

**A Pastoral Letter
of the Catholic Bishops of Uganda**

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Dear brothers and sisters,

1. We, the Catholic Bishops of the Uganda Episcopal Conference, greet you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, whose suffering and death we try to emulate during this Lenten season. Lent, as we know it, is a time of dying to self and freeing oneself from sin in order to rise with Christ at the appointed time (1 Cor 15:23). Through fasting, prayer and almsgiving, we submit to God and allow the Holy Spirit to accomplish His work in us.

2. In October 1962, the Conference issued the first Pastoral Letter with the title: "Shaping Our National Destiny". In that letter, our predecessors laid the foundational values for the new state, Uganda. They envisioned a country built on common good, human dignity, justice, unity, respect of human rights, love, peaceful co-existence, patriotism, equality, and democratic and accountable governance. A number of these principles found their way into various Constitutions of Uganda. Our last pastoral letter "Break the Yoke" which was issued in September 2022, spoke against the evil of human trafficking that had gripped our country.

3. Now, we write this Pastoral Letter to express our solidarity with you in your joys and challenges. We want to proclaim the hope that the Gospel offers to those who believe in the liberating love of Christ. Hence, we have chosen the theme: **The Truth will set you free** (Jn. 8:31-32) to enable us, like Jesus did during his time, to

challenge ourselves in the prevailing social circumstances in our country. The times call for individual and collective responsibility to make our country true to its motto "For God and My Country".

4. In this Pastoral Letter, like others before it, we are guided by our cardinal mandate which is to preach the Gospel to every creature (Mk. 16:15). By so doing, we are exercising our prophetic role; not as some privileged group, over and above the rest, but as part of that one body of Christ entrusted with the responsibility to lead and to journey with the people of God.

5. We are guided further by the teaching of the Church regarding temporal affairs, which found fertile ground during the Second Vatican Council held from 1962 to 1965. One of the Council documents, *Ad Gentes* (The Decree on Missionary Activity) (no.1), emphasized the special mission of the Church in the world as the proclamation of the Good News so "that all things may be restored in Christ and all men may constitute one family in Him and one people of God". The Council further recognized the Church's existence as tied to the joys and cries that characterize the world, to which it must pay keen attention.¹

6. We also reaffirm what late Archbishop Joseph Kiwanuka stated in his pastoral letter "Church and State: Guiding Principles" issued in November 1961: "Whatever is consecrated to God, all matters concerning souls, religious and moral matters, are governed by the Church, who

judges them” meaning that the church has the authority to delve into the moral issues that underscore the different spheres of human life. In fact, it is part of its mission to pass moral judgments in all spheres of society, including politics, ‘whenever the fundamental rights of man or the salvation of souls requires’². Accordingly, the social, political, economic and environmental spheres, where human relationships subsist, are not devoid of the influence of the Church. Indeed, the “Church's social doctrine illuminates society with the light of the Gospel, which brings freedom and truth”³.

7. All the Constitutions of the Republic of Uganda, since independence, guaranteed freedom of worship and reaffirmed the dedication of our country to God. Both the National Motto and Anthem highlight the influence of the divine sphere in the administration of the state and public affairs. The Anthem, in particular, commits us to cooperation, peaceful co-existence, hard work, and respect of human dignity. Further, the 1995 Constitution (Art 1) begins with recognition of the “people of Uganda” as the principal purpose of all organs of the state. It presents nation-building as a collective responsibility of citizens and leaders.

8. We are alive to the fact that the current Constitution was crafted against the backdrop of high expectations that swept the country when the National Resistance Army (NRA) captured power in 1986. That event, no doubt, ushered reforms in the political and economic life of

Uganda which have since become important building blocks for a peaceful and prosperous country.

9. In our pastoral letter "With a New Heart and a New Spirit" of June 1986 (par. 4), we acknowledged efforts by the new government to keep the effects of military action to a minimum; to ensure the respect of human life and property; and to treat prisoners of war well. We also observed and were happy with the 'attempt to use political power as a means of service and through negotiation', and 'to overcome tribal divisions and prejudices. In light of this, we concluded: "...all these ways of acting have been a most welcome breath of fresh air for us in Uganda and an example to the rest of the world." This was the hope that our independence also evoked in 1962.

10. In this pastoral letter, we ask whether we are still guided by these values in our day-to-day interactions and administration of public affairs. We, therefore, evoke both personal and collective reflection on how far we have each contributed to the current state of affairs in our country. We do not claim to present an exhaustive list of challenges we are facing as a country, but only what we consider more significant and requiring immediate attention.

Basis and Signs of Hope

11. As we have already noted above, Uganda today is far from what it was at independence. Indeed, many of our people recall the struggles preceding our independence in

1962; the struggle for identity, unity, equality, democracy, and human rights. Without delving into statistics, for example, Uganda's population has quadrupled, largely because of political stability and improved economic conditions. We say this without forgetting the political turmoil that ensued from the 1960s to 1990s, characterized by wars in all parts of the country, and insecurity which caused loss of life and property and, sometimes, threatened to alienate whole populations from mainstream political and socio-economic development processes of the country.

