

CONGREGATION SPEECH 2023

His Lord ship, the Chancellor of the University of Makeni,

The Bishop Elect of the Diocese of Makeni

The Representative of the Minister of Technical and Higher Education

Members of the Governing Council of the University

Vice Chancellors of Sisters Universities and members of the Conference of Vice Chancellors and Principals

The Chairperson and members of the Tertiary Education Commission

The University Registrar and Registrars of sister Universities

Chief executives and representatives of other departments, agencies and directorates

Representatives of the City Council and District Council

Minsters of Government and members of parliament here present

Excellencies, members of the diplomatic and consular corps

Esteemed Traditional representative of the Bombali Seborra Chiefdom and the Paramount Chief of the Gbanti Chiefdom

Partners of the university

Faculty and Staff, continuing students

Distinguish ladies and gentlemen and most importantly

Our Dear Graduands

Let me start by welcoming you to our humble surroundings for yet another Congregation ceremony, the 12 Congregation ceremony.

Mr Chancellor Sir, today we will present to you for the conferment of Degrees and the award of Diplomas and Certificates a total number of 881graduands of whom 643 are undergraduates and 243 postgraduates. Of this total, 326 are female undergrads and 317 male undergrads. A total number of 187 female postgrads and fifty male; 50 diploma and 2 certificates ranging from the Faculty of Nursing and Allied health Sciences; Faculty of Law and Humanities; Faculty of Agriculture and Food Sciences; Faculty of Social Sciences; Faculty of Commerce and Management; Faculty of Education ; Faculty of Information technology and Communication Sciences. The number keeps on increasing from last year 654 to 881 graduands this year. Indeed this is good news for our country and interestingly enough the female students are leading the march. Another win! We thank God for all these blessings!

Mr. Chancellor, permit also to single out new departments that are graduating their first cohort of students: For the first time we are awarding diplomas to our students in the Nursing department of the St John of God Campus, Lunsar. Congratulations to you, your Provost and staff of the St John of God Campus. We will also be conferring degrees to the first cohort of postgraduates students from the Master in Public Health, and for the very first time in our country conferring degrees of Master of Law (LLM) and MBA in human resources Management. Congratulations!

Let me heartily congratulate our dear graduands for a work well done. You have had to study in these very challenging times but you have succeeded. You are our UNIMAK champions and you have been resilient. You will need more of that as you move into a new beginning. Thank you for choosing the University of Makeni, for your trust and it has been an honor and privileged to allow us to share your lives. Allow me to apologize for times we have failed you and when we have not kept our promises and we hope to do better. Our gratitude to your parents, families and benefactors who stood by you all these years.

Graduands, allow me also to thank members of faculty and staff who have accompanied and supported you in your journey here at UNIMAK. Join me in applauding them for their good work.

But as we celebrate, let me quickly point out that this house of Congregation is taking place at a very challenging moment in our world and our country. Challenging, with so many crisis affecting and changing the lives of so many people. Food crisis, energy, climate, the Russian-Ukraine war and its consequences. No wonder, the theme of our Government's Budget and

Statement of Economic and Financial Policies for the Financial Year 2023 is : Addressing the Needs of the vulnerable in the Context of the Multiple Crises.” Indeed a trying times for many families, our world and our country. It will be a defining moment for our world and country depending on how we respond to the crises.

But crisis are moments of opportunities. I say it is also an exciting moment. Crisis can make us grow. We must learn to live in crisis and to overcome it. A moment to garner all our strength and resilience to build a better world and a better country. This is a time for creativity, innovation and using our tradition and faith to address the challenges in our world. We hope we have helped you to address these challenges using your competencies, knowledge, skills and values to create a better Sierra Leone and world.

Permit dear graduands, in this festive mood, to have the final conversation with you as some of you take your leave from us. Allow to speak on the theme: **Sierra Leone think big, the University of Makeni think big.** I intentionally chose this theme to explore certain myths and false narratives that must be critically analyzed and debunked as we build a civilization of Love. More so as we respond to these defining moments in our world and our country. Myths are widely held but false belief or idea. For us to forge ahead as a nation and a university, we need to respond to these defining moments of crises and to exposed and debunk these myths, or falsely held belief.

1: Do we need to create enemies to grow or to be better? We don't need to create enemies to be better. We can be better by using our God given talents. You don't need to cancel the other person, in order for you to survive. We must see others who are different from us as our travelling companions and not a threat to our identity , to seeing them in the image of God. Think Big!

2. A corollary to the first is another false narrative that our enemies are the other tribe, the other groups , us versus them in Sierra Leone . If you get rid of the next tribe we will all become billionaires overnight. You will be prosperous the next day. This is the myth peddled by those intending to create chaos or disunity. Our real enemies in our country are : Poverty, corruption, illiteracy, food insecurity climate change. These are the real enemies we need to fight.

