

PASTORAL LETTER OF THE CATHOLIC BISHOPS OF THE EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE OF MALAWI

“Jesus summoned them and said, *you know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and the great one make their authority over them felt. But it shall not be so among you. Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you shall be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave*” (Matthew 20: 25-27).

Introduction

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In our 2018 Pastoral letter, *A Call for a New Era in Malawi*, we emphasized the necessity of ushering in “a new era” characterized by a change of mindset, fairness and justice for all, genuine democracy, respect for the Constitution and the rule of law, respect for the dignity of all, freedom of expression and association, equal opportunity for all, care for the environment, quality public service delivery and leadership which is at the service of citizens and national unity.

This call was consistent with our previous pastoral letters such as *Living our Faith* (1992), *Choosing our Future* (1993), *Building our Future* (1994), *Choosing our Leaders in the Forthcoming Elections* (2003), *Taking Responsibility for our Future: Together Towards the 2009 Elections* (2008), *Reading the Signs of the Times* (2010) and *Strengthening the Vision of our Destiny* (2013) in which we talked about issues that persist to this day.

More than ever before, the need for ushering in “a new era in Malawi” has reached a critical stage where we can either degenerate into a failed state or rise to a unified, orderly and prosperous nation. “*I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live*” (Deuteronomy 30:19).

1. The choice before our nation

The forthcoming presidential election provides us with an opportunity to choose a leader who can save our country from collapsing and who can turn it into a unified, orderly and prosperous nation.

As we said in our previous pastoral letters (*c.f. A Call for a New Era in Malawi*, 2018; *Strengthening the Vision of our Destiny*, 2013; *Choosing our Leaders in the Forthcoming Elections*, 2003) such a leader requires to have the following necessary qualities: honesty, democratic, transformational leadership, visionary, selflessness, servant leadership (*Mark 10:44*), good stewardship, exemplary, decisiveness, respect for the Constitution and the rule of law, willingness to step down (*Luke 17:10*), being above tribal/regional/political interests, accountable and God-fearing.

Failure to have such a leader will result in our nation becoming more chaotic, divided and with deepening levels of poverty. “*Wakutsina khutu ndi mnansi*”.

2.0. Current concerns and challenges that need urgent attention

We, your Bishops, commissioned to preach the Gospel of Christ “*whether it is convenient or inconvenient*” (2 Timothy 4:2), wish to bring to the attention of the nation that there are some things wrong in our society that need to be put right. These included:

2.1. Rising tribalism

Malawi is now departing from the unifying spirit of our forefathers and going towards fragmentation and tribalism. This is shown by tribal political talk, nepotism, forms of favouring one’s own area and one’s own region as well as the practice whereby politicians seek to gain votes by whipping up the anger of voters against other tribes and regions. This is a very dangerous road we are taking as a nation and we appeal to all citizens to avoid these evils of tribalism and regionalism. We are one human family (c.f. *Living our Faith*, 1992). “*Strive to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace*” (Ephesians 4:3).

2.2. Increasing acts of political violence

We have noted with shock and deep sadness increased acts of political violence as stated in the recent statements of the Public Affairs Committee (PAC) and the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP), both issued on 8th May 2020. We condemn these acts of violence in the strongest terms possible. Anyone who subscribes to this form of violence is not consistent with the type of a leader we have described above and must not be voted into power.

2.3. Rising levels of impunity

We are deeply concerned with rising levels of impunity in some sections of our society. As we have said many times before, the killing of people with albinism, the so-called mob justice and the killing of elderly persons suspected of being witches is utterly repulsive. We call

for a speedy conclusion of these cases and a complete stop to these barbaric acts. Just as we said before, there should be non-selective justice when handling these cases (c.f. *Mercy of God as a path of Hope*, 2016). On these matters, the Word of God admonishes us: “*What have you done? Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground*” (Genesis 4:10). Considering these killings we need a leader who will act firmly and decisively otherwise we will end up with bad and uncaring leadership as described by the Prophet Ezekiel: “*Woe to the shepherds of Israel who have been pasturing themselves! Should not shepherds pasture the flock? ... So they were scattered for lack of a shepherd, and became food for all the wild beasts*” (Ezekiel 34:2, 5).

2.4. Rising levels of corruption and fraud

There are many reported cases of corruption and plunder of national resources at all levels. *Cashgate* opened our eyes to the reality of fraud in our midst which remains a problem to this day in Malawi. The biggest victims of these evils are the poor and vulnerable people. This calls for strong, decisive and exemplary leadership at the top. The Prophet Amos sternly warns us: “*Hear this, you who trample upon the needy and destroy the poor of the land: ‘When will the new moon be over,’ you ask, ‘that we may sell our grain, and the Sabbath, that we may open the grain-bins? We will diminish the ephah, add to the shekel, and fix our scales for cheating! We will buy the destitute for silver, and the poor for a pair of sandals; even the worthless grain we will sell*” (Amos 8:4-6). And “*be satisfied with your wages*” (Luke 3:14).

