

**UGANDA EPISCOPAL COFERENCE**  
**Pastoral Letter on the Occasion of the Centenary Celebration of the African Priesthood**

**June 29<sup>th</sup> 2013**

**Theme:**

*How can I repay the Lord for all the good done for me? I will raise the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord. (Ps. 116: 12-13)*

To: Our Brother Priests and Co-workers in the Vineyard of the Lord,  
And to all of you People of God.

We, the Catholic Bishops in Uganda, at the close of our Plenary Meeting held from 4<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> June, 2013, and looking forward to the celebration of the Centenary of Indigenous Priesthood in our nation, send you very warm paternal greetings.

We, at the same time, invite you to join us to offer a prayer of thanksgiving together with the Psalmist as we proclaim: *All you peoples clap your hands, shout to God with joyful cries (Ps 47: 2).*

As we celebrate the Centenary of the Indigenous Catholic Priesthood in our country, we would like to call upon you all to reflect on the number of ordination souvenirs you have received which bear those two verses of Psalm 116 cited above. Again, meditate on those sent to you on the celebration of Jubilee of priesthood bearing the same prayer. Remember also the number of times you have listened to a preacher, during celebrations of such events of gratitude which fill up our lives, opening the homily with those words.

To all of you members of the Catholic Church and other people of good will in Uganda, what better prayer can we, with raised hands and hearts, offer to the Lord, on this occasion of celebrating the first Centenary of the beginning of the priestly ministry realized through courageous and gallant sons of Uganda? What better cry can the people of this privileged country, Uganda, raise to the Lord Who, out of His goodness, chose from among her sons, Victor Mukasa Womeraka and Basil Lumu, and entrusted to them this special ministry of His love. Through their ministry the two priests presented to Him their joys and sorrows, their hopes and aspirations and in the long run, brought down upon them and their people His blessings, consolation and encouragement.

Think of the many priestly ordinations which have taken place in Uganda after the very first one of 1913 in which Victor Mukasa and Basil Lumu became priests. Again, think of the many liturgical celebrations conducted by our indigenous clergy which have nourished our spiritual life. Indeed, we have every reason to clap our hands and rejoice in the Lord.

As we, together, celebrate the Lord's visitation unto our blessed nation (Lk. 1: 68-69), we invite you to meditate and reflect upon the following:

**1. Priests are chosen by God from among men** (Heb 5.1) Uganda, at the heart of what was called the Dark Continent, a land-locked tiny country, was among the last countries to be known to the countries of Ancient Civilisation. It was among the most recent to receive the Messengers of the Good News of salvation. How shall we explain the call and the response of the first young men to a life and service that was in more than one way contrary but also alien to the culture and life-style of their people? This can only be explained in terms of the Holy Scriptures that indeed *the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength* (1 Cor. 1:25).

This Centenary is, indeed, not only an occasion but also an opportunity for us as Ugandans in general, but for Christians in particular, to recognise the love God has shown to our country. In His inscrutable wisdom, He freely chose, from among us, the first custodians and dispensers of his mysteries.

Christianity is the growing into maturity of the faith founded on the covenant established by God with Abraham and his descendants; realized in the Church which is the Body of Christ, the people of God in the common priesthood (1 Cor. 12:27).

Both in the first and in the second Covenants, the choice of ministers is freely made by God. He instituted Priesthood when he chose Aaron and his sons; *From among the Israelites have your brother Aaron together with his sons... brought to you, that they be my priests* (Ex. 28:1). They became the anointed priests ordained to exercise the priesthood (Nm 3:3). When the need for assistants arose, again it was God himself who chose such persons when he said to Moses: *You shall give the Levites to Aaron and his sons; they have been set aside from among the Israelites as dedicated to me* (Nm. 3:9).

In the same way, in the New Covenant it was not the Apostles who chose Jesus, but rather, it was Him who called and chose them from among the disciples. Jesus clearly said so to his disciples; *It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain* (Jn 15:16).

Throughout the period of one hundred years of the life and ministry of Ugandan priests, we can with confidence and joy say that the call and courage of Fr. Victor Mukasa Womeraka and Fr. Basil Lumu have borne lasting fruit. Today, almost every ethnic group constituting the population of Uganda is represented by a member in the Presbyterate.

