

# LIVING OUR FAITH: PASTORAL LETTER OF THE CATHOLIC BISHOPS OF MALAWI

*Pastoral Letter from the Catholic Bishops in Malawi and was read in every Catholic Church on Sunday 8 March 1992 (the first Sunday of Lent).*

## 1992 Malawi Pastoral Letter

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**Dear Brothers and Sister in Christ,**

As we commence this time of the Lord's favour, we, your bishops, greet you in the name of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

## INTRODUCTION

As a community journeying in faith and hope, we recognise and accept the Lord's invitation proclaimed again in this time of Lent. On Ash Wednesday, we receive ashes with the prayer, 'Repent and believe the Good News'. This prayer introduces the period of Lent when we shall 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, we, your leaders in the faith, come to share with you what this faith invites us to as a church in the Malawi of today. We place this exhortation under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the patronage of Mary, Queen of Malawi and of Africa.

## 1 THE DIGNITY AND UNITY OF HUMANKIND

Man and woman, created in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1.26), carry in themselves the breath of divine life. Each created person is in communion with God.

He or she is 'sacred', enjoying the personal protection of God. Human life is inviolable since it is\* from God, and all human beings are one, springing as they do from a single father, Adam, and a single mother, Eve, 'the mother of all those who live' (Gen. 3.20).

The unity and dignity of the human race have been definitively sealed in Christ the Son of God who died for all, to unite everyone in one Body. Rejoicing in this truth, we proclaim the dignity of every person, the right of each one to freedom and respect.

This oneness of the human race also implies equality and the same basic rights for all. These must be solemnly respected and inculcated in every culture, every constitution and every social system.

## **2 THE CHURCH AND SOCIETY**

Because the Church exists in this world it must communicate its understanding of the meaning of human life and of society. As Pope Paul VI says; 'The Church is certainly not willing to restrict her action only to the religious field and disassociate herself from man's temporal problems (The Evangelization of Peoples, No 34).

In this context, we joyfully acclaim the progress which has taken place in our country, thanks in great part to the climate of peace and stability which we enjoy. We would, however-, fail in our role as religious leaders if we kept silent on areas of concern.

## **3 THE ASPIRATION TO GREATER EQUALITY AND UNITY**

In our society, we are aware of a growing gap between the rich and the poor with regard to expectations, living standards and development. Many people still live in circumstances which are hardly compatible with their dignity as sons and daughters of God. Their life is a struggle for survival. At the same time, a minority enjoys the fruits of development and can afford to live in luxury and wealth. We appeal for a more just and equal distribution of the nation's wealth.

Though many basic goods and materials are available, they are beyond the means of many of our people. One of the reasons for this is the deplorable wage structure which exists. For many, the wages they receive are grossly inadequate, e.g. employees in some estates, some domestic workers, brick-makers etc, and this leads to anger, frustration and hopelessness. Another example of glaring

injustice is the price paid to producers, especially farmers for some of their crops.

We wish to state that every person has a right to a just reward for work done, a wage which will ensure a dignified living for his or her family.

Not only has the worker a right to be paid justly by his employer, but he also has a duty honestly and responsibly to do the work for which he is employed. We would like to remind all Christian workers that their first duty on receiving their earnings is to look to the adequate support of their family. All too often workers spend their salaries for selfish purposes.

Bribery and nepotism are growing in political, economic and social life. This causes violence and harm to the spirit of our people.

Honesty, righteousness, respect, equal opportunity for all: these must be the qualities which guide our nation as it grows and develops into the future.

One of the cornerstones of the nation is 'unity'. This reflects the will of our Creator that we live in mutual respect and oneness.

Tribalism, apartheid (whether economic or social), regionalism and divisions are contrary to the call and truth of humankind. We call all the faithful to celebrate our common birth and destiny in mutual respect, acceptance, justice and love.

## **4 THE RIGHT TO AN ADEQUATE EDUCATION**

A society which values its future affords the highest priority to providing education for its entire young people. As it is commonly put 'Young people are the future of the nation'. A sound education will aim at the following:

- (i) Creating an environment favourable to the physical, emotional, intellectual, relational and spiritual development of pupils;
- (ii) Developing in each student a respect for others and a recognition of civic responsibilities;
- (iii) Promoting the creative potential of students. The unique and diverse talents of every individual are recognised and encouraged;
- (iv) Instilling an appreciation of the students' cultural heritage, i.e. the linguistic, musical and artistic legacy inherited from the past;
- (v) Providing the students with appropriate training and skills which will equip them to make a living in the actual circumstances of our country;
- (vi) Seeking excellence, while aiming to provide education for everyone.

