



The Holy See

***ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II
TO THE NEW AMBASSADOR
OF THE REPUBLIC OF MALAWI
TO THE HOLY SEE****

Thursday, 14 December 2000

Mr Ambassador,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you today and to accept the Letters of Credence appointing you Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Malawi to the Holy See. I am grateful for the good wishes which you have brought from President Bakili Muluzi. Please convey to His Excellency my own cordial greetings, and assure him of my prayers to Almighty God for the peace and well-being of the nation.

You have suggested that this is a time of both promise and threat for Malawi. With the coming of democracy, society has made notable gains in many areas and that is a cause for satisfaction. Yet all Malawians recognize the need to strengthen still further the structures of democratic life, which are always more fragile than they seem. Unless a true sense of participation and of shared responsibility for the common good takes deep root in national life, there will always be a threat of division and violence, as people are tempted to choose force rather than dialogue as the way of organizing the political community. The recent elections to which you have referred are a hopeful sign that Malawi is moving in the right direction towards the integral development of all sectors of society. To follow this path does not mean uncritically to adopt modes of social organization which may be appropriate in other societies but inappropriate in Malawi. Your people must shape a democratic life which is truly African and which respects the genius of Malawi's culture. But there are values common to every healthy society and every well-functioning democracy; and these point the way to the future for which the people of Malawi are now striving.

You have mentioned the daunting problems facing your country, and the Holy See shares your sense of concern. Some of the problems are not new. Malawi has long been troubled by endemic poverty which creates a situation of dependence upon donor countries. The causes are both

internal and external, and any attempt to deal with the problem must also be both national and global.

Education is clearly a vital factor in a country's development, since ignorance and poverty always conspire to undermine human dignity and the fabric of society. All education is inspired by a particular understanding of life and of the human condition. In this sense religious education plays a unique role in the educational process since it is never a mere imparting of knowledge about religion in general but reaches into the recesses of each individual's conscience and engages each one's inviolable right to freedom in this basic area of life. That is why the State is obliged to respect the choices which parents make with regard to the religious education of their children. It is the State's duty to ensure their citizens' freedom to make those choices and not to seek to limit or control them.

The Catholic Church has always dedicated considerable resources to the field of education, and this is also the case in Malawi, as you have graciously acknowledged. The education which the Church promotes looks to the integral development of the human person. Its purpose is to cultivate the intellect and develop the capacity for right judgement, to help young people to assimilate their cultural heritage and form a sense of moral and ethical values in readiness for their future professional, civic, family and national responsibilities (cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, *Gravissimum Educationis*, 5). An all-round education seeks to develop every aspect of the individual – physical, intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual. For there is an ecology of human growth which means that if any one of these elements is overlooked all the others suffer. This is the vision of education which ought to inspire Malawi's leaders as they strive to raise educational levels.

You have also mentioned the health problems now facing your nation, as HIV/AIDS casts a heavy shadow upon the land. The world is looking to medical research to provide an answer to the lethal virus, and there are signs of hope on this front. But in the meantime there are vast challenges for countries like yours: to tend the sick; to care for those who survive, especially the orphans; to increase general awareness of the nature and extent of the problem; to resist the moral erosion which favours the spread of the disease; to stand guard against life-styles which aggravate that erosion; to strengthen the family in every possible way, recognizing that it is the basic unit of human society and the place where moral virtue and the culture of life must first take root. In these tasks, Malawi will always find in the Catholic Church a reliable partner. Catholic health-care has been, as you say, part of your history; and it will be no less a part of your future. Both the needs of your people and the demands of the Gospel impose this duty upon us.

Mr Ambassador, I am confident that as you fulfil your mission the cordial relations which exist between the Republic of Malawi and the Holy See will be further strengthened and enriched. I offer you my best wishes and assure you that the offices of the Holy See will always be ready to assist you. Upon Your Excellency and all the citizens of your beloved nation I invoke the abundant

blessings of Almighty God.

**Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, vol. XXIII, 2 p. 1115-1117.

L'Osservatore Romano 15.12. 2000 p.6.

L'Osservatore Romano. Weekly edition in English n.51/52 p.6.

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