Among these chosen sons, some are shepherds to whom God's flock is entrusted. We thank God for their faithful ministry; for, out of the nineteen Catholic dioceses which make up the Catholic Church in Uganda, the Holy Father has entrusted seventeen to Ugandan Bishops. These are among those who were inspired by Victor and Basil and chosen by God to dedicate their lives to His service and His family like Aaron and his sons.

## **2. Even in our time God continues to choose his priests from among his people**

### **Overwhelmed by joy in 1913, Bishop Henry Streicher exclaimed:**

*I announce to you a great joy. This joy... is the sacerdotal ordination of Bazilio Lumu and Victor Womeraka who on the 29<sup>th</sup> of June twill be made priests of the Lord, our brothers in the priesthood. On the 29th June, there will appear in the sky of Uganda, a great light.... The intercession of the Martyrs of Uganda who shed their blood for the faith, is responsible for this great light... The apparition of these two stars in the sky of Uganda is the divine answer which Jesus – Priest has given to the laborious life, the dedication of those among you who have spent so much time doing good in our two seminaries.*

This year of our Centenary more than fifty Deacons will be ordained priests in Uganda and a likely equal number will be raised to the diaconate. They are products of our minor and major seminaries. They are sons from families of various social standards. They come from the Small Christian Communities and parishes both in rural and urban settings. They are our gifts to God, to serve the Church and the larger society. We wish to truly-recognize the prayerful and pious Catholic families who nurture among their children the love to serve God and his people as priests.

We, your pastors and leaders, to whom the Church here in Uganda has been entrusted, feel proud of you. We sincerely thank you for the sacrifices you make, for the inspiration and support you give to these young men who aspire to the priesthood today. Our sentiments are in line with those of Bishop Henry Streicher who ordained the first Ugandan Priests! Together, we echo his inspirational words that, *the intercession of the Martyrs of Uganda is responsible for this great light... and a divine answer which Jesus— priest has given to the laborious life. The dedication of those... who spend so much time doing the good in our seminaries.*

Three days after his ordination, Fr. Victor wrote to the Superior General of the Missionaries of Africa a letter from which we quote the following paragraph: / *do pray you, My Lord Bishop, to*

*help me by means of your prayers that I may never tarnish in any way the gift which God has given to this country through me. I feel am still as man as ever.*

This portion of the letter of our first priest echoes the words of the letter to the Hebrews: *Every high priest is taken from among men and made their representative... He is able to deal patiently with the ignorant and erring, for he himself is beset by weakness* (Heb. 5: 1-2).

Priests have always been and always will be chosen by the Lord from members of his new people, the Church. They have been and always will be their <sup>repr</sup>esentatives. Among the books of Bishop Fulton Sheen one bears the following title: The Priest is not his **Own**. He has never been his own and he will never be.

The first Ugandan Priest asked Bishop Leo Livinhac to pray for him that he "*may never tarnish, in any way the gift which God has given this country through me*". He ended his letter confessing his weakness and his <sup>hu</sup>manness. Here again priests are reminded of the warning in the second letter to the <sup>C</sup>orinthians. In this letter, St. Paul warns us; "*But we hold this treasure in earthen vessels that the surpassing power may be of God and not from us.*" (2 Cor. 4:7). Such is the treasure of priesthood. Everyone called and chosen by God to this noble ministry in Church should never lose sight of these truths. We carry a precious treasure; it is not our own; what we carry is in earthen vessels; we rely on God for its security and fruitfulness.

### **3. Gratitude to the Christian Faithful for, love, support and cooperation**

We avail ourselves of this occasion of the celebration of the Jubilee in this message to express to you people of God, our deep feelings of gratitude. We sincerely thank you for the love you have for the Church and for your ministers. When they are sent to you, we know that you readily and joyfully accept and welcome them. We know how you cooperate with them in the building of God's Kingdom. We know how you encourage and accompany them, not only by your prayers, but also with financial and material support. During our pastoral visits in your parishes, we are inspired when you express your desire for priestly services to be brought nearer to your communities through the opening up new parishes. *We thank you for that.*

The celebration of Jubilees has its roots and practice in the history of the Chosen People of God, the Jews. As a nation, we celebrate the Jubilee of Priesthood in the same spirit that the Chosen People celebrated their Jubilee. Among the essential elements of the Jubilee celebration, first and foremost, is gratitude. As the Church in Uganda, we have reason to rejoice as we thank God for the many indigenous good, very good, holy, zealous and

saintly priests who have served God, His Church and the society in this country in these last hundred years.

