, equality and unity.

It is sad, that a generation later, we are grappling with the same vices. In actual fact, it is regrettable that these vices, which the Catholic Bishops condemned three decades ago, have become even more deeply engrained and are tearing our society and our nation apart, while keeping the vast majority in grinding poverty. If we are not careful as a nation, we are heading towards social disaster. Hence there is an urgent need for every Malawian, starting with our political leaders, to stand up strongly and courageously against these vices and to choose to amend and correct the situation by implementing the values of equality, justice and unity. This is the only way that we Malawians can experience true development that benefits all citizens. Sadly, at present it appears that the distribution of national resources, development projects and influential political positions are not based on merit and competence but on nepotism, regionalism, tribalism and cronyism. This will not take this country anywhere near where it can be.

4. The right to an adequate education

The Pastoral Letter of 1992 then addressed the need for government to pay attention to providing quality education for its youth. It stressed that education should be holistic, should help the student acquire values such as respect for elders, promote creativity in the pupil, enable the student to appreciate his or her cultural heritage, help the student develop training and skills that would allow him or her to earn a decent living in the future. In short such education should seek excellence while aiming at providing education for everyone.

Honestly speaking, if we examine where we find ourselves today, it is sad to find and admit that we are far from the aspirations of our fore-fathers. The education system and facilities have been deteriorating over the years since the ushering in of multiparty dispensation. The standards and facilities of education are deplorable especially for the poor people in rural areas. It is one of the most neglected sectors of development. If nothing is done, the future of this nation is doomed. Unfortunately governments and the majority of political leaders seem unwilling to take seriously this project of overhauling the education system and injecting resources into it. This trend is very worrisome and must not be allowed to continue. To continue providing good quality education for the sons and daughters of the rich minority while neglecting the vast numbers from poor families is a very dangerous path for this country. This is a concrete example of inequality and injustice that our national education system is perpetuating. This must be addressed forthwith. We look forward to a day when children from both rich and poor families receive quality education under one roof and can be provided with equal opportunities to excel in life. To this end the Church is always willing to partner with Government to improve the education standards of the nation.

5. Adequate health services for all

In the quest to move towards equality for citizens, the Catholic Bishops in 1992 addressed the state of the health services in the country. Under this discussion, they acknowledged the success of the Primary Health Care that the Government had initiated. They also recognized the part that the Church was playing in supporting government efforts. At the same time, they drew the attention of the nation to the severe difficulties faced in areas such as overcrowding, shortage of medical personnel, inadequate care given to the sick, inequality in medical treatment and the unfortunate situation of drug theft in health facilities and at central stores.

We find ourselves in a similar defective situation today. Our health care system is almost on its knees. Most of our health facilities are in a dilapidated condition. The doctor-patient ratio is well below the expected standards. Our health centres, clinics and hospitals are running without adequate personnel and without sufficient medicines. Stealing of drugs and medicines has become more rather than less widespread. Institutions which are meant to restore hope and health frequently let people down leaving them helpless, sad and in despair. We cannot make any meaningful progress as a nation if we continue to neglect this very important and vital sector. Instead of continued overdependence on referral hospitals abroad where only a few rich and

politically connected people can access specialist services, deliberate efforts should be made to develop a health care system in this country which will address the needs of all Malawians regardless of their status in society. There is also need to motivate health service providers to instil in them passion for their vocation and professionalism in their work. Mishandling and abuse of patients by health care providers must also be urgently addressed.

The Catholic Bishops in 1992 drew attention to the reality of the various diseases in our country and in particular to the reality of HIV/AIDS. While great strides have been made in the care and treatment of people with HIV/AIDS, this disease needs continued attention and resources. Today we are faced with the further challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic. We join with Government in the call to take seriously the preventative measures as prescribed by the Ministry of Health. We renew our call to everyone to go and get vaccinated to protect themselves and their loved ones from the spread of COVID-19. Let us take seriously the words of Pope Francis: “getting vaccinated is a sign of charity” (18th August 2021).

6. Participation of all in public life

Quoting the Scriptures, the Catholic Bishops in 1992 reminded Malawians how every person is endowed with the gifts of the Holy Spirit which are meant to benefit everyone in the community (Eph. 4, 7-16; 1 Pet. 4, 10-11).

We, your Bishops, want to restate the implications of this principle. The people in authority and government need to create an environment where it is possible for all to participate in decision making and the building up of society. Apart from citizens casting their vote and the three arms of government doing their part, we feel that more deliberate policies and initiatives must be created. This is to allow the citizenry to participate fully in decision making in matters that concern them and matters that generally affect their lives. Decentralization should not just be about resources but also about decision-making processes. People must be fully involved in choosing development projects needed in their areas. There should be transparency at all levels including villages/communities on how funds meant for development are used.