## **5 PROBLEMS OF OUR EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM**

At the outset, we wish to record how greatly we esteem and applaud the efforts which have been made by the government to provide education at all levels. The work of the Churches in this field has also contributed greatly to the advancement of our people.

Nevertheless we feel it necessary to draw attention to some of the problems which beset our educational institutions at present:

### **(a) Illiteracy**

Illiteracy is one of the principal causes of poverty and lack of development. It cannot be said that we have succeeded in promoting the creative potential of our citizens while there remains a large scale problem of illiteracy in our society. It must be recognised that this is a problem which cannot be solved by state initiatives alone. Since a great responsibility lies with parents, we urge them to recognize this duty by sending their children to school.

### **(b) Falling Standards, Overcrowding and Shortage of Teachers and Materials**

It is more and more widely recognized that standards of education are not only not rising, but are actually falling. Clearly there can be little hope of creating an environment favourable to the emotional, intellectual and spiritual development of pupils when schools are grossly overcrowded and suffer from a serious lack of teachers. While the present acute shortage has been made much worse by the policy of requiring all teachers to remain in their own regions, final solutions to these problems will also demand generous increases in the resources made available to education. This will have very practical implications for the way in which our national priorities are established and the budget distributed.

### **(c) Unequal Access to Education**

The criteria used in selection of pupils for secondary schools and third-level institutions should be known to all and be seen to operate fairly. Nor should they work to the disadvantage of particular individuals or groups. Access to

education should not depend on whom the candidate knows nor how much money he possesses.

#### **(d) Discipline**

We believe that indiscipline is a major problem in secondary schools. It will not be solved by threats of punishments. There is a need to examine the underlying reasons for this state of affairs. Among them are:

- (i) Failure of parents to exercise their responsibility towards their children as they grow older;
- (ii) Lack of co-operation between parents and school authorities;
- (iii) Frustration due to poor or uncertain job opportunities;
- (iv) Manipulation of the selection process to include undeserving students;
- (v) Lack of support from higher authorities when action has been taken, or needs to be taken, by the school.

### **6 CHURCH-STATE PARTNERSHIP IN EDUCATION**

Improvements will come about in the educational system only if there is mutual trust and genuine partnership between the different interested groups in society, i.e. parents, teachers, the Church and the State. In particular, we recognise the importance of Church-State participation in this area.

On the one hand, the Church has a responsibility to support in every way possible the educational goals of the government. On the other, the government has a duty to respect the rights and legitimate aspirations of the

Churches. Only through such a mutual recognition of rights and responsibilities will a fruitful partnership between Church and State be realised in practice.

### **7 ADEQUATE HEALTH SERVICES FOR ALL**

Equality among citizens and the demands of justice call for policies which aim to provide adequate health care for all without distinction. The following principles have always guided us in this vital area of concern,

- (i) Life is sacred. It is a gift from God to be valued from the moment of conception until death,
- (ii) Human beings can never be reduced to the status of objects. We recognise that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit,
- (iii) Every person is of equal dignity. The value of life is not to be measured by one's age, possessions or position in society.

### **8 DIFFICULTIES EXPERIENCED IN OUR HEALTH SERVICES**

We wish to pay tribute to the achievements of the government of Malawi in extending health services with the aim of providing the best possible care for all. Particularly worthy of mention has been the establishment of an excellent system of primary health care. The notable contribution of the Churches through their extensive network of hospitals and health centres is deserving of special praise.

At the same time, we are aware of the severe difficulties which the health services are experiencing at present.

### **(a) Overcrowding and Lack of Personnel**

Without doubt, the most serious problem is the acute shortage of health centres to cater for the population. One cannot claim to uphold the principle of the sanctity of life if provision has not been made for even minimal health care for every person. This is a priority which a society cannot ignore if it wishes to be a caring and compassionate community. It must be recognised that if this problem is to be tackled, it will demand the allocation of more resources from the State.