12. Worthy to note is also the relative democracy and expansion of the economy and other sectors. However, there are many questions lingering in the minds of Ugandans, both young and old; whether, for example, in the sixty-two years of independence a lot more could have been achieved, and how our society has descended into some of the worst social, political, economic, environmental, and moral malaise.

Some Social Challenges of Concern

13. Despite the resolute steps we have taken as religious leaders to build the moral conscience of our people, the country seems to slide back into moral and spiritual turmoil, and we too are asking, why? We believe, however, that the current social, environmental, political and economic ills are indicative of a moral and spiritual crisis that have eaten deep into our value system. If this were

not the case, how else would one explain the fact that all this is happening in a society rooted in Christian and other religious beliefs, and a value-laden national Constitution? We say this fully aware of the frailty of human nature. We know, like St Paul, that many of us are willing to live the values prescribed by scriptures and the national Constitution, but the body is weak (*Mt 26:41; Gal 5:17*). We take inspiration from Esther who prayed for the children of Israel so that God's purpose will be achieved in their lives (*Est 4:12ff*). We pray for our society so that the Lord will grant us the grace to overcome the obstacles to our spiritual struggles and become His true witnesses. It is a call we make to our leaders and those they govern and to all persons whose decisions and actions affect our country directly and indirectly.

14. It is to be noted that the three moral duties of every man and woman are: to recognize and worship the one true God, the Creator of all things; to be the keeper of his or her brother or sister, meaning to love his or her neighbour because he or she loves God (*Dt 6:5, Lev 19:18; Mt 22:37*); and to be the steward of creation (*Gen 1:29*). Human dignity has its roots in the unique place of man and woman in creation. We read in the book of Genesis that God created man and woman and he created them in his own image and gave them dominion over all things (*Gen 1:28-29*). A society that does not recognize this simple truth cannot value life. In such society, the human person is turned into an object of exploitation for selfish ends. Our

country is not far from such a society. Many of you know that trafficking in persons; homicide; political intolerance; corruption; child labour; sexual exploitation of women and children; and discrimination of persons on ethnic, tribal and other grounds, are widespread in Uganda. This is not only immoral, but also sinful and contradicts the plan of God for humankind. It points to lack of awareness or deliberate evasion of our moral duties to uphold human dignity and to be each other's keeper.

Homicide

15. The cry of Abel continues to resonate in our society today (*Gen* 4:9-16). His murder by Cain is the first homicide recorded in the Holy Bible, and was motivated by envy. It was love put to the test. Love is a fundamental principle for harmonious society and human relationships. Love drives us to cherish life, share what we have with those who do not have, and forgive those who wrong us (*Mt* 5:43-6:18; *Mt* 25:31-46). Where there is no love, human life is disregarded, the poor are ignored and trampled upon, and inequalities prevail. We are concerned that many Ugandans today are not doing enough to ensure love is entrenched in our country as a common good. Yet, although not explicitly mentioned in the national Constitution, love underpins constitutional values such as human rights, peaceful coexistence, equality, justice, participation, transparency, and accountability.

16. We watch and read almost daily in the media, shocking stories of murders, some of which have happened due to domestic violence, perpetrated by one spouse against the other. We have also watched with awe the aggression meted against innocent children by some parents, domestic workers and witchdoctors, some of which have resulted in grave injuries and fatalities. Many people have also continued to lose their lives in the hands of mobs and individuals taking the law into their own hands. This violent mentality has extended to the unborn and newly born, thousands of whom have been denied the opportunity to live due to abortion, neglect and abandonment. What is at stake in all this is a deep-seated disregard for the sanctity of life in our society, emanating from failure to be each other's keeper, inordinate love of money and weaknesses in the judicial system and other mechanisms for conflict resolution.

17. The position of the Church on killing remains the same and is rooted in scriptures. It is said, "Thou shall not kill" (*Ex* 20:13). Intentional killing, including of the unborn, is, therefore, gravely immoral and sinful. We affirm what the Church has always taught that "human life must be respected and protected absolutely from the moment of conception"⁴. The reason is that all life belongs to God who alone has the powers to give and take it as and when He wills. The Lord tells us in the Bible: "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you and before you were born, I consecrated you" (*Jer* 1:5; cf *Job* 10:8-12; *Ps* 22:10-11).

Similarly, the Church teaches us: "You shall not kill the embryo by abortion and shall not cause the newborn to perish"⁵.

18. It is, therefore, incumbent upon each one of us to defend life in all its stages, including the unborn. Where we have fallen short of this duty, either by commission or omission, let us seek the mercy of God and reconcile with affected persons and families in order that we and our country will receive the blessings reserved for us by God, the origin and author of life.

