

THE ROLE OF CATHOLIC MEN IN THE CHURCH TODAY

Good morning Rev. Fathers,

Good morning gentlemen,

You have already been welcomed by your hosts, Catholic Men Association members of St. Kizito Chigoneka Parish. I echo the welcome sentiments. I welcome you on behalf of all Catholic Men Association members in the Archdiocese of Lilongwe. I wish you a very productive visit that should invigorate your belonging to Catholic Men's League.

I have been asked to reflect with you on the Role of Catholic Men in the Church. It is very wide. There is a lot that one can speak about and write about. While acknowledging all that, I will limit myself to the basics that relate to your groups; Catholic Men's League of Chipata Diocese and Catholic Men Association of the Archdiocese of Lilongwe. The names may differ a bit but the idea remains the same.

Allow me to first of all to give a brief background of the Catholic Men Association of Lilongwe to which the men of Chigoneka Parish belong. That will somehow give you a background of the national association because it all started here and men of Chigoneka Parish are co-pioneers.

Back in 2015, when the Episcopal Conference of Malawi was preparing to host the AMECEA Conference in 2016, there was, as usual, an anxiety on the full ability to handle the conference. Bishops were very sure that Laity Council was going to be involved and took comfort in that assurance. They were also most sure that Catholic Women Organization was going to get itself highly involved. Bishops took such a greater comfort in the assumed involvement of Catholic Women Organization that they wished men had a similar association with clear structures from the Small Christian Community up to the national level through Out Stations, Parishes, Deaneries and Dioceses. Laity Council, under whose umbrella, Catholic Women Organization was, had same structures. These clear structures gave greater assurance that even the flow of information about the conference and anything related to it would reach down to everyone in the Church across the dioceses.

The mere wish of Bishops that, had men organized themselves as women did, in a spirit of complementarity, things would have been a lot easier because there could have been a balance of efforts resulting into a greater involvement of men both in the preparation and coordination during the actual conference. While this was just a wish among bishops, which somehow got into the ears of Diocesan Pastoral Coordinators, nobody actively mentioned this to any group nor actively

initiated anything towards starting any group of catholic men. I was the Archdiocesan Pastoral Coordinator for Lilongwe then and I can assure you that Archbishop Ziyaye, (of good memories,) never whispered to me about this wish nor did I whisper to anybody about the same.

The AMECEA conference and everything in relation to its preparation, implementation and wrap up activities went well. The involvement of Laity Council under which were Catholic Women Organization and Youths worked very well. Much as everybody worked hard for the success of the conference, women evidently, visibly, and colorfully excelled in every way to everyone's admiration and satisfaction through their organization. This must have triggered some thoughts in men; starting with the very men who, under the banner of laity council, worked successfully hard alongside women during the same conference.

After the AMECEA conference, men from parishes of St. Patricks, St. Kizito, Utatu Woyera, and, Padre Pio Outstation spontaneously started organizing themselves into some structured individual groups of Catholic Men Organization. I repeat with emphasis; they did this independently of each other. To create visibility, in each of these parishes, when the Archbishop visited, men requested for slots to participate as "Catholic Men Organization" and even sought audiences with His Grace, requesting him to allow them form their own organization. The start was unstoppable because by the time they sought these audiences, three of these Parishes already had their constitutions in place. One Parish even had a vibrant choir of Catholic Men Organization that was already making rounds in Parishes around for further visibility and selling the idea to them.

Things went so fast that His Grace, upon receiving all these requests, granted an audience to a task force that had been quickly put in place. His Grace directed the Pastoral office to guide and coordinate the group in view of giving it an official recognition. The Task Force developed a common constitution with content from the ones of St. Patricks, St. Kizito and Padre Pio and presented this to priests at their Deanery meetings, Diocesan Council of Priests and Presbyteral Council. At all these presentations priests demanded that the Task Force develops a spirituality or way of life and, order of meetings for members of the group. This condition was satisfactorily fulfilled. Further meetings of the same forums accepted the documents, making a recommendation to his Grace to officially formalize the group. A colorful official launch took place at St. Patrick's Parish in August 2017.

After the launch, executive committee members of the organization received many invitations from different parishes and deaneries to give formation to

members about the group. There were also invitations from other dioceses. To-date the group is in all the 8 Dioceses.

The Conference of Catholic Bishops in Malawi has since officially recognized the group, assigning a national Chaplain to it, allowing the formation of a national Executive committee, approving its Constitution on national level, putting in place a Task Force to draft the group's official spirituality, changing its name from the initial Catholic Men Organization to **Catholic Men Association**, and, approving its uniform. We are having our sixth National Conference on the Feast of St. Joseph, Husband of Mary, our Patron Saint next month, during the weekend of Friday 20th March through Sunday 22nd March, at St. Andrea Kaggwa Parish here in Lilongwe.

