

A CALL TO INTEGRITY

A Pastoral Letter from the Zambia Episcopal Conference on the role of all Zambians to work for the common good of our nation.

i. Introduction

To all Zambians of Good Will!

We, the Catholic Bishops of Zambia, greet you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ!

“The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.” (The Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, Second Vatican Council # 1)

Since independence, our country, Zambia, has always been a citadel of peace. Nevertheless, we seem, as a nation, to be in the midst of great uncertainty. We, as shepherds and pastors -for that is our defined role, address this pastoral letter to you. We acknowledge the role of politicians to direct and order society. However, as pastors, we too have a responsibility to contribute towards building a strong democratic culture in our land. It is for this reason that we write this pastoral letter on the following issues that concern the welfare of our people.

2. A Nation at Crossroads

Our nation, today, stands at the threshold of a looming crisis. We face many challenges of governance and survival, among which, are increasing poverty and the presence of abject poverty, a pervading cancer of corruption, spiralling job losses, economic disintegration, an education system that is failing and a constitution making process that is still controversial and seems not to be in the interests of citizens. As Zambians, we need to examine our conscience, seek the truth and work towards bringing back hope to our people.

In our post election pastoral letter of 9th November 2008, we referred to the tension, polarization and divisions that were manifest in our nation. We note, with great concern that this tension has now heightened rather than dissipated and the problem is now more serious than ever before.

3. Growing Poverty Levels in our Country

The growing poverty levels in our country are worrying. The situation is aggravated by job losses and the rising cost of living especially high food prices. It is imperative that in looking for solutions, Government needs to involve more stakeholders to participate in drawing up realistic strategies that work.

The 2009 National Budget presented at the end of January was a lost opportunity for putting in place measures that alleviate the suffering of the lower income groups of our society such as those in rural areas and the peri-urban communities. The Government still needs to consider outlining a robust social security scheme and defining a new realistic minimum wage that is commensurate with the cost of living.

4. Corruption and abuse of office

Corruption in our society has become endemic. This must not be allowed to continue. Corruption in public office needs to be tackled decisively. Our Government seems to be in denial over the prevalence and high levels of corruption and abuse of authority among its ranks. Yet, the Auditor General's Report, which is a government document, clearly points to this problem every year. In saying so, we are alive to the fact that corruption exists also in the private sector. However, Government being a custodian of public resources shoulders greater responsibility in ensuring that resources placed under its care are used for the common good.

5. The National Constitutional Conference (NCC)

A country's constitution should be the most important document that provides a framework for both governance and development. We have significant concerns about the manner in which the National Constitutional Conference (NCC) has gone about conducting its business. To pretend that all is well with our constitution making process in the NCC would be a mistake.

When the NCC Act was promulgated, the Zambia Episcopal Conference and others opposed the manner in which the Act was framed. In spite of staying away from the NCC, we hoped against hope that the NCC would come up with a progressive document. Notwithstanding the fact that some of our gallant citizens are participating in the NCC, the exercise, in its debates and manner of operation, has fallen far short of what the people of Zambia want. The result will most likely be a constitution that entrenches Government's hold on power and one that is far removed from the aspirations of the people. In short, what this NCC has succeeded in doing is to mutilate the people's desires as correctly captured in the Mung'omba Draft Constitution.

We have been down this route before. Didn't the Mwanakatwe Constitution Review Commission of 1996 equally have good provisions? How then did we end up with a bad constitution of 1996? This then is where the problem lies. We have said time and again that content for the constitution has never been a real problem. By and large, Zambians are agreed on the larger issues of the content of our constitution. The problem has always been that of process.

From what we are now seeing, this NCC will go down in the history of Zambia as yet another of those constitution-making processes that gobbled millions and millions of Kwacha while a people driven constitution continues to elude us as a nation. For a poor country such as Zambia, this situation cannot be allowed to continue. It has become a moral issue.

6. Policy Change concerning selection to Grade Ten

It is our wish to see more of our youth receiving quality education up to Grade Twelve and beyond but only when we have the capacity to absorb them.