Unjust Accumulation of Wealth

19. We have, on a number of occasions, through our pastoral letters and messages, warned against the danger of greed and illicit accumulation of wealth. While material wealth is not in itself evil, the Bible is against ill-gotten wealth (*Am* 8:6). It also detests attachment to wealth because of its potential to alienate us from God and fellow humans, as demonstrated in Jesus' encounter with the rich young man (*Mk* 10:17-22; *Mt* 19:16-22; *Lk* 18:18-30). Jesus tells us that true self-fulfillment and abundance resides in our relationship with God and others, not in material wealth (*Lk* 12:15). Similarly, rather than ask God for material wealth, Solomon asked for wisdom (*1 Kg* 3:9; *Wis* 9:4).

20. The pursuit and glorification of wealth that characterises our society today should be cause for

concern to every believer and people of good will. There are many people whose preoccupation with wealth has caused untold suffering to others. We see this in the rampant land grabbing, abuse of public resources, theft, robbery, bribery, cheating, and lies. These are besides many other forms of immorality and sins that have taken root in our society. What is shocking is that many of these evils are so perverse that we have become accustomed to them. It is a sign that we are yet to be true keepers of our brothers and sisters. Like St Paul, we, therefore, encourage each one of us to do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but to consider others more than ourselves and to look to the interests of others (*Phil 2:3-4*).

Jealousy

21. The scriptures present two dimensions of jealousy. On the one hand, it is linked to the character of God as the omnipotent and only God: "You shall not worship any other god, for the Lord is 'the Jealous One'; a jealous God is he" (*Ex 34:14*). Similarly, St. Paul uses jealousy positively to express his deep, protective concern for the spiritual well-being of the Church in Corinth (*2 Cor 11:2*). Unlike human jealousy, God's jealousy is motivated by love, and God expects us to reciprocate in order to attain eternal life (*1Jn 4:7-21*).

22. On the other hand, human jealousy, is among those acts considered by St Paul as contrary to life in the spirit (*2 Cor 11:2*). Human jealousy, is among those acts

considered by St Paul as contrary to life in the spirit destructive and does not wish the other good, for it is driven by selfishness. We envy people who have what we do not have even when they have acquired them legitimately, or people who are what we are not. This is one of the causes of rampant homicide, witchcraft, slander and blackmail in our society. St Paul does not speak well of such behaviour (*Gal* 5:19-21). It shows that we are still being controlled by our own desires (*1 Cor* 3:3) and this contradicts our call to love, for as St Paul points out: "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs" (*1 Cor* 13:4-5). We, therefore, say with St Paul, "Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other" (*Gal* 5:26).

Sectarianism

23. The tendency to identify with tribe, religion and other social groups has taken a negative trend in our society. This problem has been with us all along and has greatly impeded social services and the evolution of the Ugandan state into a true nation. Today, we see widespread discrimination, oppression, nepotism, hatred and violence in public offices and communities based on misconstrued social identities. The Bible warns us against such tendencies. Jesus prayed for oneness of his followers; thus, setting the precedent for unity in the Church and society: "I pray that they may all be one. May they be one, so that the world will believe that you sent me" (*Jn* 17:20-

21). Similarly, while addressing himself to the controversy over circumcision of gentiles, St Paul emphasized faith in Christ as the only uniting factor and condition for grace (*Ga/* 5:3-4). He also decried the division among Christians who claimed to be either for Paul or for Apollos (*1 Cor* 3:4-5).

24. There is, therefore, a need for each one of us to do something to eliminate tribalism and other forms of sectarianism in Uganda. We should do more to change our hearts and unify the people across the different social and political divides (*Jn* 17:20-23); seek justice and the good of others, not just those of our tribe (*Mic* 6:8); emphasize our shared identity in Christ which breaks tribal and other sectarian barriers (*Eph* 2:14-18); demonstrate Christ-like love to those who are different from us (*Lk* 6:27-36); work for peace between opposing groups (*Mt* 5:9); be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger (*Jas* 1:19-20); and overcome evil with good rather than retaliate against other tribes or groups (*Mt* 5:38-42; *Rom* 12:14-21). Let us continue to see our brothers and sisters as images of God bestowed with divine dignity (*Gen* 1:26), and, together with them as a family of God.

Economic and Social Inequalities

25. In our pastoral work, we see poverty on the faces of many people. Often, this has been attributed to sloth, laziness or fickleness, ignoring the structural factors that have condemned the poor to this condition. They include

an economic structure that favours capital at the expense of labour and primary producers, and a political arrangement that empowers leaders at the expense of the people. This has created and continues to widen the gap between those who have and those who do not have. According to the Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 30.1% of the population of Uganda lives below the poverty line and about 44% of children experience monetary child poverty.⁶ This state of deprivation and inequality has created discontent in sections of the population and is partly responsible for riots, mental health issues, and domestic violence, among others. Prophet Amos famously berates those who exploit the poor and the weak (*Am* 6:4-7). It is, therefore, incumbent upon leaders to ensure that our country's economic and political systems serve all Ugandans, and, above all, provide opportunities for the poor to get out of their poverty traps. We call for preferential option for the poor in our planning as a country.