FAMILY AS DOMESTIC CHURCH

In talking about role of men in the church I will start from the role of the catholic man in the family. At some point down history the family was proudly considered 'the church in miniature.' The definition of this term looked at Christian husbands and wives as icons and witnesses of the love of Christ for his Church. Children were an expression of the fruitfulness of married life. The family, therefore, was the place where the gospel was transmitted and lived out among the members. In that Church there were generally natural roles that members automatically assumed without questioning or being questioned but everyone joyfully accepting and respecting these roles. Each family being looked at in that way created a communion of families that shared similar values and came together in the larger church composed of several families within the same locality. There was pride in the members; among husbands, wives, children and neighbors. We cannot talk about Church if there are no families. It all starts and must start from the family. It is in the family that every man slowly learns and practices his roles and responsibilities towards the Church and in the Church.

Abraham, our Father in Faith

The Bible is not short of instances where God called on certain men to lead his people and where his choices were unanimously accepted by all. In responding to God's calls, family was always involved. When God called Abraham to leave his land for some land away that he would show him, Sarai, Lot and many servants were involved. Sarai fully recognized that her husband was responding to God's call and accepted to go with him, supporting him all the way. In his own way, Lot also supported him. Because of the support system it was possible for Abraham to realize the call.

The reward of Abraham's obedience was promised to Abraham, but Sarah also received the same reward yet it was Abraham who understood it most. By Abraham's faithfulness, Sara benefitted.

Abraham must have told Sarah about the sacrifice of Isaac and she in her support system accepted that Abraham follows God's will because refusal to do so would have called God's wrath over both of them. Abraham must have negotiated and dialogued with Sara to accept God's request to offer Isaac as a human burnt offering. Sarah, therefore, must have suffered the deep pain of losing her only son to human sacrifice.

Joshua, a Community Leader

After Mozes' death, Joshua wondered if he could really fit into his predecessor's shoes, taking charge of a people, some of whom fiercely opposed Moses. God made him so powerful that he managed the people so very well that he indeed led them into the Promised Land. He witnessed how God chased their enemies from the land and how others submitted to them. Now at a very advanced age he worried that these people might forget what the Lord had done for them hence asking them to declare clearly who they resolved to serve; whether Yahweh or the false gods of their ancestors in the wilderness or the new false gods that the inhabitants of their land worshipped. As for him he made it crystal clear that, "**as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.**"

A decision to commit oneself to the Lord starts with an individual and God loves it. This is a decision that each person, family, and community, has to make but it starts on an individual level, effectively leading to a collective level. When a leader decisively says, '**I will,**' those following him have the courage to say, '**we too will.**' This is what it must mean to be a leader.

A leader must be able to look ahead and be decisive. He must challenge others to make choices without fear. He must be decisive based on his convictions. This is what it must mean to be a strong leader. There is a saying that goes; 'chimene wamkulu amaona atakhala pansu, mwana ngakhale ataimirira sangachione.' Kukhala pansu kwathu kuzikhala meditative, reflective (seeking God's wisdom,) all embracing (because of deep love,) and, then decisive.

Jesse and His Eight Sons

God sent Prophet Samuel to Jesse, a father of 8 sons, to anoint a king among them. Jesse knew his sons so well that any could have been king. That's why he easily paraded each of them because in his mind, any of them was suitable.

Unknown to Jesse, God wanted the youngest, who was equally raised despite Jesse not giving this youngest son the benefit of the doubt that he could be the one destined to be king. It turned out to be him that Samuel was to anoint as king. It was the responsibility of the father to properly raise the boys and he did.

It may not always be the case that a man will take the leadership role in matters of faith in family. Just as women have played the supporting role, men must also be able to do the same without feeling belittled. Much as women have provided support to men in the family, men should do likewise.

The Story of a Mother and her Seven Sons

The story of a woman with her 7 sons in 2 Maccabees chapter 7 is a story that has a strong man behind who either gave great support to his wife in mentoring her sons or a man who inculcated great family values to his wife so that even after he had died, the wife chose to live by those values even in the face of death and encouraged her boys from the first to the last to do the same. The story does not mention who the husband of this woman, the father of these seven sons was. Some traditions say he was Eleazer who also suffered similar martyrdom himself.

VALUES TO BE EMBRACED TO FAITHFULLY PLAY THESE ROLES

For not wanting to re-invent the wheel, I searched the internet for any groups similar to ours in the Catholic Church. The very first one I got, '**Knights of Columbus**' so much attracted my attention that I did not search further.

The Knights of Columbus were founded in 1882 by Venerable Father Michael J. Macgivney, to provide a means by which men could support the Catholic Church, provide financial protection for their families and engage in works of charity to benefit the less fortunate. This is a group of men that has empowered catholic men to put their faith in action "by building stronger families, stronger parishes, and stronger communities, (and for our adaptation, stronger Small Christian Communities - *Miphakati in Lilongwe or Mambumba in Chipata*. I am not interested in introducing the Knights of Columbus to you and I must not. Rather, I am interested in the roles that members of the group play in the Church.

