

Citing ‘looming crisis,’ Zambian bishops call for government integrity

LUSAKA, Zambia - Zambia’s Catholic bishops urged the government to tackle a variety of problems, including corruption, the economy and poverty.

In a wide-ranging pastoral letter, “A Call to Integrity,” the bishops called on President Rupiah Banda’s government to stop intimidating and mistreating members of the public and the media in its “paranoia against constructive criticism.”

“To stifle the voice of the people and ignore their legitimate demands is to take peace for granted,” the bishops said in the March 1 letter.

They said that although Zambia had been a citadel of peace since its 1964 independence from Britain the nation now seemed to be in the midst of great uncertainty.

“We, as shepherds and pastors, acknowledge the role of politicians to direct and order society,” the bishops said. “However, we, too, have a responsibility to contribute toward building a strong democratic culture in our land. We believe that our faith and moral principles can help guide the search for just and effective responses to the nation’s problems.”

They said corruption in Zambian society had become endemic and called on the government to decisively tackle the problem.

“Our government seems to be in denial over the prevalence of high levels of corruption and abuse of authority among its ranks. Yet the auditor general’s report, which is a government document, clearly points to this problem every year,” the bishops said.

They also recommended that an independent commission be set up to investigate government procurement procedures in all ministries and to prosecute wrongdoers.

The bishops said they could no longer stay aloof while the country's recent economic gains were slowly being lost.

"Our nation stands at the threshold of a looming crisis: mine closures and the collapse of the currency; increasing poverty; economic disintegration; spiraling job losses; an education system that is failing and a constitution-making process that is still controversial and seems not to be in the interest of citizens," they said.

The "government does not seem to have a clear strategy for addressing the deteriorating economic situation," they added.

They said they were particularly worried about the job losses in the country's copper-mining industry and the great suffering these losses would cause to the many families whose livelihoods depend on the mines. However, they urged the government to involve more stakeholders in drawing up realistic strategies that work toward addressing the growing poverty in the country.

"The joys and the hopes, the grief and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the grief and anxieties of the followers of Christ," they said, referring to the opening sentence of the Second Vatican Council's "Gaudium et Spes."

The bishops also:

- Questioned the government's decision to abolish Grade 10 examinations, calling it a "superficial method of attaining the Millennium Development Goals on education. ... As major stakeholders in the education sector, we consider the new policy ill-advised, ill-timed and not based on sound education principles."
- Said the political will to make the agriculture sector the mainstay of Zambia's economy has not been matched by investment and policies.
- Called on all Zambian citizens to work toward the common good.
- Urged the government to prioritize reducing poverty and waste. They said resources gained from reducing waste must be redirected toward poverty-reduction programs.