



## **AFRICA/MALAWI - The Catholic Church defends the Chairperson of the Episcopal Conference accused of being biased: "the Bishops do not enter the field of mere politics"**

Lilongwe (Agenzia Fides) - "The Church should not be identified with any political party and is therefore unwarranted for politicians to insinuate that the Chairperson of the Episcopal Conference was inspired by some opposition elements". This is the meaning of the statement signed by three associations (diocesan priests, religious men and religious women) to reject the accusations by the President of Malawi, Bingu wa Mutharika, against His Exc. Mgr. Joseph Mukasa Zuza, Bishop of Mzuzu and Chairperson of the Episcopal Conference of Malawi. On 16 August, during a prayer meeting for peace in Malawi, organized by the Country's main religious denominations, Mgr. Zuza had said that the Presidency "should stop suffocating civil society, the press, the judiciary system and democracy" (see Fides 18/8/2011).

The intervention of Mgr. Zuza had been criticized by the President, who stated that the Bishop had been influenced by the opposition. "Some people are suggesting that Mgr. Zuza has been influenced by opposition elements, while others say that he wanted to attack the President of the Republic," is what the statement says of which a copy was sent to Fides, signed by the Association of Diocesan Catholic Clergy of Malawi, from the Association of Religious (Women) Institutes of Malawi, and the Association of Men Religious Institutes of Malawi.

"We would like to remind those in political leadership positions that the Bishops, as leaders of the Church, do not enter the field of mere politics. As such, the Bishop's office and the Catholic Church should not be identified with any political party or type of government. It is therefore unwarranted for politicians to insinuate that the Chairperson of the Episcopal Conference of Malawi was inspired by some opposition elements", the statement said. The document also denounced threats and intimidation against religious leaders who practice their "prophetic role": "Any attempt to attack the clergy, is an attack on the Church" the statement warned.

Malawi is experiencing a very serious political and economic crisis. On 20 August President Bingu wa Mutharika fired the entire government, assuming the interim of 42 Ministries, while several opposition movements and civil society have announced new protests. (L.M.) (Agenzia Fides 05/09/2011)