

**PRESS RELEASE BY
THE UGANDA EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE ON
THE ISSUE OF THE REFERENDUM**

16th March 1999

1. There is, since the end of last year, a heated debate especially in the mass media, and workshops on the issue of the coming referendum.

When the Catholic Bishops met at their Plenary meeting on Tuesday 16th March 1999, they made the following clarifications and comments on the **REFERENDUM**, which they wish to communicate to the general public.

When the Bishops read and studied the sermon of His Eminence Emmanuel Cardinal Wamala, delivered in Luganda on Christmas Day, 25th December, 1998 in Lubaga Cathedral, they found it did not contain specific reference to the Referendum but rather to the vote in general. The relevant paragraphs of that sermon are translated here below for readers to know exactly what was said. People, therefore, who are going by hearsay, should take serious note of what was said and not try to interpret into it what they wish the Cardinal said.

Here are the relevant paragraphs:

‘The year 1999 is going to be a critical year here in Uganda. We have an opportunity to be reminded of the important duty we have, the duty to be reconciled as Ugandans: citizens of different ethnic entities, (Efferent languages, different political opinions, different religious beliefs. In this year, we have been reminded of the Human Rights declared by the United Nations. It was not the United Nations which created these rights. Human Right: are in our very humanity. They are in our creation to protect OUR HUMAN DIGNITY. As Ugandans, we can achieve reconciliation once we understand and protect our Hun-tan Dignity. As Ugandans, we can achieve reconciliation once we understand and protect our *human dignity* and that of others.

‘We shall be able to be reconciled once we understand and protect the Human Rights of every person without discrimination. Let us not deceive ourselves into thinking that a mere act of casting a vote to decide an issue is by itself sufficient to make people feel at ease.

Had that been the case, the Israelites and Palestinians would have already cast such a vote. Even in Northern Ireland, there would be no longer any shedding of blood. The vote assists people who have a heart of reconciliation.

`We have so far not succeeded in building a culture of peace because we are failing to abide by just principles. In his message, Pope John Paul II tells us this: 'When the promotion of the dignity of the person is the guiding principle, and when the search for the Common Good is the over-riding Commitment, then solid and lasting foundation for building peace are laid.' (Message, 1st January, 1999).

`This year is a year dedicated to God the Father, our Father, it is a year of love: love of God and love of our fellow people. This love demands of us to be reconciled'.

2. The Bishops accept and recognise the referendum as constitutional as stipulated in Articles 74 and 271 of the Constitution.

Article 74 refers to a Referendum which can be held every 4th year of Parliament for the people of Uganda to decide on their preferred political system. While Article 271 refers to the 1st referendum in the year 2000, four years after the first government in power under the New Constitution. More so, the referendum is rooted in people's sovereignty on deciding on political systems. The Bishops are full aware that many human rights may be restricted to an extent require solely for the common good. However, they express fear that if there is inadequate and f-partial civic education given to the people, the referendum might leave society divided. They, therefore, stress much the great importance which ought to be put on protect promotion of peace and reconciliation throughout the period and in the future. This culture of peace and reconciliation should be a priority in the hearts of all citizens and the leaders. These two values offer the true and firm basis for our development as a nation and all our other treasured values and institutions.

3. The Bishops emphasize the need for equal freedom on either side of the debate to be heard; fair and just opportunities for either side to express its views; elimination of all types of bribery, corruption and manipulation of the people in this important debate; respect of each other's views; mature and peaceful discussion of the issue at hand.
4. The Bishops put great importance on provision of genuine and impartial civic education to the people on this important issue of the Referendum so that people may choose from a position of knowledge and conviction; having well grasped the core and essential issue of the Referendum.
5. The Bishops request the Electoral Commission to put it place impartial civic educators, well trained and equipped, to clearly explain to the citizens of Uganda: what a Referendum is and means since it is going to be the first national referendum in the country; the central issue of this referendum; the exact components of each political system (Movement and Political Parties); the nature of the regular Referendum on political system every fourth year of a new Parliament; what exactly happens to the other political system when one is preferred by the majority of Ugandan voters; how to ensure that the Referendum will be held freely and fairly to express the verdict of voters without any injustices and corrupt influences. This civic

education should reach all peoples in their rural settings and be imparted in a language and manner they can fully understand.

As nation, we are aspiring to have democracy which is based on peace human rights; co-existence, development, the protection of both the majority and minority, respecting good neighbourliness and respect for the international standards ratified by the State.

Inspired by the Social teaching of the Church we share the guidance given by the Holy Father John Paul II, who in his encyclical letter, THE SOCIAL CONCERN OF THE CHURCH, of 1987 has this to say, on the position of the Institutional Church, on political and economic systems under No. 41.

*'The Church does not have **technical solutions** to offer for the problems of underdevelopment as such, as Pope Paul VI already affirmed in his Encyclical. For the Church does not propose economic and political systems or programmes, nor does she show preference for one or the other, provided that human dignity is properly respected and promoted, and provided she herself is allowed the room she needs to exercise her ministry in the world.'*

'But the Church is an "expert in humanity", and this leads her necessarily to extend her religious mission to the various fields in which men and women expend their efforts in search of the always relative happiness which is possible in this world, in line with their dignity as persons.'

+ Paul Kalanda
Chairman of the Uganda Episcopal Conference