26. In the Catholic Church's social doctrine "preferential option for the poor" is among cardinal principles of our Christian faith. It has its basis in Christ's mission: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me. He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor and broken hearted" (*Lk* 4:18; *Is* 61:1-2). Jesus identifies himself with the needy and rewards those who help them. Though divine, he took the form of a slave and accepted to serve others (*Phil* 2:7), and washed the feet of his disciples (*Jn* 13:1-20). Pope John Paul II

tells us that "...preference for the poor...cannot but embrace the immense multitude of the hungry, the needy, the homeless, those without medical care and above all, those without hope for a better future like the youth. "7

27. It is not lost on us that over the years, government undertook various initiatives to eradicate poverty. They include: *Entandikwa* (Capital), *Bonna Bagaggawale* (Prosperity for All), Operation Wealth Creation (OWC), *Emyooga* (Specialized Skills Enterprises), and, most recently, Parish Development Model (PDM). However, these initiatives were marred with corruption, underfunding, poor planning, political patronage, bureaucratic red tape, nepotism, poor internal monitoring, and financial illiteracy on the part of intended beneficiaries. Consequently, the intended goals could not be fully realized.

28. We are further disturbed by the distorted understanding of the right to private property which is fuelling land grabbing and corruption in the country and has greatly undermined the common good. No individual or group should amass the earth's goods as to deprive others of the basic necessities of life. Mahatma Ghandi once said: "... the world has enough resources for everyone's need, but not for everyone's greed."8

29. We contend that to ignore the plight of the poor would mean becoming like the rich man in scripture who pretended not to know the beggar Lazarus lying at his gate

(*Lk* 16:19-31). We, therefore, reiterate the principle of universal destination of goods; that God created the goods of the earth for the benefit of all (*Gen* 1:26-28). We encourage everybody to practice justice in their dealings with others and support the poor to realize their full potential.

The Scourge of HIV/AIDS

30. We are cognisant of the significant drop in new HIV infections and AIDS-related deaths in the country in the past decade, partly attributed to the extensive roll out of HIV treatment and prevention services. However, HIV epidemic control has not yet been attained, with new HIV infections and AIDS burden still very high. A total of 1,492,407 Ugandans are living with HIV and with 730 new infections every week and 20,000 deaths in 2023.⁹ Adolescent Girls and Young Women (AGYW) continue to have high HIV incidence at 6,600 new infections.¹⁰ This situation is disturbing as funding for HIV/AIDS services from domestic and external sources have declined currently and prospects for the future are uncertain. The war against HIV/AIDS is yet to be won as more is needed in treatment and prevention services.

31. We appeal to all stakeholders in the country, right from the Cabinet, Parliament, local governments, civil society, development partners, the private sector, and communities to play their respective roles. In that way, we will all work to end this horrible epidemic and hand over an

AIDS-free generation to posterity. As Church, we are committed to creating awareness and providing health services for our people through our pastoral work, and we encourage the people to test for HIV/AIDS and those found positive to enrol for treatment. Above all we call for self-control and a responsible living.

Maternal and Infant Mortality

32. According to Uganda Bureau of Statistics, maternal mortality ratio is 207 deaths per 100,000 live births¹¹. Infant mortality rate is 36,858 deaths per 1,000 live birth, 3.04% which is a decline from 2024¹². Progress has been made in the reduction of maternal, infant and child mortality rates over the years. Nevertheless, more can be achieved with investment in the health sector to ensure all Ugandans especially the weak and vulnerable enjoy this precious gift of life. This requires sustainable financing mechanisms to enhance health services, availability and affordability of medicine, and good services. The Church remains committed to mobilizing the masses (formal and informal sectors) to contributing to the national health insurance a route that can guarantee universal health coverage.

Corruption

33. As a country we struggle with financial losses due to corruption. The crisis appears to be deepening. Transparency International's 2024 Corruption Perceptions

Index ranks Uganda 140th out of 180 countries.¹³ We lose UGX 10 trillion annually, nearly 44% of domestic revenue to corruption.¹⁴ High-profile corruption scandals involving top government officials keep making headlines. Moreover, corruption has been reduced to financial losses only yet various laws of Uganda provide for different forms of this vice, sometimes disguised as malpractices. It includes loss of public property resulting from negligence or omission, vote bribery and stealing, nepotism, discrimination, destruction of the environment, and use of one's office or public institutions for personal gain. It is perplexing that meaningful action remains elusive. As a result, citizens are deprived of basic social services, inequality and injustice is fostered, poverty exacerbated and our democracy and stability threatened.