Catholic Universities can help to identify and indicate the foundations for the construction of an intercultural society, in which ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity is seen as a source

of enrichment and not an obstacle for the common future. We should see in our communities , country and the world “ not the evil which divides us but the good that unites us”. As Pope Francis reminds the people of South Sudan in his recent visit to that country : Let each citizen understand that the time has come to stop being carried along by the tainted waters of hatred, tribalism , regionalism and ethnic differences . It is time to sail together towards the future. We are all on the same team. Sierra Leone think Big!

3: The myth that we can do it alone. Let me concentrate on my own business and that is it. Let all hell lose so long as I am ok ! Let my own salary and emolument be ok and dame to the rest of mankind. We cannot survive alone. We have a common future; we have a shared future in order for us to be a prosperous nation. Prosperity to be sustainable has to be shared . Sierra Leone Think Big!

4. The Illusion of singular identity. Diversity is not a crime and those societies that enhance diversity are those that are more prosperous. Identity is not a zero sum game . The narrative that we have a single identity is false and acting on a single identity is also false. We all have a plurality of identities and embrace diversities. Most of the barbarity and atrocity seen in our contemporary world are based on the illusion of singular and one dimensional sense of identity. A person belongs with many groups and identities. The illusion of singularity undermines and hides the common plight and situation of persons. We need to embrace the richness of our diversities. The beauty of our world is in its diversity. How cold, dull , drab and boring would our world be without diversity. To be holy and whole is to embrace the richness of diversity. The false narrative that to be diverse is a curse is the defining challenge that we have as a nation and world. Sierra Leone Think Big!

5. We are not poor , that is a false narrative. By no means are we poor; we are a blessed country endowed with so many resources: human, material, social and cultural . Instead we are impoverished. Impoverished when we are not innovative, critical, mentally lazy, greed, driven by conspicuous consumption. Impoverished when we are held captives by our self serving interests, by our inability to transcend region, ethnicity, borders , impoverished by our close mentalities , impoverished when we refuse to encounter others. Impoverished when we refuse to enhance a culture of dialogue, of encounter and trapped by a culture of conflict and violence. Let us get on our feet, with determination , grit, sweat it out and make a country a better place.

Fifth myth or false narrative is that some super agents would come to make or develop our country. Nobody is going to develop our country but we ourselves. Yes, we need support and solidarity but we alone can walk the talk.

The myth that we can do it alone, any region, ethnic group can do it alone. Infact today we talk about an African power pool, African fiber pool, the African single market. It is a myth that an ethnic group can develop the nation alone. We need to pool together. It is strange that African leaders advocate for seat at the G21, African Union, etc but at home they practice and fuelled regionalism, ethnicity etc. The myth that the private sector can do it alone. We need public and private –sector together, all the actors working together, the state, civil society, the private sector and the international community. Therefore, this moment calls for unity, cohesion, solidarity and culture of dialogue and not division, conflict, in addressing these national and global headwinds that will continue to affect us.

As we debunked these false narratives and myths let us propose what we believe in , let us reframe, reimagine and reposition to create a better normal, forge new narratives and alternatives. Universities must play a critical role in shaping these new narratives. Pope John Paul 2 reminds us in his letter to Catholic Universities: A catholic university must serve society by including in its research serious contemporary problems like the search for peace and stability, a new economic a political order, the protection of nature amongst many other problems and if need be, a catholic university must have the courage to speak uncomfortable truths which do not please public opinion, but which are necessary to safeguard the authentic good of society.

Catholic Institutions of higher learning ought to be hubs for analyzing the signs of the times and interpreting them in the light of the gospel. Pope Francis invites us” to attend to the CRY of the EARTH and CRY of the POOR” We should pursue the work of higher education within a perspective of justice, global responsibility and communion in diversity.

Mr Chancellor, as a member of the academia and the Conference of Principals and Vice Chancellors in Sierra Leone, I appeal and call on the political class, civil society and the international committee to promote, enhance and foster a politics for the common good in our country. Free us from the anxiety concerning our future and that of our students. I take my cue from the pastoral letter of the Catholic Bishops in Sierra Leone and the Interreligious Council asking for a responsible politics on the part of us all and more especially the political class as we prepare for elections. Let us commit ourselves to responsible politics devoid of

the false myths of ethnicity, regionalism , partyism, tribalism , do or die, us alone. Throw away the politics of the belly and it is our turn to eat and work for the common good. Sierra Leone think BIG!

UNIMAK has designed its long term plan for the next decade with the following thematic priorities around : fostering academic innovation, enriching students experience ; strengthening enrollment; supporting research excellence; developing outstanding human resources; sustaining campus renewal; ensuring financial stability, engaging our community, strengthening operational efficiency and digitization of our products, programs and processes. Above and beyond these thematic guidelines are the values to be the best and not settle for less and think big, dialogue, innovate and embrace diversity and internationalization. Building lasting peace through dialogue, dialogue entails talking to one another, sharing different views and coming to agreement and walking together.

