

THE SAD STORY OF MALAWI

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

Second Sunday of Lent, 25th February, 2024

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

We greet you all in the name of Jesus Christ, who is our Lord and Saviour. During this Lenten Season, we are asked to examine our lives in the light of the Good News of Jesus, in the light of His Word in the Bible and in the light of the example He gave us when He lived among us over two thousand years ago. 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 passion, death and resurrection.

We also take this time of Lent to examine where we, as a country, are in Malawi. During this year, we will clock four years of the ‘*Tonse Alliance*’ Government. If Malawians ask themselves, ‘AM I BETTER OFF NOW THAN I WAS FOUR YEARS AGO?’, the resounding answer for the vast majority of Malawians is an emphatic ‘NO’. It is clear that the story that the *Tonse Alliance* Government told us before being elected into government is not being realised. Yes, the nation has suffered from crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the disaster caused by cyclone Freddy, droughts, floods, etc. These crises have shaken systems, taken lives, uprooted whole villages and

wiped out livelihoods. However, at the same time, we have witnessed a glaring failure of leadership. Leaders have resorted to being salesmen of words, with no serious attempt at keeping any promises they made to the people. In fact, rather than fulfilling any promises, they are making new ones with total disregard for accountability. Is it all just words, words, empty words? Many empty words have been uttered on the following topics:

1. Fruitless Engagements with the State President

Fellow Malawians, mindful of our prophetic role to be the voice of the voiceless, we have privately engaged the State President several times. Still, we fail to see any positive change in the general governance of our dear Malawi or any improvement in the plight of our poor brothers and sisters across the country. We have repeatedly warned the Government leadership that if poor governance continued, the state of our nation would become far worse than it was four years ago. Unfortunately, our prediction has come true. While our efforts to engage the Government leadership have been largely unsuccessful, as Christians we keep on trying hoping for change at some stage. With the hope of hastening such change we hereby amplify the cry of the poor and suffering Malawians through a different approach.

2. Corruption

Corruption is still rampant. From the top down, people with high connections are unjustly turning into multimillionaires overnight to the detriment of the majority of people who are being kept

in grinding poverty. Sadly, the corruption has seeped into all areas of life in Malawi. This is the reality we are in now. Every effort has been made to systematically hollow out and weaken oversight institutions, almost all of which have now been rendered useless. The fight against corruption has been allowed to collapse. Shame on those who have allowed this to happen! What remains is a game of make-believe, the mere appearance of fighting corruption. People are not fooled by this. As followers of Jesus Christ, we live in hope. In this context of Christian hope, we salute the heroic few, like the Malawi Law Society and others who firmly believe that the sin of corruption is not the way to go and who are still at the forefront of the fight against corruption. They have not lost hope that true justice for all is possible under proper leadership.

3. Under the Watch of the *Tonse* Government

What is happening to our leadership? Under their watch and too often with their collusion, we note the following:

- a. Speeches about curtailing expenditure on leadership are just empty words. In reality nothing changes at all. Continuous excuses for travel and accumulating allowances for large entourages which drain public funds, have become the norm.
- b. There is a perception that suppliers under investigation for corruption are being favoured with millions of dollars in payments at a time when the nation is suffering due to a shortage of forex.

- c. Dubious deals with suspect and shady suppliers are the order of the day. There appears to be no prioritising the needs of the majority who struggle to survive day by day. The cry of the poor is drowned out by the prevailing mis-procurement in ministries, departments and agencies through the use of dubious middlemen, some of whom are linked directly to the President's Advisors at the State House.
- d. We have seen the issuance of sovereign guarantees to dubious individuals with nothing to show for the welfare of the country, thus putting the country at risk of an even further debt burden.
- e. We have seen a journalist go into hiding for merely telling the nation the truth about the military's transactions with an individual who is under investigation for corruption. Is it an attempt at taking us back to the one-party state style of dictatorship?
- f. We are disturbed by the lingering rumour that there are plans to hurriedly change the 50%+1 electoral system. Pursuing this would be as grave a mistake as attempting to change our constitution to allow a third term. If it is indeed being considered, the wise thing to do is to take it off the table right away, as it would cause great discontent among the public.
- g. Nepotism is also rife. Appointment of senior officers in government appears to favour one tribe or region over the others. All Malawians are equal. During the campaign, we were told repeatedly that nepotism would be history, yet now what we see is different from what was promised.