### **(b) The Vocation of Caring for the Sick**

Caring for the sick is a calling from God of a special dignity and importance. It can never be seen as just another job or another way of earning one's living. While we greatly value the generous dedication to service of many of those who work in the medical field, we cannot ignore that the quality of medical care is often seriously inadequate, e.g. patients being unattended to for long periods of time; the lack of commitment on the part of some personnel; the failure to recognise each patient as one's brother or sister in need, etc. We therefore invite all health workers to serve every patient without exception with responsibility and true dedication.

### **(c) Inequality in Medical Treatment**

Absolute equality of access to health care for all citizens is difficult to achieve. However, this is an ideal which must always be striven for. The guiding principle determining whether a patient will receive priority treatment ought not to be his apparent usefulness or his position in society. Rather, every person, whether rich or poor, educated or not, blood relative or not, has

equal right to receive health care. The practice of stealing and reselling medicines seriously threatens this right.

## **9 THE TRAGEDY OF AIDS**

It is heartening to note the extensive health education programmes currently in operation in the state. One cannot fail to stress the importance of preventive measures particularly in respect of contagious diseases. The current epidemic of AIDS is a case in point.

All recognise that in the present circumstances where no cure for AIDS is available, prevention in the form of health education is the only way of combating this problem.

We want to encourage the efforts undertaken in that direction and hope they can still be intensified: true facts about the disease should be made public more readily; information made available to all; personnel and resources freed for the treatment and counseling of the victims and their families.

However, preventive methods must respect God's law and enhance the dignity of the human person. It is most regrettable that little attention is paid to the fact that faithfulness to the Gospel's teaching on conjugal fidelity is the single most effective method of preventing the spread of tragic illness. We strongly object to the dissemination of the view that use of condoms is the remedy against this epidemic.

Besides the immorality involved in the indiscriminate distribution and use of condoms, we must be aware how much they contribute to spreading a false sense of security and encouraging a promiscuity which can only aggravate the existing problem. We appeal to Christian parents to protect and counsel their children against such practices and to guide

them to true Christian understanding of sexuality.

## **10 PARTICIPATION OF ALL IN PUBLIC LIFE**

In their writings to the Christians, both the apostles Peter and Paul note how the Holy Spirit grants the members of the Christian community gifts of all sorts for the benefit of the community. 'On each one of us God's favour has been bestowed in whatever way Christ has allotted it. To some his gift was that they should be apostles; to some prophets; to some evangelists; to some pastors and teachers.' Whatever the gift, the purpose is one 'to knit God's holy people together for the work of service to build up the Body of Christ'. (Eph. 4.7-16 cf 1 Pet. 4, 10-11).

African society has traditionally recognized that what is true of the Church is also true of any society: its strength resides in recognizing the gifts of all and in allowing these gifts to flourish and be used for the building up of the community. 'Mutu umodzi susenza denga' [One head cannot carry a roof]. No one person can claim to have a monopoly of truth and wisdom. No individual — or group of individuals — can pretend to have all the resources needed to guarantee the progress of a nation. 'Mtsinje wopanda miyala susunga madzi' [A river without rocks does not hold water]. The contribution of the most humble members is often necessary for the good running of a group.' Wopusa anaomba ng'oma wochenjera nabvina' [The fool beat the drum to which the clever one danced].

## **11 FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND ASSOCIATION**

Moreover, human persons are honoured —and this honour is due to them—whenever they are allowed to search freely for the truth, to voice their opinions and be heard, to engage in creative service of the community in all liberty within the associations of their own choice. Nobody should ever have to suffer reprisals for honestly expressing and living up to their convictions: intellectual, religious or political.

We can only regret that this is not always the case in our country. We can be grateful that freedom of worship is respected: the same freedom does not exist when it comes to translating faith into daily life. Academic freedom is seriously restricted; exposing injustices can be considered a betrayal; revealing some evils of our society is seen as slandering the country; monopoly of mass media and censorship prevent the expression of dissenting views; some people have paid dearly for their political opinions; access to public places like markets, hospitals, bus depots etc is frequently denied to those who cannot produce a party card; forced donations have become a way of life.

This is most regrettable. It creates an atmosphere of resentment among the citizens. It breeds a climate of mistrust and fear. This fear of harassment and mutual suspicion generates a society in which the talents of many lie unused and in which there is little room for initiative.