Following the Catholic Bishops of 1992 we call on all citizens to take part in public life. Malawians should not delegate their responsibility to build this nation. They must not hand over their responsibility to build this nation to a few powerful and influential people. Citizens should wake up and hold accountable anyone they entrust with public office and authority. They have the right and responsibility to demand what is due to them so that they receive better services from those who hold public office on their behalf.

7. Freedom of expression and association

While applauding the government for protecting freedom of worship, the Catholic Bishops in 1992 drew attention to the situation that restricted freedom of expression and association. They named academic freedom restrictions, restrictions on exposing the ills of society, the monopoly

of media by the state, censorship preventing the expression of dissenting views and indeed many other related restrictions.

We may ask where are we now with regard to these freedoms three decades down the line? While we recognize the opening of airwaves and more media channel outlets including social media, we still have a long way to go. The Access to Information Law is yet to be operationalized fully and enjoyed by all Malawians. We also note with concern that dissenting voices in our society are muted through the application of archaic and draconian laws. This is not in tandem with the current multiparty democracy which guarantees freedom of expression even when it is critical of government policies and actions. Government ministries, agencies and departments mandated to oversee this must ensure that legal freedom of expression and association for every citizen is guaranteed.

8. The truth will set you free

The Catholic Bishops in 1992 invited Malawians to embrace truth and abide by Christ's proclamation on the same. They clearly warned how evading truth and feeding Malawians with lies, empty slogans and political propaganda creates a dangerous atmosphere of cynicism and mistrust.

Let us look around. Are we any different and any better today as regards this caution? No. We are not. We are even worse. What is claimed to be a developmental agenda in party manifestos and campaign rhetoric slogans is all but empty speeches. Malawians are now realizing that campaign promises are only a way to deceive the masses. It is now becoming a culture to manipulate the masses by telling them what pleases their ears and placates them in the short-term. In this way politicians obtain the ticket to rule and ascend to positions of authority. We cannot continue in this way. Malawians must look for leaders who are honest and truthful and who mean what they say. Such leaders can steer this nation to prosperity for all through systems of effective service delivery and authentic development. Empty promises couched in beautiful speeches must stop.

9. A workable system of justice for all

The Catholic Bishops in 1992 drew attention to one important arm of Government namely, the Judiciary, which is responsible for the administration of justice. They bemoaned how justice seemed to be aborted by administering selectively to the advantaged and powerful in society.

In this area, we must applaud the Judiciary which has, on several occasions recently, demonstrated that it is acting with the independence required and expected of it. However, as has always been the case, there are unfortunately some whose actions, decisions and judgements threaten to tarnish the image of the judicial system. The Judiciary must always remember that it has a key role to play in the administration of justice and especially in the fight against corruption. In this regard, we appeal to the Judiciary to ensure that corruption cases are expedited and that everyone is seen to be treated fairly and similarly before the law. This builds

public confidence that the Judiciary too is playing its role in a constructive way. The Judiciary must avoid making suspicious and questionable judgements and pronouncements which are seen neither to be promoting justice nor fighting corruption. Loss of public trust in law enforcement agencies and the Judiciary fuels mob justice, public anger and is a recipe for civil disorder. Our plea is that the Judiciary should always act with integrity guided by the principles that govern this noble profession.

PART 2: NEW ILLS IN OUR COUNTRY

Having reflected on the 1992 Pastoral Letter, '*Living Our Faith*', we now turn to the consideration of some new ills in our country.

10. Governance in the Tonse Alliance

We have noted with concern that since the 2020 Fresh Presidential Election which ushered in new leadership, the country is engulfed in endless political bickering especially among the political groups that comprise the Tonse Alliance. This bickering projects to the public a lack of cohesion within the Alliance and a sense of no direction. These feed into the popular discourse and fuel an atmosphere of uncertainty and instability which has disastrous economic effects. In this regard there is urgent need for the alliance partners to draw up joint programmes of action for the remainder of the government term. The lack of such programmes is fuelling public dissatisfaction. Such programmes can facilitate accountability and actions that are based on electoral manifestos and pledges of the individual parties. This can help to fulfil the need for an inclusive socio-economic development strategy for this country.

Furthermore, there is need to create a management framework for the Alliance to bring cohesion and direction in the political space. In view of the 50% +1 electoral formula for the election of the President adopted in 2020, we envisage that in future, it is unlikely to have a Government that will comprise one political party only. Electoral alliances are likely to become the order of the day and so too are coalition governments. We note, however, that the country lacks a legal framework for coalition governments. We therefore call upon parliament to put in place a legal framework for coalition governments. From time immemorial, it is a well-known fact that how political power is configured and exercised can either bring about good developmental outcomes, effective service delivery and people-centred systems or it can bring about state predation, big man politics that prevent servant and people-centered leadership, corruption and kleptocracy.