- h. Confusion surrounds the Public Service Reform Report. There is a general feeling that the Report has very beneficial recommendations for citizens of the country, but for unknown reasons, it is kept a secret.
- i. The *Tonse Alliance* seems not to care at all about any of the promises it made to the people.
- j. The Affordable Inputs Programme has become a joke, targeting only a handful of people. Where is the fertiliser which is to be bought for MK4,995 per bag? As a result, the nation faces food insecurity.
- k. The purchasing power of the Kwacha has been greatly reduced, yet incomes have not kept pace with the devaluation.
- l. The suffering in the villages has worsened. Some families face starvation, as they could not afford the fertilizer that was on the market and further problems due to erratic rains.
- m. Parents/guardians cannot afford school/college fees for their children/wards and many students/pupils are forced out of all levels of education. As well as an injustice to those immediately affected, this will have negative repercussions for our country going forward.
- n. Our roads continue to deteriorate rapidly. For instance, main routes like the M1 and the M5 roads are an embarrassment to our nation.

4. Judiciary

Even the Judiciary appears to have abandoned its integrity and has embroiled itself in corruption and partisanship. The price of judges and magistrates is no longer taboo; it's an open secret that some lawyers thrive by bribing judges and magistrates to defeat the ends of justice. Some judges and magistrates are accountable to no one. They take years to hear a case, yet the Judiciary does nothing to discipline them. Instead, they are rewarded with promotion. We believe that the Ministry of Justice is frustrating efforts by the Malawi Law Society to put in place a law that regulates the judges. This law deserves our support because a solid legal system is the backbone of any country that wants to eliminate corruption.

5. Victimization of Elderly People on Accusations of Practicing Witchcraft

Some elderly people in Malawi live in fear that their lives are in danger. Many older men and women face the reality of being victims of witchcraft-based violence and other grave human rights violations and abuses. In the year 2023 alone, 78 elderly persons were tortured and 25 were killed for being accused of practicing witchcraft. A recent (27th December 2023) case of assault and harassment was of Christina Chiwoko, aged 66 from Mwanza Village, Traditional Authority Chiwere in Dowa District. Christina was buried up to the neck while being interrogated about alleged witchcraft activities. While cases of victimisation of older women and men are on the rise, there are no noticeable concrete steps by the Government to address and remedy this critical human rights problem. One avenue to ensure the

provision of effective justice to elderly persons is to strengthen the legal framework. The Government has been coy on the tabling of the Elderly Persons Bill in Parliament to pass it into law. With the enactment of the Elderly Persons Law, it is envisioned that elderly men and women will be protected through enhancing their security and guaranteeing their access to justice.

6. Respect and Care for Creation

It is now universal knowledge that planet Earth is under grave threat from climate change brought on by our failure to respect and care for the environment. If we continue as we are, future generations will be deprived of what they need to live on. Malawi, too, must honour the international agreements on climate and environment that she has signed up to. We call on the Government to renew its efforts to:

- a. manage and preserve our forests;
- b. continue to encourage the planting of trees;
- c. provide and promote alternatives to charcoal;
- d. promote solar and other clean energy sources;
- e. enforce sustainable ways of using natural resources;
- f. promote sustainable farming methods, for example, climate-smart agriculture, etc.

7. Malawi Arriving at ‘Bagamoyo’ instead of the ‘Promised Land’

Fellow Malawians, we feel very sorry to say that because of all the difficulties and failures listed above, most Malawians have lost hope in the *Tonse* Government and its leadership. In spite of all the excitement that the *Tonse* Government would lead

Malawians to the promised land, only four years later, to the disappointment of all except the few well-connected people, Malawi has ended up at Bagamoyo – a city on the east coast of Tanzania, which when a slave arrived there he or she lost all hope of being free again. Instead of reaching the promised land of prosperity we are bogged down in the same land we wanted to leave, namely the land of hunger, disease, poverty, corruption and a like. Hence, most Malawians, except the very few well-connected ones, feel strongly that there is nothing else they can do to turn around the country or improve the deteriorating living conditions. They fail to see anybody in the current Government who cares about them or who is able to improve their situation. They wonder how this Government would answer God’s question to Cain: “Where is your brother Abel?” Would they answer like Cain? “I don't know. Am I supposed to take care of my brother?” (Genesis 4:9).

8. Intraparty Squabbling

We watch with dismay the continuous squabbles that are being manifested in the political parties. What is seen are continuous fights that either end in circles of expulsions of members from parties or court injunctions and cases. In our view, these are actions that are driving democracy backwards and have the potential to throw this country into chaos and further dehumanizing poverty. Are these individuals or groupings fighting for an opportunity to serve the interest of Malawians or to forge opportunities to take up advantageous positions and satisfy their own interests? Malawians are crying out for political parties that put the interests of the nation before their own interests.