We highly appreciate those priests who have courageously and generously, by the grace of God, never "tarnished the gift" that God gave to Uganda through them. We are proud of them; we salute them.

#### **4. Sorrow and Repentance**

We, your bishops, who by God's grace are leading his flock today, would be naive if we denied the infidelity of some of those chosen people who bear the indelible mark of Holy Orders. We share the pain and the sorrow which the members of God's family feel because of those shepherds who have betrayed not only their trust but also the trust of the entire Church and of God Himself. They have tarnished the gift given to our nation, entrusted to them by God, for His glory and service to His people.

This sad side of our Jubilee celebration invites us to reflect on the great commandment, the commandment to love God and to love our neighbour (Duet. 6:5). In loving our neighbour among other things, we are commanded to help him/her when we notice any wrong in him/her. The command of the Lord is categorical: *"If your brother sins (against you), go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have won over your brother"*(Mt. 18:15). This command also is extended to the body of Christ, "the Church".

On the other hand, we all know that those ministers of God who betray this trust are members of our families; they come from active Small Christian Communities; they live in communities with brother priests and actively serve communities. it is very difficult to believe that members of this holy and noble call through their imprudent and reckless tendencies and behaviour, though carrying divine *treasure in earthenware vessel* (2 Cor. 4:7) have betrayed God's trust!

Some of us as members of this body of Christ, the Church, may have contributed in one way or the other in this betrayal by not helping our priests to live their vocation as is expected of them by God Who called them to this high office. For this, we have a share in the fall of our brothers.

As we celebrate with joy and gratitude this grand Jubilee, we should ask for repentance for the failure of those who could have helped but did not do so. We should also repent in one way or the other, for some of us who may have led these brothers to betray the trust of God and of entire Church!

## 5. Counsel to our Priests and Lay Faithful

It is important always to bear in mind that Bishops and Priests are human beings; they are liable to err and make mistakes. We, like any other human being easily and often fall short of the expectations of God and of members of God's Family. Each one of us has his strengths but also his weaknesses. As a result of this, situations may arise which cause misunderstandings, pain and sufferings to the entire Body of Christ, the Church, and which sometimes lead to sour working relations.

In such situations, the temptation always is to have recourse to self-alienation, despair, abandonment of duty, rejection of self or others, forming pressure groups, writing open letters to the public, making use of mass media, or even go to the extreme of violent solutions. This behaviour does not in any way correspond to the Christian attitude which is the attitude of Christ Himself Who came so that he may reconcile the world with God (2 Cor. 5:8, Jn. 3:17). Often times, such attitudes have caused division and hatred between Christian communities, the parish, the diocese and consequently, the Church.

This is how the human nature would react if it were not redeemed by Christ (Cor:1:13). Far be it from us, chosen people of God, the royal priesthood, a people set apart to forget the words of St. Paul who appeals to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace" (Eph.4:3).

With what moral authority shall we preach reconciliation, love and peace if we do not endeavour to practise what we preach? We encourage you, brothers, to love and support one another. We earnestly appeal to you to love and work together with your Bishops in mutual love, trust, filial and respectful obedience.

The politics of the world is not the model for the Church, the Body of Christ, for which he gave up his life. We have the wisdom and laws of the Church to draw from. Let the Lord Jesus Himself Who never abandons us whenever and wherever we find ourselves in a 'storm' (Mk. 4: 35-39), be our sole strength and security since relying on human wisdom and security alone, can only disappoint us (Ps.146: 3).

We, your bishops, recognize our obligation not only to foster but also to nurture vocations to the priesthood and the religious life in line with Vatican II document, *Optatam Totius*, no. 3

We promise and want to accompany you as we invite you be open to us to share with us the challenges you encounter in your vocation and ministry.