34. Corruption has also grossly undermined our country's potential as an investment destination by raising the cost of doing business, and negatively affected our relationships with God and neighbour. Prophet Micah condemned corruption and hypocrisy among those in power (Mic 7:1-6). He warned that God is not deceived by leaders who speak righteous words but harbour corrupt hearts.

Strengthening protection for anticorruption activists, ensuring the independence of anti-corruption agencies, and maintaining judicial independence are, therefore, essential steps in this fight. More importantly, a sustained political will is needed to create an environment where

high-profile cases can be effectively prosecuted and stolen money can be recovered. There is, therefore, a pressing need for renewed efforts from government, civil society, and citizens to tackle this epidemic that has condemned many Ugandans to dire poverty and some areas of our country and its social services to backwardness.

Unemployment

35. The recent National Population and Housing Census revealed that over 70% of Uganda's population is below the age of 30, with 22.7% aged between 18-30 years.¹⁵ This data highlights the need for increased investment in youth development programmes, education, and job creation. It also reveals that 51% of the youth is not in employment, education or training. Moreover, about 400,000 of them are released annually into the job market to compete for approximately 9,000 available jobs. This rate of youth unemployment poses a threat to the country's stability and socio-economic development.

36. We note that unemployment is making it difficult to eradicate poverty, as the youth and many other Ugandans lack the opportunity to fully exploit their potential. Frustration has driven many young people into drug abuse, rebellion, trafficking, extremism, gambling and other crimes, and disregard for and loss of interest in marriage. Moreover, many have abandoned rural areas for urban ones, with hope of finding jobs, only to end up taking odd jobs that cannot pay enough to meet their basic needs.

Agriculture, which should provide sustainable jobs, is not promising due to challenges such as climate change, high cost of inputs, poor technology and dwindling arable land. This has made the sector unattractive to many young people. The manufacturing and service sectors, meanwhile, are growing at slower pace than population growth, and are unable to absorb the excess youth population.

37. We are cognizant of government's response to youth unemployment through tailored programmes such as the Youth Livelihood Programme, Youth Venture Capital Fund and the skilling programme. Unfortunately, like all government programmes, these too have proved ineffective in addressing unemployment due, largely, to corruption, inadequate or lack of entrepreneurial training, lack of proper supervision, negative attitude of youth towards agriculture, politicization, inadequate capital, and lack of or inadequate land. There is, therefore, a need to adopt and bolster complementary policies that boost the private sector; and revitalize the education system, emphasizing skills and capability development.

38. We call upon government to invest more in entrepreneurial and business management training as pre-requisite for accessing resources under youth development programmes; include the youth in the conceptualization and design of programmes intended for them; emphasize and finance skilling as a key component of the education curriculum in the country; and enhance the mindset change component of the various programmes. These

interventions could turn young people into job creators as opposed to job seekers.

Alcoholism

39. The rise in alcohol and substance abuse in Uganda is deeply concerning. We are witnessing a surge in people struggling with addiction. This does not only devastate their lives, but also affects their productivity in society. A Report which was produced by World Health Organization (WHO) in 2024 indicates that a Ugandan consumes on average 12.21 litres of pure alcohol annually - the highest in Africa where the average is 4.5.¹⁶ The same report indicates that a Ugandan drinker aged 15 and above, consumes on average 28.5 litres per year.

40. Alcohol consumption is a leading risk factor for mortality and morbidity for several diseases including cancer¹⁷ in our country. We lose 87 people per year due to alcohol related complications per 100,000 in the country.¹⁸ The burden is reflected in our country in the medical cost, lost productivity, accidents, law enforcement, family breakdowns, domestic violence, premature death, alcohol use disorder, and shuttered future of our youth.

41. To curb this growing epidemic and safeguard the future of our youth, the country urgently needs effective public education campaigns, improved access to treatment, and stricter regulations on alcohol and substance availability. The current legislation that includes the Liquor

Act, the Portable Spirit Act, and the Enguli (Manufacturing and Licensing) Act, all enacted in the 1960s, have become obsolete to address contemporary challenges of excessive consumption of alcoholic drinks. Nevertheless, we are grateful to the many organizations and individuals who are working tirelessly, to combat alcohol abuse and rehabilitate alcoholics.

42. In 2019, the Ministry of Health, with Cabinet approval, formulated a National Alcohol Control Policy. This policy aligns with international efforts, following the World Health Assembly's 2005 resolution for a Global Strategy to Reduce the Harmful Use of Alcohol. Additionally, Uganda adopted recommendations from the 2014 UN high-level meeting on Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs), recognizing alcohol as a major risk factor. The Alcoholic Drinks Control Bill presented to Parliament in 2023 to regulate, among others the manufacture, importation sale, and consumption of alcoholic drinks was rejected.

43. Despite these positive steps, the existing National Alcohol Control Policy needs more robust implementation to effectively reduce alcohol-related harm. To curb this growing epidemic and safeguard the future of our youth, the country urgently needs effective public education campaigns, improved access to treatment, and stricter regulations on alcohol and substance availability.