9. The Evil of Religious Intolerance and Violence

Recently, we have witnessed increased incidents of religious based physical and verbal attacks in some parts of our peace-loving country. Regardless of what triggered the said forms of violence and attacks, we condemn such attacks in the strongest terms possible. Such barbaric behaviour has no place in a democratic and God fearing country which is based on the rule of law, love and a constitution which guarantees freedom of religion for all people in this country.

We call on all citizens to respect the religious beliefs of others and to allow them to practice their faith in freedom. We call upon law enforcements agents to act decisively wherever such evil and criminal acts occur without fear of favour. We call upon all religious leaders, Christian or not, to assist their fellow believers to translate their religious beliefs to love, peace, unity and justice as anything contrary to these values comes from the evil one, namely Satan.

10. Roadmap Towards 2025 Elections

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future”, (Jeremiah 29:11). When these words were spoken, Israel was in exile for their disobedience. A false prophet had told Israel that God would deliver them from Babylon in two years’ time, and Jeremiah had come to set the record straight. He delivers the heartbreaking news that Israel will spend the next 70 years in Babylon. This is not the news that they wanted to hear. This would mean that an entire generation would die in exile. But God wants them to know that He still has a plan

for the wayward nation. As time drags on, they need to hold onto the belief that God has not abandoned them. This hope will help them maintain their stamina in the decades to come.

With all the ills and challenges listed above and many more, we might be tempted to believe that we are a doomed nation. This is not true. God does not forsake His children. We too, as time drags on, need to hold onto the belief that God has not abandoned us. Our faith in the merciful God should help us maintain our stamina in the decades to come as we limp towards prosperity.

God requires our cooperation in order to assist us get out the mess we are in. One way of cooperating with Him is to actively and wisely participate in forthcoming elections. As much as our leaders are responsible for the many problems we face as a country, we the citizens, the voters, are also responsible for these problems by choosing leaders who are not able to govern the country properly. Hence, as we approach the 2025 elections, we want to remind everyone that:

- a. Not being interested in politics translates to not being concerned about your quality of life, well-being, job, freedom and future.
- b. Politics needs sound foundations, legitimacy and an ethical framework to be humane and useful.
- c. It is important that everyone exercises their right to vote so that those elected are truly representatives of the people.
- d. It is essential that young people exercise their right to vote as the outcome of the elections will determine their future.

- e. Every citizen has the duty to stand up for freedom and justice.
- f. In the lead-up to the elections, every Malawian is called upon to be a good citizen by avoiding violence and destructive behaviour.
- g. The media, money, power, and government/party machinery can be used by politicians in devious ways to secure votes.
- h. It is essential to ask of candidates, what their record of service has been, what they are capable of doing, before voting for them – not who they are or where they come from or what connections they have.

11. Conclusion

We cannot continue this way as a nation. Our leaders need to stop being greedy and serve the people that put them in power. We need truly empowered oversight institutions that are independent and free from political influence. Parliament needs to stop politicking and serve the people. The scenes we have seen of late have been nothing short of shame. We are witnessing a serious lack of credible and visionary leadership in the country. This is the root cause of all the problems we now face. Unless the leadership stops being greedy, gets serious about governing and vigorously tackles corruption, we will not only remain stuck in the very spot we find ourselves in now, but will sink even further. We call for a robust legal framework which will regulate the judiciary so that it will be accountable. In the name of God, we call upon our leaders to hear the cry of the poor.

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, justice, patriotism, love and peace in Malawi.

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

*O God bless our land of Malawi,
Keep it a land of peace.
Put down each and every enemy,
Hunger, disease, envy.
Join together all our hearts as one,
That we be free from fear.
Bless our leader, each and every one,
And Mother Malawi.*

*Our own Malawi, this land so fair,
Fertile and brave and free.
With its lakes, refreshing mountain air,
How greatly blest are we.
Hills and valleys, soil so rich and rare,
Give us a bounty free.
Wood and forest, plains so broad and fair,
All-beauteous Malawi.*

*Freedom ever, let us all unite
To build up Malawi.
With our love, our zeal and loyalty,*

*Bringing our best to her.
In time of war, or in time of peace,
One purpose and one goal.
Men and women serving selflessly
In building Malawi.*

Signed:

Most Reverend George Tambala
Right Reverend Montfort Stima

Most Reverend Thomas Msusa
Right Reverend Peter Musikuwa
Right Reverend Martin Mtumbuka
Right Reverend John Ryan
Right Reverend Peter Chifukwa
Right Reverend Alfred Chaima
Right Reverend Yohane Nyirenda
Right Reverend Vincent Mwakhwawa

President, Archbishop of Lilongwe
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