It is our strong belief that our responsibility emanates from the Lord Himself Who through St Paul, mandated that Timothy and Titus take care of the clergy working with them.

The *Pastoral Letter Christus Dominus* no.16 clearly exhorts the Bishops to be solicitous for the welfare of the clergy as well as the faithful.

The laity too, are urged to give due honour to the presbyters and to support them, *For the scripture says, You shall not muzzle an ox when it is threshing and A worker deserves his pay. Do not accept an accusation against a presbyter unless it is supported by two or three witnesses* (1 Tm 5:17-19).

## **6. Launch into the deep.** (Lk.5:4)

With the words of exhortation above, blessed John Paul II launched into the Third Millennium. Let his words be our battle cry. This Jubilee of priestly celebration is also an invitation and occasion for us to start afresh. We call upon all God's people to ride up and march with Christ who leads into the second Centenary.

The growth of the Church in Uganda demands a high number of educated, committed and dedicated men of God. The quality training required for the servants of God and of the Church is a very costly undertaking. With a hundred years behind us, we are expected to rely on ourselves for the education of our ministers. We call upon all the Lay Faithful of the Church to accept the challenge and to rise up to it.

We call upon the young people of today and those to come to open their hearts, to listen to God who calls and to respond unflinchingly like the boy Samuel; *"Here I am Lord. You called me"* (1 Sam 3:5).

Our beloved priests of Uganda, we are proud of you. We know the conditions in which you carry out your ministry.

We know the difficulties you face in your daily work. We admire the dedication, generosity and love you have for God and the people you serve.

For this great and sacred ministry, we are grateful to you.

The rapid changes in the world today are impacting us all in varied ways. We are bombarded with lifestyles and ideologies from every corner of the world. We take this opportunity to remind you of the Lord's caution that you must always keep and treasure in your hearts, *"You are in the world... but you do not belong to the world"* (Jn 15:19).

Indeed, like our Mother Mary, a priest is called to be a person who learns to treasure and ponder everything in his heart (Lk. 2: 51-52).

In his letter to us St. John warns us: *"Do not love the world or the things of the world... for all that is in the world, sensual lust, enticement for the eyes, and a pretentious life, is not from the Father but is from the world"*(1Jn 1:15-16).

Our standards, therefore, are and must always be the standards of Christ. He sums them up in the following call to all his disciples, *"So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect"*(Mt.5: 48).

As we end this letter of love and concern to all our priests and all people of God celebrating

the Jubilee of Priesthood in our country today, allow us to implore all of you with a plea of Msgr. Victor Mukasa Womeraka made to his brother priests:

*"My brother priests, I beg every one of you to try and keep your original zeal, which you had when you were ordained priests. The older among you encourage the young, and the young support the old. Do not let yourselves be carried away by fashions which come and go, but be determined to serve in truth"*(Life of Msgr. V. Mukasa p. 27-28).

We impart upon you all, our Episcopal blessings, entrusting you to the care of the Blessed Virgin Mary our Mother and the intercession of our Ugandan Martyrs.

We remain,

Your Shepherds and Bishops,

**Uganda Catholic Secretariat,  
NSAMBYA - KAMPALA, UGANDA**

*On June 29<sup>th</sup> 2013*

### **1. GULU:**

- i. Gulu Archdiocese (1923)
- ii. Arua Diocese (1958)
- iii. Lira Diocese (1968)
- iv. Nebbi Diocese (1996)

### **2. KAMPALA:**

- i. Kampala Archdiocese (1883)
- ii. Kasana-Luweero Diocese (1997)
- iii. Kiyinda-Mityana Diocese (1981)
- iv. Lugazi Diocese (1997)
- v. Masaka Diocese (1939)

### **3. MBARARA:**

- i. Mbarara Archdiocese (1934)
- ii. Fort Portal Diocese (1961)



- iii. Hoima Diocese (1965)
- iv. Kabale Diocese (1966)
- v. Kasese Diocese (1989)

#### **4. TORORO**

- i. Tororo Archdiocese (1948)
- ii. Jinja Diocese (1966)
- iii. Kotido Diocese (1991)
- iv. MorotoDiocese (1965)
- v. Soroti Diocese (1981)