Limited Civic Knowledge

44. We are further concerned about the limited civic knowledge that characterizes the population. Much of the citizenry is disempowered and dispirited, and incapable of putting demands for services on leaders and participating meaningfully in public affairs. This has subjected the population to manipulation by leaders. Voters can hardly call their leaders to account for their actions; thus, breeding impunity that need to be addressed with urgency.

45. We call upon the laity to participate actively in the political, economic and social affairs of the country. The Church teaches us that "Christians, as citizens of two cities (should) strive to discharge their earthly duties conscientiously and in response to the Gospel spirit. They are mistaken who, knowing that we have here no abiding city but seek one which is to come, think that they may therefore shirk their earthly responsibilities".¹⁹ Unfortunately, some of our people are in a state of apathy and are increasingly losing interest in public affairs. Many think that their views or votes no longer matter. This kind of attitude could undermine the deepening democracy and social affairs in our country.

46. Civic education equips and empowers citizens to participate effectively in the governance and other affairs of their country. In our view, this has not been accorded the importance it deserves. Much of what we see is voter education undertaken towards general elections. Yet

elections are not the only aspect of democracy, for democracy includes a whole range of elements, such as the right to participate in economic, social and other political activities on a day-to-day basis. With empowered citizenry, we would easily curb corruption, improve service delivery, and reduce the gap between the rich and poor. We, therefore, urge the government and other stakeholders to channel more energies and resources to civic education as an important aspect of nation-building. The necessary conditions need to be created for citizens to play their role as prescribed in our national Constitution.

Role of Civil Society Organizations and Political Parties

47. Our national Constitution (Article 29) guarantees the freedom of every citizen of Uganda to assemble and associate with others in pursuit of common objectives. This provision, read together with Article 72, has aided the formation and activities of political parties, civil society organizations, media houses and groups, trade unions and other associational entities. This is a welcome development in light of our murky history.

48. We cannot overemphasize the contribution of citizen-driven agencies in the growth of democracy and culture of human rights. In fact, they are among the key ingredients for building a civilized society. Civil Society Organizations check excesses of government, while political parties, besides provide alternative policies. A

government that does not respect the rights of its citizens to exercise their freedom through associational and other legitimate means is said to be undemocratic. Uganda has had such governments in the past, and we have noticed, over the years, some worrying trends reminiscent of those dark days. We have, for example, followed some attempts to stifle activities of political parties through laws such as the Public Order Management Act, while sustained attacks and excessive regulation of human rights and governance-related organizations has created fear and made it difficult for them to operate.

49. Truly, if our country is to attain sustainable peace, democracy and prosperity, it must entrench the respect of human dignity and rights, including the rights of citizens to associate and express themselves freely, provided they do so within the law. Both the leaders and citizens must, therefore, in all their activities, be mindful of our history which is well articulated in the preamble to the National Constitution (1995).

Political Prisoners and Detainees

50. We note with concern reports of the rising phenomenon of political prisoners and detainees in Uganda. Security agencies are accused of arresting, detaining, torturing and abducting people of dissenting voices without due process of the law. These actions reflect a troubling pattern in our politics. Many families do not seem to know the fate and whereabouts of their

missing loved ones. Family members, victims, relatives and friends have expressed frustration in attaining justice. Most disturbing has been the trial of civilians in military courts, including political prisoners. The Supreme Court has recently declared these trials unconstitutional and has directed the transfer of all such cases to civilian courts. We urge government to expedite the process, for, as Martin Luther Jr once said: "justice too long delayed is justice denied".

51. We, most importantly, consider the phenomenon of political prisoners and detainees a reflection of the nature of politics in our country. It is prevalent in some teething democracies where political tolerance is at its lowest and politics operates at the level of victor and vanquished. This should not be the case with us in Uganda, especially in the 21st Century. We must take a deliberate step to occupy a place among democratic nations of the world where respect for divergent views and beliefs, political leadership as service, and opposition as partners in development, is entrenched.

Environmental Degradation and Climate Change

52. In our various pastoral letters and messages, we decried the degradation of our natural environment. We pointed out causes such as reduction in arable land against a fast-growing population, loss of soil fertility, and high demand for charcoal in urban areas arising from high cost of clean energy. Of grave concern to us is that aspect of

environmental degradation driven by the greed of a few. We have already discussed the dangers of greed to the human soul and society. If, today, Uganda loses close to 55 hectares of vegetation each year, it is partly because some people are taking more from the environment than they need in order to meet their insatiable appetite for material wealth.

