

CATHOLIC BISHOPS OF UGANDA
Christmas Message to all the Faithful
23rd December 2004

PEACE TO ALL PEOPLE OF GOOD WILL

Following our letter "Concern for Peace, Unity and Harmony in Uganda", we the Catholic Bishops of Uganda visited the suffering people in the Northern and Eastern parts of our country, to experience and live their sufferings.

We divided ourselves in three groups and we were able to visit seven districts. One group visited the Eastern Region in Soroti Diocese, (Soroti, Katakwi and Kaberamaido Districts). Another group went to the Northern Region in Gulu Archdiocese (Gulu and Kitgum Districts), and another group visited Lira Diocese (Lira and Apac Districts). This gave us the opportunity to assess the conditions in the Internally Displaced Peoples' camps to enable us plan and strengthen the Catholic Church's interventions in rehabilitation, reconciliation, resettlement and development of the affected Regions.

We saw the unbearable suffering and indignity to which our people are exposed in those parts of the country for the last eighteen years. Despite the suffering the people are going through, we were consoled by their optimism that a lasting solution to the conflict will soon be achieved. They are eagerly waiting for that day when real peace will dawn so that they will be able to return to their villages and live normal life in peace. We were also encouraged to see that some basic infrastructures were in place, both at the camps even though they are not enough. A number of schools have also been constructed in villages in the eventuality that people return to their villages. Access roads have been provided. All these are signs of hope.

On our return from these Regions, our visit culminated into a meeting with His Excellency the President of the Republic of Uganda and other civil leaders from the Northern and Eastern Regions. We were able to convey the feelings of the displaced people in the camps. We expressed our findings, concerns and recommendations to the President and government. We believe that the government will continue to take note of the situation, and follow the line of peaceful negotiation, which is already initiated, so that true peace may be restored in these regions. We are very optimistic that the efforts made by the government to dialogue with the rebels and declaring a ceasefire, is indeed a milestone in the government's efforts to seek for lasting peace. We have the hope that government has sought the best alternative to end the suffering of the people in the Northern and Eastern parts of our country.

As we celebrate Christmas, the Birth of our Lord Jesus Christ the Prince of Peace, let us characterise this year's Christmas with Peace. As we continue to pray for peace let us welcome true peace in our hearts, in our families and in our country.

We re-echo the words of our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II for the World Day of Peace, 1st January 2005. "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom. 12:12). Evil is

never defeated by evil; once that road is taken, rather than defeating evil, one will instead be defeated by evil.

"Peace is a good to be promoted with good. It is a good for individuals, for families, for nations and for all humanity; yet it is one which needs to be maintained and fostered by decisions and actions inspired by good."

Brothers and Sisters in the Catholic Community, we are already in the year of the Eucharist, which the Holy Father launched in October 2004. The Holy Eucharist is the source, centre of Liturgy and summit of Christian life. We are called upon to promote the culture of the Eucharist in the Ecclesial communities, in order to witness to God's presence in the world.

Since the Sacrament of the Eucharist is very important for our lives as Catholics, we encourage all the faithful to intensify the various celebrations concerning the Eucharist: Sunday celebrations of the Eucharist (Mass), Eucharist Adoration in all its forms, Eucharistic processions, worthy reception of the Holy Eucharist coupled with the sacrament of reconciliation, share one's table with the poor and the needy, in the service of charity, renewal of faith, sacrifice, communion and service in the Eucharist, as a sign of the Catholic Church in the world. Along with these let us also intensify our union with Mother Mary in the praying of the Rosary.

On the 11th February 2005, the World Day for the sick will be celebrated in Africa, in Yaounde, Cameroon.

Here in Uganda, we are officially launching intensive prayer in preparation for the celebration of the 15th AMECEA General Assembly, which will be held in Uganda from 1st to the 10th of June 2005. The Theme for the General Assembly is 'Be a Good Samaritan: Responding to the Challenges of HIV/AIDS within AMECEA Region.'

We, your Pastors in Uganda, are recommending that that Day of 11th February 2005 be a day of Prayer and Intercession with the Blessed Sacrament exposed for the whole day. The Rosary should be recited in common, with the Litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and be concluded with Benediction and the "Ave Maria" song of our Lady of Lourdes.

It is our Prayer that all people of good will get involved deeply in fostering the culture of peace, working for peace and yearning for peace in our beloved Country Uganda.
We wish you all a Merry, Blessed and Peaceful Christmas and a prosperous New Year 2005.

Signed:

Most Rev Paul K. Bakyenga

Archbishop of Mbarara and

Chairman, Uganda Episcopal Conference