In 2009 soon after the war, we designed our response to creating the type of society, the type of Sierra Leone we want: This was articulated in a document we named VISION 2025: Vision 2025 articulated where we want our nation to be by the year 2025 and how to get there. It provided the unique opportunity for the people to chart a desirable future for their country. A consensus was reached on the grand questions relating to a progressive, stable and attractive nation with a people united for a common purpose. It became the future we agreed to build. We wanted a united country, based on democratic principles, rule of law, and justice for all, whose citizens participate actively in national and local management ; a dynamic, open and enlightened , integrated society. People called for a new type of leadership that is responsible, responsive, effective and accountable.

Scenario techniques were used to develop the vision: envisaging alternative futures to illustrate divergent paths, focusing on critical variable, and exploring consequences of different actions. Some critical variables, such as governance, will be under Sierra Leone's control, others will not, such as instability in neighboring countries. Yet others, such as global change, can be beneficial or can pose threats, depending on how Sierra Leone responds.

Scenario 1: The first scenario, Sweet- Salone, relies on good governance, sound economic policies and a favorable regional environment to produce strong economic growth. Donor

funding and debt cancellation helps make a good start. The State delivers social and judicial services everywhere; upgrades economic and social infrastructures; and maintains security. The Truth and reconciliation Commission and Special Court help purge the nation's soul. Displaced persons and ex-combatants are successfully reintegrated. With high standards of democracy, human rights, transparency, budget discipline and tough stance against corruption, Government wins the people's confidence. Carefully- designed economic reforms are undertaken; foreign investment is sought, making the economy more competitive; indigenous ownership and access to capital encouraged.

SCENARIO 2:

In the second scenario, **Betteh- Nor- Dae**, Sierra Leone benefits from reasonable governance, but is less fortunate in the regional environment, and less resolute in economic growth. External forces hamper recovery efforts, although the government adopts standard good governance and economic policies. Much expenditure and effort goes into poverty reduction, but civil unrest simmers, illicit diamond mining and trading continue, ethnic and regional tensions and economic disparities remain, and the investment climate is seen as high risk. Rejuvenation of the economic base is slow, and potentials remain unfulfilled. The economy remains uncompetitive. Nonetheless, continued efforts at good governance maintain stability, and the country is on a slow upward path.

SCENARIO 3:

In **Tight- Gentry**, less good governance prevails, especially in the early years, but a fortunate environment and firm national management allow Sierra Leone to become competitive and benefit from satisfactory growth. Initially there is dissatisfaction due to government's inability to deliver social rehabilitation and employment, or to eliminate corruption and nepotism; global terrorism cells emerge. The Weaknesses lead to a military coup, backed by the Western interests; a new military dictator sets up a harsh discipline regime; draconian measure stamp out corruption and illicit operations, bringing back the rule of law and government authority, although civil rights, transparency and the social sectors receive lower priority. Seeing that economic growth can address poverty, the new rulers work with multinationals and international agencies to modernize infrastructure, to utilize natural resources, and successfully stimulate growth. Eventually the dictator calls and wins a

presidential election; however, governance is still not transparent and power is sometimes abused. Disquiet leads to a second election, won by a reform candidate. By 2025 good democratic government builds upon the economic foundation. Sierra Leone is becoming a “middle income” country.

SCENARIO 4:

Sierra Leone fares less well in the fourth scenario, **Dombolo**. The country suffers from bad government, personal greed and internal and external conflict, drifting from crisis, mostly of its own making. Initial attempts at rehabilitation and stability do not work, made worse by an influx of refugees. The state cannot deliver non- corrupt, well- managed services; humanitarian aid declines; food production does not recover; governance is inequitable; and unrest grows. Young men return to fighting; illicit diamonds thrive. Poor macroeconomic management brings inflation and lack of public resources; investors avoid the country and donors withdraw. In the lawless environment HIV\ AIDS and disease escalate. There are coups d’etat and war, religious fundamentalism and international terrorism, links to international crime. The main losers are the desperately poor people, helpless caught in a maelstrom of conflict and the ambitions of local and international leaders. By 2025, with another civil war, the cycle of violence and despair repeats itself. (Source: **National Long term Perspectives Studies, Sierra Leone Vision 2025: SWEET-SALONE, August 2003, <https://unipsil.unmissions.org>**)

We are two years away to 2025 and it is time to renew our commitment as we work to bring about our SWEET Sierra Leone, the Sierra Leone we want. Dear graduands commit yourself to this bigger dream, the united, attractive and prosperous nation.

Finally, On behalf of the staff and students of the University of Makeni, I take this singular opportunity to express our sincere thanks and appreciation to our Bishop and Chancellor Bishop Natalio Paganelli for serving us and providing leadership to the University for the past twelve years. A new Bishop elect has been appointed and Bishop Natalio takes his leave as his mission has been accomplished. Bishop Natalio has demonstrated to us that a Catholic university should never forget its mission to the vulnerable and the least of our brethren, the poor and above all our mission to promote social justice and fight for the common good. We wish you well in all your future endeavors and thank you for all:

I thank you all for your attention and may God bless you!.