We are therefore concerned at the recent decision by the Ministry of Education to abolish a cut-off point for selection to grade 10 and offer places to all those who passed Grade 9. As major stakeholders in the education sector, we are gravely concerned that this decision has been made without any prior consultation and dialogue. In addition, it would seem the decision was taken without any prior planning and research to establish the effect and consequences of implementing this new policy especially given the existing limited capacity of schools to cope. We have established that as a result of the new policy many more pupils have been selected for Grade 10 than there are places currently available. Many schools are now being pressurised to accept a large number of additional pupils without having the necessary human, material and infrastructural capacity. We have further observed that with this new

policy, for example, the pupil-teacher ratio has been compromised resulting in the teacher's inability to allocate more time and attention to pupils.

While we appreciate the isolated developments of building new infrastructure, we consider this new policy ill-advised, ill-timed and not based on sound educational principles. It certainly prioritises numbers and compromises quality education. It is a superficial method of attaining the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) on education.

We appeal for a much greater investment in education and for proper planning to ensure that quality education is safeguarded. Sadly, this new policy is not matched by such investment and planning.

As shepherds and pastors we pose the question to the Government: Is our commitment as a nation to schooling rather than sound education?

7. Political and economic welfare of our nation

Though we consult widely, we do not pretend to bring technical expertise to the many complicated issues of statehood. This is the preserve of economists and politicians. However, we believe that our faith and moral principles can help guide the search for just and effective responses to the economic turmoil that threatens our country.

What is clear is that we are seeing Government officials and politicians preoccupied with jostling for power and strategically positioning themselves for the 2011 elections. In the process, the Government is increasingly becoming too sensitive and paranoid to any form of criticism, even constructive criticism.

We cannot stay aloof while some economic gains that we have made are lost. Some of the effects of the economic crisis are particular to Zambia such as the closure of the mines and the collapse of our currency.

Government does not seem to have a clear strategy for addressing the current deteriorating economic situation. There is too much hope being placed in the Multi Facility Economic Zones (MFEZ). Apart from the fact that they seem to offer economic hope, the MFEZ by their nature, are export oriented and the agreements authorize them to externalize all their earnings. The only gains foreseen for the local economy are the creation of menial jobs and opportunities for satellite economic activities but these are far insufficient to bring about prosperity for our local people. Equally, these agreements allow

most companies to import raw materials and labour. Whether indeed we shall see huge inflows of companies investing in these MFEZ is yet to be seen. In any case, these zones will only be in very limited areas (part of Lusaka and the Copperbelt). What about the rest of the country? We may see an increase in an already high rural-urban migration with the false hope that jobs are being created in town. This will further undermine rural development and growth and worsen the already high rural poverty.

We implore our leaders to work together for sustainable solutions. In our view, the global financial meltdown should be a catalyst that compels our leaders to work together regardless of their political inclinations.

8. The Agricultural Sector

For some time now, agriculture has been identified as an alternative to mining and arguably has potential to promote rural economic growth. However, the political will to make agriculture the mainstay of our economy has not been matched by investment and policies. There is also insufficient stimulus policy to motivate this growth. The Fertiliser Support Programme (FSP) is a disaster and a huge conduit for corrupt practices and abuse of authority. In fact, this programme must be abolished in favour of programmes such as Food Security Packs, which genuinely target vulnerable people. The tax incentives announced in this year's budget will only benefit commercial farmers who have money to import the zero rated agricultural equipment.

9. The Mining Sector

As Church leaders, we are very worried about the much talked about job losses in the mining companies and the great suffering these losses will cause to the many families who depend for their livelihoods on the mines. However, Government needs to be cautious in their anxiety to save jobs in the mining sector. There is a possibility of mining companies exaggerating the impact of the declining prices of metals on the world market in order for them to put Government in a weak bargaining situation. Mine owners, should not be allowed to use workers as human pawns, in order to compel the Government to provide more favourable conditions to them.