53. The Church draws inspiration from the following text of scripture: "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good." (*Gen 1:31*). Further, in 2016, Pope Francis, in his Encyclical *Laudato si* (Praise ye Lord), called for decisive action to protect and restore what he called "sister, mother earth", emphasizing the interconnectedness of creation, with man being an integral part and not separate from it. This encyclical, together with *Laudate Deum* issued in 2023 ahead of the 28th Conference of Parties to the Paris Agreement 2015, held in Baku, Azerbaijan, have greatly driven the Church to a more intense reflection and response to climate change and environmental degradation. We echo with Pope Francis:

This sister (earth) now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life.²⁰

54. We know that environmental protection has been among main preoccupations of different governments in

Uganda since independence. Laws and policies have been enacted over the years to create institutions responsible for coordination and protection of the environment. Currently, we have the 1995 Constitution (Article 39) which guarantees the enjoyment of clean and healthy environment as a human right.

55. In keeping with the mandate vested in it by the same Constitution (Article 245), Parliament enacted laws that led to creation of institutions such as the Ministry of Water and Environment (MWE), National Forestry Authority (NFA) and National Environment Management Authority (NEMA), and Environmental Police. Their main function is to protect the environment in accordance with the various laws of the country. We, therefore, believe that if environmental degradation is continuing unabated, it is not because the country lacks mechanisms to address this problem. Rather, there is a need to empower these institutions to perform their functions more effectively and without fear or favour, and the population to play its part as prescribed in the various laws.

56. The link between environmental degradation and climate change has been scientifically proven. Climate change manifests in, among others, prolonged drought, floods and landslides. These phenomena continue to cause serious disruptions in food production in all parts of the country, leading to food and income insecurity in many families. Meanwhile, chronic landslides in areas such as Mt. Elgon and Mt. Rwenzori have displaced, killed and maimed

many people over the years. We express our sympathies with and pray for those affected. There is need, therefore, for government to work with other stakeholders in providing a permanent solution to this problem. We should not continue losing lives every year to what has become a predictable occurrence.

57. We are, of course, aware of the fact that there are some efforts in that direction but not enough to provide lasting solutions. Uganda, for instance, is party to the Paris Agreement 2015 and has drawn its Nationally-Determined Contributions and National Action Plan. These are welcome developments. We are, however, concerned that this plan has not received adequate resources for implementation. Our adaptation fund which would greatly support farmers to cope with the effects of climate change is inadequate. Current programmes for irrigation are inadequate and expensive for most smallholder farmers. We, therefore, urge government to explore and introduce affordable irrigation schemes for smallholder farmers as a means to cushioning our national food system and the poor against the adverse effects of climate change.

Conclusion

58. In his address to the clergy, religious and seminarians in Lubaga Cathedral on 28th November, 2015, Pope Francis emphasized the importance of memory. He urged them not to forget or ignore all that God had done for them; not to take for granted the things they had

received, and all that had been passed on to them. We should not also forget our history in order to avoid falling into the past mistakes. Forgetting the past makes us miss opportunities for change. Scriptures speak of the people of Israel remembering their history and building on it (*1 Cor* 9:15; *Heb* 11:13). Our future has its foundation in our history. It seems to us that there is a tendency by each one of us to ignore the path treaded by our ancestors. This syndrome makes us repeat past mistakes in our nation building.

59. Fortunately for us, not all is lost, for Christ has assured us of his continuous presence and accompaniment in our daily struggles with evil in the world (Mt 28:20). During this Lenten season, we are presented with the Cross, the true symbol of God's love for humankind. Jesus calls us to carry our own crosses daily and follow him (Lk 19:23); not as passive onlookers, but active co-creators of a "...world befitting mankind because it befits Christ".²¹ To co-create with God means to be agents and vessels of hope and the Truth, God Himself, the liberating force who is willing and able to turn our economic, social, political environmental and ecological woes into prosperity and fulfilling relationships.

60. The Church has concluded the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (Synod on Synodality) during which we are called to: creatively implement and renew our commitment to **communion** in discerning and living God's call; **participation** as we are called to serve

one another; and **mission** to be witnesses to the love of God in the midst of the whole human family. We are invited to be witnesses especially to those who live on the spiritual, social, economic, political, geographical and existential peripheries of our society. As St. Paul puts it in his letter to the Romans, creation is groaning and is awaiting redemption (*Rom* 8:22). Therefore, in dealing with the challenges that confront us as a family of God and nation we should pray, listen, analyse, dialogue, discern and offer advice which corresponds to the will of God. In so doing we will advance the hopes, dreams, and aspirations of every person for a better country and wider human community.

61. As we come closer to the general elections in 2026, we remind you of our pastoral letters; “Building a Peaceful, United, and Prosperous Uganda through Free and Fair Elections” issued in 2010, and, “Blessed are the Peace Makers: Pastoral Letter of the Catholic Bishops of Uganda on General Elections” issued 2021. In these letters, we observed that every election period comes with anxiety, violence, uncertainty, and a sense of hopelessness. This is informed, largely, by experience of elections over the years. Issues such as uneven playing field for the contesting candidates, interference in elections by security agencies, and violence, are still unresolved. There have also been complaints about vote rigging, unclear winners, and loss of property and lives. Therefore, we call upon those in authority to allay these fears by undertaking early

and comprehensive reforms to accommodate the various recommendations of the Supreme Court, views of political and civil society groups, and the rest of the population. There is a need to provide an enabling environment for voters and political parties to participate freely and effectively in the general elections.

