

Zambian bishops warn they will sue government over attacks on Catholics

LUSAKA, Zambia - The Zambian bishops' conference warned it would sue the government and its agents for defamation if they continued attacking and insulting Catholics.

In a letter that was to be read at Masses June 5, Bishop George Lungu of Chipata, president of the Zambian bishops' conference, said the conference had contacted attorneys to discuss what legal recourse might be taken to challenge those who have vilified church teaching in media reports and that legal action would be taken if the unsubstantiated attacks continue.

The warning comes as Zambia draws closer to holding presidential and general elections on a still-unspecified date later this year and church officials have witnessed a growing barrage of attacks in the media against Catholic doctrine. Several Zambian bishops also have spoken against policies and actions taken by the government of President Rupiah Banda. Because of the criticism, the church has been portrayed by Banda's regime as favoring opposition leaders.

Bishop Lungu said the attacks on the church were coordinated and planned.

The bishop pointed in particular to reports in print and on public television by journalist Chanda Chimba and others who "would never on their own accord have the operational and financial ability to carry on the kind of attacks being waged against Catholics."

"We also note the growing but steady stream of individuals, journalists and questionable organizations that are ready to parade themselves before the public media vilifying innocent citizens and the Catholic Church," Bishop Lungu wrote.

The reports accused Catholic clergy of openly engaging in politics and supporting opposition political parties while charging that they secretly fathered children and

engaged in child abuse and homosexuality.

However, Bishop Lungu said that the attacks were meant to discredit church leadership and divide and confuse Catholics.

“Since all public media (in Zambia) is owned and controlled by government, we can safely conclude that these attacks on our church are sponsored by government,” the bishop said. “Whatever the case, this is not the way of winning the Catholic vote in an election year.

“Whoever is behind these attacks is working on the principle of divide and rule, trying to divide Catholics in Zambia,” he added. “But when these attacks distort the Catholic Church’s moral doctrine on celibacy and homosexuality, we all have cause for alarm.”

Bishop Lungu explained the clergy’s apparent entry into politics was motivated by an obligation to speak on behalf of the poor and voiceless.

“When we speak, as bishops, our message has nothing to do with any perceived dislike or preference for any particular sitting president or any political party,” the letter said. “We therefore refuse to be cowed into silence or to be compromised or be silenced on national issues, important issues that affect poor people.”

The bishop also urged Catholics to embrace a calm spirit and an attitude of forgiveness and reconciliation when provoked.