10. Everyone must work towards the common good

Our Catholic Social Teaching has always taught that all economic life should be grounded on moral principles and the economy exists for the human person and not the other way round. It is for this reason that our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, of happy memory, writing in the encyclical, *Centesimus Annus*, #35 calls for a “a society of free work, of enterprise and of participation” that is not directed against the market, but demands that the market be suitably controlled by the forces of society and by the state to assure that the basic needs of the whole society are satisfied.

We know that Government is calling for patience and calm among citizens. How is this possible in the face of so much adversity? How can the nation be patient and submissive when jobs are being lost everywhere especially in the mining industry? When the rainy season is almost over and farmers have not received supplies of fertilisers? When Government is obsessed with controlling the media? When year after year the Auditor General’s reports go unnoticed and culprits unpunished? When corruption is growing in a country that calls itself a Christian nation?

In support of the great Catholic tradition anchored on the Gospel and the Church’s Social Teaching, we are convinced that what is happening in our country calls for integrity at personal, corporate and institutional levels.

11. Other Challenges

Our country is striving towards prosperity and democratic governance. The process is long but we should not lose sight of many other challenges we still face as a nation. Some of these challenges are:

- 1) The need to aggressively combat HIV and AIDS, malaria and other diseases
- 2) The need to take immediate measures to domesticate protocols and enact laws that promote gender equality and empower women
- 3) Improvement of maternal health care and management of the growing number of orphans and vulnerable children
- 4) Reduction of child mortality
- 5) Rehabilitation of rural roads and building new ones
- 6) The need to halt deforestation

12. Recommendations

In light of what we have stated in this Pastoral Letter, we now address ourselves specifically to our Government, Members of Parliament and people of Good will.

A. We strongly urge the Government to:

- 1) Prioritise poverty eradication especially in rural and peri-urban areas;
- 2) Reduce wastage arising from endless workshops and seminars, feasibility studies, trips and large foreign delegations. The resources gained from these savings must be re-directed towards poverty eradication programmes;
- 3) Stop the tacit collusion of trying to undermine the fight against corruption and strengthen rather than undermine the Task Force on Corruption as well as the office of the Attorney General;
- 4) Set up an independent Commission of Inquiry to investigate Government procurement procedures in all Government Ministries;
- 5) Prosecute wrong doers and widely publicise any disciplinary action arising from the Auditor General's reports;
- 6) Disband the NCC and instead put in place a small, non-partisan, group of qualified technocrats to fine-tune the Mung'omba Draft Constitution and after a Referendum, Parliament should formally enact the new constitution in its entirety;
- 7) Galvanise Zambians and put in place urgent and effective measures required to address the problems of the economy;
- 8) Rescind, immediately, the new policy of qualifying to Grade ten and instead work towards a culture of consultation and genuine appreciation of the challenges of education in this country with the view to providing solutions;
- 9) Desist from intimidating and mistreating members of the public and the media; and
- 10) Review the Fertiliser Support Programme, grain storage and marketing and the role of the Food Reserve Agency with the view of formulating policies that give predictable direction to all stakeholders.

B. We implore Members of Parliament to:

Redouble their efforts of spearheading the mitigation of pressing needs of people in their constituencies and to desist from being preoccupied with the desire to win the next elections.

C. We reassure the People of Good Will:

- 1) That even in these difficult times, we know that God is with us and loves us. We call everyone to prayer. The nation must pray without ceasing for the good of our country.
- 2) We also urge you to put into action the tenets of your faith and beliefs. We must never as citizens do anything that lowers the dignity of fellow human beings; abets corruption, or undermines the respect for the sacredness of creation.

13. Conclusion

As we stated in our last pastoral letter, we, the Catholic Bishops are still open to facilitating dialogue in the nation. Nevertheless, the Government should also promote genuine and effective dialogue by embracing key partners to build consensus on important national issues. To stifle the voice of the people and to ignore their legitimate demand is to take peace for granted. No price is too high to pay so that we may continue to live in peace in Zambia.

Finally, as Catholic Bishops, we wish to remind the Government of its duty to preserve peace by listening to the voice of the people.

May God bless you all.

Presented on *1st March 2009* and signed below by the following:

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