62. We celebrated the 60th anniversary of the canonization of the Uganda Martyrs on 3rd June at Namugongo Martyrs Shrine and on 19th October, 2024 at St. Peters' Basilica, Vatican. This is significant to us as a country because it demonstrates true witness and motivates us to do more to become Christ like. The Martyrs are our ancestors in faith and a guide in our moral and spiritual living. As we have marked this important anniversary, we pray that their blood becomes the seed of peace, unity and reconciliation in our country, and an opportunity for every Ugandan to fully utilize his or her potential for the service of God and society, and building human society as family of God.²²

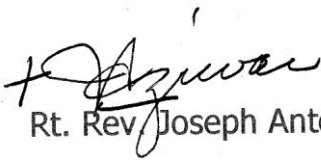
63. Finally, we take this opportunity to remind you about the Jubilee Year inaugurated by Pope Francis in December 2024. This is yet another invaluable moment of grace, a moment for us to seek reconciliation with God, with one another and with the rest of creation. It is a moment to commit ourselves fully to working for truth, justice, love and peace in our families, communities, country and the world. Above all, may it be an opportunity to reflect more deeply on our lives so that we may find meaning in

following Christ, knowing very well that through Baptism, we were called and anointed to proclaim the Good News and participate in the inauguration of the reign of God on earth.

64. The message of this pastoral letter is clear. If we abide by the ordinances of God, Who is the truth, the truth will liberate us from evil ways and we shall be free children of God.

65. We pray for one another so as to build a society where justice and truth prevail. May the peace, hope and love of God be with you as we prepare ourselves to celebrate Easter, the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Given on 25th March 2025, at Nsambya Catholic Secretariat, on the Solemnity of the Annunciation of the Lord.



Rt. Rev. Joseph Antony Zziwa

**Chairman, Uganda Episcopal Conference and
Bishop of Kiyinda- Mityana Diocese**

H.E. Emmanuel Cardinal Wamala: Archbishop Emeritus of
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Rt. Rev. Sanctus Lino Wanok : Vice Chairman of Uganda
Episcopal Conference and
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Most Rev. Raphael p'Mony

Wokorach, MCCJ : Archbishop of Gulu

Most Rev. Paul Ssemogerere : Archbishop of Kampala

Most Rev. Lambert Bainomugisha: Archbishop of Mbarara

Most Rev. Emmanuel Obbo, AJ : Archbishop of Tororo

Rt. Rev. Sabino Ocan Odoki : Bishop of Arua Diocese

Rt. Rev. Robert Muhiirwa : Bishop of Fort Portal
Diocese

Rt. Rev. Vincent Kirabo : Bishop of Hoima Catholic
Diocese

Rt. Rev. Charles M. Wamika : Bishop of Jinja Diocese

Rt. Rev. Callistus Rubaramira : Bishop of Kabale Diocese

Rt. Rev. Lawrence Mukasa : Bishop of Kasana-Luweero
Diocese

Rt. Rev. Francis Aquirinus Kibira : Bishop of Kasese Diocese

Rt. Rev. Dominic Eibu, MCCJ : Bishop of Kotido Diocese

Rt. Rev. Christopher Kakooza : Bishop of Lugazi Diocese

Rt. Rev. Serverus Jjumba : Bishop of Masaka Diocese

Rt. Rev. Damiano Guzzetti, MCCJ : Bishop of Moroto Diocese

Rt. Rev. Constantine Rupiny : Bishop of Nebbi Catholic
Diocese

Rt. Rev. Joseph Eciru Oliach : Bishop of Soroti Catholic
Diocese

- Most Rev. John Baptist Odama : Archbishop Emeritus of
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- Rt. Rev. Joseph Sabiiti Mugenyi : Auxiliary Bishop Emeritus
of Fort Portal Diocese
- Rt. Rev. Egidio Nkaijanabwo : Bishop Emeritus of Kasese
Diocese
- Rt. Rev. Giuseppe Filippi, MCCJ : Bishop Emeritus of Kotido
Diocese
- Rt. Rev. Giuseppe Franzelli, MCCJ: Bishop Emeritus of Lira
Diocese
- Rt. Rev. Matthias Ssekamanya : Bishop Emeritus of Lugazi
Diocese

Endnotes

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- ² *Ibid*, no. 76
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- ⁴ Catechism of the Catholic Church 2003: no. 2270
- ⁵ *Ibid*, no. 2271
- ⁶ Uganda Bureau of Statistics, Household Survey, 2019/2020
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- ⁸ Cf. Journal of Religion and Business Ethics 4 (2):19 (2021)
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- ¹⁷ *Ibid*.
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- ²⁰ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation, 2023: *Laudate Deum* No. 2
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