2.5. Dysfunctional systems of public service delivery

As we have stated before, systems and institutions of public service delivery are greatly challenged and breaking down.

Regarding health, the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed how under resourced our health system is in terms of infrastructure, equipment and personnel. This has happened because for a long time we have not put enough resources into the system and some of the little that has been put into it has been misused. In addition, there was over reliance on medical facilities outside the country instead of developing systems

of our own. Furthermore, the health care workers are under motivated. Here too, biggest losers are the poor and the vulnerable citizens.

Similarly, the education system has suffered the same challenges in terms of limited funding, substandard infrastructure, inadequate learning materials, insufficient and under motivated personnel, in addition to unstable curricula. Increasingly, we are seeing a two-tier system of education: private, which is deemed to offer better education for the rich and a dysfunctional public one serving the poor and the vulnerable. This promotes inequality in our society.

While the Malawi Defense Force is mostly regarded as professional and enjoys a lot of public trust and confidence, the Malawi Police Service is generally considered as partisan and dysfunctional and has lost a lot of public trust. In addition, the Malawi Police Service is underfunded leading to inefficient service delivery and poor welfare of police officers. *“It is to the interest of the community, as well as of the individual, that peace and good order be maintained” (Pope Leo XIII, Rerum Novarum, no. 36).*

These dysfunctional systems of public service delivery underline the necessity of electing a leader with the qualities outlined above.

2.6. COVID-19 pandemic

While appreciating the efforts made so far by the Government and the international community in finding resources and setting up committees in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, there is still need for a more inclusive and coordinated approach, more public awareness campaigns and transparent use of resources. As we have stated in our recent statements, COVID-19 is real and deadly. We are concerned with sections of society who deny the existence of this disease. Similarly, we are concerned with a lack of consistency in observing the precautionary measures. For example, while people observe them in churches they ignore the same precautionary measures in markets and other public places. In the event of imposing restriction on mobility there would be need for social support for the poor and the vulnerable and such support should not be politicised.

2.7. Continued environmental degradation

As we stated in our 2018 Pastoral Letter: *“The destruction of the environment in Malawi is clearly manifested in the accelerated destruction of natural resources like forests and natural habitats as well as the failure to seriously develop renewable energies” (A Call for a New Era in Malawi, 2018)*. The situation continues to deteriorate. We risk desertification of our land, creating food insecurity in the country and increasing the gap between the rich and the poor. The plunder of Chikangawa forest is a typical example of the continuing environmental degradation in Malawi. This affects mostly the poor and the vulnerable. *“The human environment and the natural environment deteriorate together ... the deterioration of the environment and of society affects the most vulnerable people” (Pope Francis, Laudato Si’, no. 48)*. And the *“preservation of the environment, promotion of sustainable development and particular attention to climate change are matters of grave concern for the entire human family” (Pope Benedict XVI, Letter to the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, 2007)*.

2.8. Challenges related to holding a credible election

Aware of the fact that an election is a process not an event, we are concerned about the following: the loss of public trust and confidence in the current Malawi Electoral Commissioners, inconsistency in the determination of electoral calendar, vandalism of MEC equipment, lack of security in centres where MEC is processing voter transfers and issuing duplicate voter certificates, biased, unprofessional and defamatory reporting by the public broadcaster, MBC. We are also concerned with the general abuse of freedom of expression by political party zealots on social media by among others, fabricating all forms of falsehood, lies and rumour mongering. This calls upon all Malawians to exercise extra vigilance to ensure that the electoral process is transparent. Let there be issue-based campaign. Above all, it calls for a leadership that can provide appropriate direction and supervision.

Conclusion

Our country is at crossroads. We can either choose to save our nation or destroy it. The most urgent task before us is to choose a leader who can rescue it from further deterioration. We call upon all duty bearers to ensure that the forthcoming presidential election is free, fair, credible and peaceful. We also urge all Malawians to go and vote and vote wisely, keeping in mind the consequences of not voting or not voting wisely. Let us continue to pray and seek God's guidance for the success of this election.

With the same conviction with which we have made this *Further Call to a New Era in Malawi*, we, your leaders in the faith, we place this exhortation under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the patronage of Mary: *"I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live"* (Deuteronomy 30:19).

May the rising and Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ to heaven mark the rising of our nation to a new era!

Most Reverend Thomas Msusa	President and Archbishop of Blantyre
Right Reverend Martin Mtumbuka	Vice-President and Bishop of Karonga
Most Reverend Tarsizio Ziyaye	Archbishop of Lilongwe
Right Reverend Peter Musikuwa	Bishop of Chikwawa
Right Reverend Montfort Stima	Bishop of Mangochi
Right Reverend George Tambala	Bishop of Zomba
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