## **12 FOSTERING PARTICIPATION**

We urgently call each one of you to respond to this state of affairs and work towards a change of climate. Participation in the life of the country is not only a right; it is also a duty that each Christian should be proud to assume and exercise responsibly. People in positions of authority, in government and administration, have a particular duty to work for the restoration of a climate of trust and openness. However, participation will remain a fiction without the existence of adequate channels of expression and action; and independent press, open forums of discussion, free association of citizens for social and political purposes, and the like...

## **13 'THE TRUTH WILL SET YOU FREE'**

A first step in the restoration of the climate of confidence may be taken by recognizing the true state of the nation. The truth will set you free' (Jn 8,32). These words of Christ do not have an exclusively religious meaning. They also express a deep human reality. For too long we have refused to see that, besides the praiseworthy achievements of the last decades, our country still suffers from many evils; economic and social progress does not trickle down to the mass of the people; much still remains to be achieved to make adequate education and health services available to all; the AIDS problem presents an incredible challenge; recurrent unfavourable climatic conditions often account for poor crops and subsequent misery for the people ...

People will not be scandalised to hear these things; they know them. They will only be grateful that their true needs are recognized and that efforts are made to answer them.

Feeding them with slogans and half-truths - or untruths! — only increases their cynicism and their mistrust of government representatives. It gives rise to a culture of rumour-mongering. Real progress can only be attained when the true problems and the real needs are identified and all resources are channeled towards solving them.

## **14 A SYSTEM OF JUSTICE WHICH WORKS FAIRLY**

We would like to draw your attention to another area of life in our society. We cannot ignore or turn a blind eye to our people's experience of unfairness and injustice, for example, those who, losing their land without fair compensation, are deprived of their livelihood, or those of our brothers and sisters who are imprisoned without knowing when their cases will be heard. In a just society, a citizen must have easy access to an independent and impartial court of justice whenever his rights are threatened or violated. In particular, before a penalty is imposed, it is in the interest of justice and human dignity that the accused be informed in good time of the charge against him and be granted opportunity for a fair trial and, where necessary, the possibility of legal counsel. We call upon all and particularly those responsible for the administration of justice to ensure not only that procedures are respected but also that impartial judgment is rendered to the accused person. This will only be possible if the administration of justice is independent of external influence, political or other. Our bond of brotherhood and sisterhood in the one body of Christ and our solidarity as a people should, in love, compel us to hunger for the justice and righteousness of the Lord in our society.

In this context, we recall the words of Jesus at the beginning of his ministry: 'The Spirit of the Lord is on me, for he has appointed me to bring the good news to the afflicted. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives, sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year of favour from the Lord'. (Luke 4,18-19)

This appeal for fair treatment should also be heard within the Church. We want to recall the importance of adhering to procedures which have been instituted to promote justice and protect the rights of the faithful. Our Church communities do need well-established and competent forums for hearing various cases, complaints and grievances of their members. Those of us who have to pronounce judgment on persons and situations are to view the exercise of our authority as a service of the truth for the common good as well as for the well-being of the individual. In particular, we exhort the people of God to respect the right of defence of those accused of having committed offences.

## **CONCLUSION**

The issues raised in this letter will obviously require an ongoing and more in-depth reflection. It is the Church's mission to preach

the Gospel which affects the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation, be it hunger, ignorance, blindness, despair, paralysing fear, etc. Like Jesus, the advocates of the poor and the oppressed, the believing community is invited, at times obliged in justice, to show in action a preferential love for the economically disadvantaged, the voiceless who live in situations of hopelessness.

The human rights and duties identified in this pastoral letter for our reflection are only some of the issues that our God invites us to consider seriously. In our response to God, we humbly recognise that though a gifted and blessed people, we are not a perfect community. If some of our personal

weaknesses, biases and ambitions are not purified by the word of God and just laws, they can very easily destroy peace and harmony in our societies and communities.

We hope that our message will deepen in all of us the experience of conversion and the desire for the truth and the light of Christ.

This will prepare us for the worthy celebration of Easter, the feast of the risen Lord in whom we see ourselves as a risen people with dignity restored.

**Archbishop J Chiona**

**Bishop F Mikhori**

**Bishop M A Chimole**

**Bishop A Assolari**

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