Knights of Columbus is headquartered in Connecticut - United States of America. Members are spread in such countries as the Philippines, Canada, Mexico, Poland, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Panama, the Bahamas, the Virgin Islands, Cuba, Guatemala, Guam, Saipan, Lithuania, Ukraine, and South Korea.

Gentlemen, see how the Holy Spirit works in the Church; I have told you no authority spoke to anyone about Catholic Men Association here in Lilongwe. I

would guess it was the same in Chipata. Along the way we realize that way back in 1882 a certain man already spoke to fellow men about starting a group of Catholic Men in the church and it has long since been functioning. The same Holy Spirit has been at work today among us and he impresses on us the same values and roles. As said above, the main role of the Knights is to put their faith in action.

Building Stronger Families through Love

Gentlemen, the family needs to experience love. It is the man who proposes and gives initial plans to the woman. The woman merely responds. She may resist until she is sure there is love and that there will be love. Of course the man wants to be loved back. That is why he does all he can and he must. He even sacrifices. It is love that builds foundations in a family. Love requires a lot of responsibility. It starts with marital love, maternal love or community love. Responsibility goes with sacrifice. We must not forget that at the heart of the catholic faith is the commandment to love one another as Christ loved us. For a catholic man this must extend beyond sentimental affection. It must be a clear call to self-giving, sacrificial love that must mirror Christ's own love. Your relationship with your spouse, your children and your larger community outside your family must show this love. In marriage husbands are called to love their wives as Christ loved his church. This calls for faithfulness, seeking the full good of the other and making it a priority in every way.

Provision

In paternal love children must really feel there is indeed somebody responsible for them in total love and care by providing material needs and guiding them in their faith. It is not only the children who need this, the mother too does. The catholic man must be a role model by teaching his children christian values that include love itself, kindness, humility, prayerfulness, perseverance; all in a conducive environment within the home, much in mind like that of the holy family of Nazareth.

I recall when I was young, my Dad bringing some packages on his way home from the office. My mum would do likewise on his way back from school as a teacher. I used to admire them. What baffled me was that while I would overhear them complaining to each other about shortage of money in the family, still each one brought something home. I very much looked to a time when I would make them happy by bringing something home. I did not have to wait until growing up. I realized that if I branched into the bush to collect some masache for the outside, my dad would be happy. I realized that if I picked some firewood on my way back home from school or from some errands, my mother would be happy too.

My happiest day was when I branched into the forest to collect firewood and I chanced into some large mushrooms and took them home on a day when my mother was concerned about the lack of relish. She prepared it so well that it felt like eating beef. I had made my own significant provision.

Protection

There are many insecurities facing the world, the church, society and the family in our world today. These cause a lot of worry to family members. Children are mostly weakest victims of decisions of any of the parents. Most decisions, however are inspired, guided and initiated by the husband who is also the father. Decisions are made in the seclusion of the bedrooms and only communicated to children in the living room. At times they are not even communicated directly but rather actions based on decisions made implemented. Catholic men must protect each and every member of the family including the most voiceless and even the unseen. A catholic home must be one where faith and all related virtues must be taught and upheld by all members.

Spiritual Leadership.

A catholic man must not hesitate to display with total love his spiritual leadership in the family, both to his wife and children and the entire household. There may be other relations, servants or maids living with the family in the household. A catholic man must ensure that all these embrace the family values such as attendance to mass, to miphakati/mambumba prayers, sacraments, family prayer etc, ensuring that all these are a great part of family life.

A catholic man must look at himself or consider himself as the domestic catechist in his family and must not be ashamed to take up this important role. He must lead by good example and should not fear to lovingly admonish anyone going wayward.

Children have many questions about the faith of the parents which is their own faith and the faith of the family. A catholic man must not just welcome these questions but actually seek them and be able to answer them convincingly, taking pride in his knowledge of the church and the faith by seeking and giving right answers to all these questions.

When a Catholic man practices his responsibilities well in the family he will wish that all families in the larger community do the same. He will therefore not hesitate to assume or accept leadership roles assigned to him and become a community

leader. Such acceptance will help the growth of the larger community with approvals from his family where he has ably displayed his leadership.

Conclusion

I have walked you through what roles catholic men can play in the church. We have evident gaps in the church that make the church a community that is full of people without the spirit of God in them. It is like a body without the spirit. When catholic men choose to fill these gaps with what I have proposed, there is be a great spirit blowing within the parish and in the greater community where catholic men will take up leadership roles and responsibilities in the small Christian communities, in Parishes, and in society as a whole. They can even take up roles of evangelization among others because they will have known their church deeper than ever before. They will become salt and light.

“By embracing these roles, Catholic men contribute to the spiritual and communal well-being of their families and the broader church community. Their commitment to living out these responsibilities reflects the love of Christ and helps build a strong, faithful and vibrant Church. Through their example and leadership, Catholic men play a crucial role in nurturing a faith filled environment where all can grow in love and holiness.

Let us be that kind of men, faithfully and humbly playing these roles until one day we too will be able to say, ‘I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, *firmly guarding the gospel*, I have kept the faith.’”

I wish you well.

Thank you.