

THE EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE OF MALAWI



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ECM Pastoral Statement Need for Pastoral Solidarity During the COVID-19 Pandemic Tuesday, 26th January 2021

“Jesus went to the home of Simon and Andrew with James and John. As Simon’s mother-in-law was sick in bed with fever, they immediately told Him about her. Jesus went to her and taking her by the hand, raised her up. The fever left her and she began to wait on them” (MK 1,29-31)

Brothers and Sisters,

As a nation we are now faced with yet another crisis in terms of a new surge of COVID-19. The number of people who have contracted the virus and some have succumbed to it since the beginning of the year is quite alarming and threatening. We would like to accompany those that are suffering from this scourge in this time with Scriptures and the Tradition of the Church. God is speaking to us through this painful experience. The text of Mk 1,29-31 and some other biblical texts offer us several insights into how a crisis like this can offer us hope and solace for those who have lost their dear ones.

“Jesus went to the home of Simon and Andrew with James and John”

When Jesus visited the house of Simon there was already a sickness that the mother-in-law was battling with. He did not go into a house with perfect peace. It was not an ideal house. Malawi, like the whole world, is a house afflicted by an unseen sickness in the form of COVID-19. The invisible enemy is causing to some of us “fever and to be sick in bed” like Simon Peter’s mother-in-law; our houses are potential “infirmaries” as our hospitals cannot take in all those who are COVID-19 positive. What hope is there for those down with “a fever and in bed?” What word of comfort is there for them at this time? As parishes and Small Christian communities, we cannot enter these houses as Jesus did because the risk of infection is very high. Those like Simon Peter’s mother-in-law are now in bed alone and in isolation. How can we allow the Lord to visit and heal them? Jesus enters the home of Peter and he continues to do the same in our homes today in Malawi. Can we as Christians, as a community, etc. find a way of accompanying and offering hope to the sick and the isolated?

“They immediately told him about her”

They could have chosen not to “disturb” him by keeping silent about the illness. Some of us, after being diagnosed COVID-19 positive, may not want people to know. We are encouraged for the sake of those around us to disclose our condition so that others may be saved from infection if they take proper measures to protect themselves. *“They immediately told him about her”*. Can we in our parishes form a network of solidarity with those who are infected, affected and those grieving? We cannot let them alone. COVID deaths are dehumanising in many ways; the isolation and loneliness of those infected feel and the burials that do not allow for a dignified funeral and burial service. The Church feels greatly grieved when

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burying her sons and daughters in such painful ways. But as those men who did not discriminate against the paralyzed person but rather brought him to Jesus, we too should demonstrate love and sympathy to those suffering from COVID-19 and refrain from stigmatizing them. Let us avoid making COVID-19 infected and affected members in our society from reliving the experience lepers used to undergo among the Jews in the Old Testament when they were discriminated against.

We would have loved to offer proper respect and dignity to the deceased. In life, some of those who have died helped others have dignified funerals and burials but, in their case, they get buried in a hurry and with very few people. We thank the Government for reminding us of the need to take proper infection preventive measures even during burials. A pastoral solidarity network at this time is much needed. It is time to feel concerned with those who are suffering and tell them that they are not alone.

“Jesus went to her and taking her by the hand, raised her up. The fever left her and she began to wait on them”

We are not able to “take each other’s hands” as Jesus did to Simon’s mother-in-law because of COVID-19 danger. However, we can still allow the Lord to hold us in this very difficult moment. The Lord holds us through those around us. We need invisible hands that hold people together. These invisible hands are health workers, care givers of those who are sick, essential workers who bring them food and other essentials and pastoral workers i.e. priests and other Church ministers. Praying and offering sacrifices daily for the sick, may our parishes form a network of solidarity in supporting these people. Jesus wants to hold and lift us by the hand. This is the only way that those who are sick are comforted and healed.

“The fever left her and she began to wait on them”

All countries and organisations are at a standstill. Our plans and dreams may have been shattered. Many people have lost jobs due to COVID-19. They would have loved to wait on us in service. Doctors, nurses, teachers, engineers, sportsmen/women, politicians, civil servants, business people and priests/religious would have loved to render their services to us. They would have loved to be like Martha to cook for us when we visit them. All this now cannot be taken for granted. We pray and are hopeful that if one day we are able to defeat this virus, all these people will happily get up, put on their “aprons” to serve us like the Mother-in-law of Simon Peter. The word “*diakonia*” explains very well what Simon Peter’s mother-in-law did after her cure. It has the sense of “serving at table” but in a wider sense, Malawi needs a lot of “servants” to rebuild our lives, hospitals, schools, markets, roads, agriculture, education and many other areas that need to be developed so that people can once again enjoy dignified living and shared road map (Cf. Pope Francis’ Encyclical Letter, *Fraternity and Social Friendship*, nos. 31 and 130). Malawi has so much to do that we need to pray hard for an end to this COVID-19. This service reminds us of the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37.

“Jesus raises by the hand, Simon Peter’s mother-in-law”

This “*raising by hand*” points towards His own Resurrection when the Father was to raise His Son from death. Fear is another devastating element that has a heavy grip on those suffering from COVID-19 including those who are not positive. Jesus, who cured Simon Peter’s mother-in-law is the same Jesus who assures us that we should not be afraid and

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calling us to turn to him in times of trouble as he says: “Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest” (*Mt 11,28*).

COVID-19 has instilled in us fear, but as Christians, this is time to preach message of hope to all at this time. We will be raised by the hand of the Lord. The Father through His Son will raise us up. When Lazarus was sick, Mary and Martha sent for Jesus to come and assist their brother to live on. Jesus did not turn up and the two sisters could not understand why Jesus had to wait for so long before coming and all hope was gone. What we should know is that God’s ways are not ours; even when Jesus was four days late, he was still on time for Lazarus to live on. With the COVID-19 pandemic, most of us are fighting a battle of fear and we do not understand why God seems to delay in coming to our aid – but let us not be discouraged because what we should always remember is that, God has his own time. While we mourn those who have succumbed to COVID-19, we thank the Lord for instilling in us the hope that this battle against COVID-19 will be won. We find evidence of this in the so many of our brothers and sisters who are being healed.

Finally, let us all join hands in prayer, that the Lord may bestow on us His loving and healing grace. May those who are affected and infected by this pandemic experience the inner peace and tranquility which only our Lord and Saviour can bestow.

Questions for reflection

1. Like Jesus in Simon’s house and as a Christian, what role am I playing or should I be playing to combat this pandemic?
2. Who needs my assistance at this time of the pandemic?
3. What response have I to give to be my brother’s or sister’s keeper?
4. What should I do to reduce stigma and discrimination of those infected and affected by COVID-19?
5. What should I do to be free from fear when tested positive for COVID-19?

Through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, may God protect us from all current and future threats of the pandemic.

Most Reverend Thomas Msusa
Right Reverend Martin Mtumbuka
Right Reverend Peter Musikuwa
Right Reverend Montfort Stima
Right Reverend George Tambala
Right Reverend John Ryan
Very Reverend John Chithonje
Very Reverend Patrick Thawale

President and Archbishop of Blantyre
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