11. Weak and indecisive leadership

We have also noted with sadness that decision making at the highest level of government is slow despite having the necessary legal powers, authority and information. This is particularly true with respect to the fight against corruption. We believe that a President who campaigned on a platform of anti-corruption, and promised to deal with the vice, will not keep any of his ministers and aides when there is sufficient information about their involvement in corruption. Reports in

the formal print media note that a significant number of statutory corporations, ministries, departments and agencies have some of their work stalled because they are waiting for guidance or approval from the Office of the President and Cabinet (OPC), sometimes for as long as five months. That office, instead of being the centre of effective administration radiating the essence of servant leadership, has become a source of inefficiency and underperformance in the public service. The performance of the office and the competence and suitability of key persons manning the office should be urgently reviewed and decisive actions taken.

12. Plunder of public resources, patronage and impunity

As Catholic Bishops we, together with all concerned Malawians, are deeply shocked and dismayed by the recent revelations concerning the plunder of public resources by foreign nationals in partnership with corrupt politicians and civil servants. We are now more than convinced that this country has enough resources which, if put to good use, could propel it to meaningful development for all. These revelations should serve as an opportunity for us as a country to demonstrate concretely that our battle against corruption is not just mere lip service but a genuine and relentless fight to eliminate this cancer in our country.

The politics of appeasement and patronage have continued, pretty much like in previous regimes. This is particularly true in the appointments of Chief Executive Officers to various parastatals. It is our view that resolving these issues immediately require forthright executive political leadership that would intervene in ways that would promote integrity, uprightness and the rule of law. We note that these institutions accumulate and manage huge amounts of revenues that do not go through the national budget. This enables spending without sufficient accountability and creates an environment for siphoning public resources for narrow political ends and personal benefits. These parastatals must operate with total independence and be accountable to Malawians. Sadly, continued pressure and interference by the Office of the President and Cabinet in the operations of parastatals is a clear demonstration of impunity. We call upon the leadership to intervene and provide the necessary executive political leadership.

13. Siding with those who loot instead of siding with the poor

We are equally dismayed that some greedy Malawians are siding with those responsible for the plunder of resources instead of siding with the poor who are victims of corruption. These resources belong to Malawians and if put to good use, this country would not be where it is today. True patriotism demands that we should feel angry at such unpatriotic behaviour and religiously defend the resources of our country. This can go a long way in improving service delivery, infrastructure development, etc.

14. Affordable Input Programme (AIP) and National Disasters

As Catholic Bishops we have noted that this year's implementation of the Affordable Input Programme (AIP) has been blatantly inadequate. This programme designed to enhance food

security among the poor lacks transparent and accountable implementation. Similarly, we find the response to national disasters very wanting especially in areas badly affected by Cyclone Anna, such as the lower Shire. There is need to review these programmes and make them robust and effective.

15. New threat to human life

Today we also experience a new threat to human life and dignity in the form of propaganda for the enactment of abortion laws. As Catholic Bishops, our stand on abortion will never change. All instances of direct abortion are murder. We shall always defend and protect the life of the unborn child. Human life is sacred and must be safeguarded regardless of how it has come about. For God commands: “You shall not kill” (Ex. 20, 13).

CONCLUSION

16. “Love tenderly, act justly, walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6, 8)

The issues we have raised in this Pastoral Letter as we commemorate the 30th Anniversary of ‘*Living Our Faith*’ require ongoing reflection and action. It is the Church’s mission to preach the Gospel which effects the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation, be it hunger, ill-health, corruption, ignorance, blind loyalty, despair, paralyzing fear, etc. Following Jesus, the believing community is invited, and at times obliged in justice, to show in action a preferential love for the poor, the oppressed and the voiceless.

To ‘love tenderly, act justly and walk humbly with God’ in our present day in particular means denouncing, uncovering and uprooting corruption - the cancer that is largely responsible for keeping this country very poor and under-developed. Corruption causes untold suffering for the vast majority of ordinary Malawians who face crushing poverty on a daily basis. In the interest of building a more just and transparent Malawi that benefits all its citizens, let no agent of corruption, however powerful, wealthy or who their connections are, be shielded or protected, provided that he or she is given proper recourse to the legal processes of the courts.

We stand with and applaud those who risk everything by standing up to corruption. They are shining examples of St. Paul’s exhortation: “Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them” (*Eph. 5,11*). Let us all say “NO” to corruption.

The Catholic Bishops, thirty years ago, pointed out that by living our faith through what we do, we are going to build a better Malawi for all. Why have we not lived well our faith in the activities and programmes that we have been carrying out all these years? As we forge ahead, what can we do to accomplish the aspirations of the Bishops in 1992 and have a better Malawi for all ?

May the Lenten call to conversion and our celebration of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ at Easter mark the beginning of a new dawn for all Malawians.

May St. Joseph, the foster father of our Lord Jesus Christ, watch over our country and obtain from God a spirit of integrity, patriotism, love and peace for all Malawians and for the whole of humanity.

We place these reflections under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the patronage of Mary, Queen of Malawi and of Africa.

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	and	Apostolic Administrator of
Right Reverend Montfort Stima Mangochi	Zomba	Vice President and Bishop of
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