

LET US NOW PRAISE FAMOUS MEN!

Peter Henriot

“Let us now praise famous men....” *Ecclesiasticus*: 44: 1

That poignant biblical phrase came to my mind and heart on last Saturday’s bright and sunny morning, as I stood along the Great East Road with thousands of Zambians, old and young, as the funeral procession of our late President came from the airport. It was a particularly solemn and somber moment, with military troops, high government officials, diplomats and ordinary citizens in orderly procession.

I recalled an event deep in my memory of over forty years: the assassination and burial of John F. Kennedy, President of the United States of America. Again, a very solemn and somber moment.

Something that characterises these solemn and somber moments of the funerals of Presidents and other major national and international figures is that we do indeed, in the words of the Bible, “praise great men.” This is not the moment to more sharply analyse the history of an Administration or critically evaluate the faults and failings that might have marked the regime. Yes, that comes later, as indeed it has for President Kennedy and surely will for President Mwanawasa.

But for now, praise for achievements is deservedly in order. Therefore let me mention several of the late President’s achievements, some which many others are highlighting these days and perhaps a few which don’t get widely lifted up.

ANTI-CORRUPTION

Certainly President Mwanawasa’s “zero tolerance” campaign against corruption was a bright change from the previous Administration. Whether or not the campaign was totally sincere and/or totally successful is a story still to be told. But the campaign at least placed an emphasis that needed to be placed if a few rich and dishonest Zambians were not to continue to get even richer by being even more dishonest, while the majority of the citizens went hungry.

There is still a very long ways to go to “make Zambia clean and honest!” in Government practices and business dealings. Yet Mwanawasa’s words and actions (such as seeking to lift the immunity of someone in order to pursue charges of “plunder of the national economy”!) did much to restore confidence in both Zambians and non-Zambians.

This confidence was also one of the reasons Zambia won cancellation of its enormous and harmful external debt. The President himself praised Jubilee-Zambia for its efforts in this regard. But the national and international Jubilee campaign was greatly assisted by the President’s reputation to take steps to restore a workable economy in this very rich country with so many poor people.

FAIR ECONOMY

Mwanawasa will also be remembered for publicly noting that the newly prosperous economy, marked by rising growth rates and lowering inflation rates, was not always benefitting the majority of Zambians. Indeed, he often stood out alone among his own Administration’s

colleagues in calling attention to the plight of the two-thirds of his countrywomen and countrymen who lived in intolerable conditions of destitute impoverishment.

This concern for the poor in Zambia was one of the reasons he fearlessly demanded that the newly prospering copper mining industry be required to pay a decent tax on their profits. He felt that foreigners or a small group of locals should not be allowed to prosper at the expense of Zambians, the people of the very soil which was enriching so few of them. And he did not back down in the face of criticisms from many of the mining companies.

The late President knew first-hand the importance of agriculture, the sector that should be the mainstay of this country's prosperity. He owned three farms, and delighted during his vacation times to return to his own farms. National television often showed him walking through his fields, enjoying his good harvest, and encouraging fellow Zambians to devote themselves to good agricultural practices.

One of the good agricultural practices he will be remembered for was his insistence that Zambia can feed its people – and even a wider community – without surrendering to the pressures to accept genetically modified crops. His strong stand against accepting GMO relief maize into the country during the first few months of his time in office, along with his repeated rejection of this highly controversial agricultural approach, won him admiration but also criticism. Indeed, he had to endure public insults even from some high-ranking USA government officials for his stand.

FIRM STANDS

But his willingness to take a firm stand is one of the characteristics that now wins him praise today. Another position he took – unpopular among many Zambians – was his solid opposition to the death penalty. As a lawyer, he argued that the death penalty really was not an effective deterrent to crime and sometimes might be used incorrectly. He also did not personally want to contribute to that type of criminal punishment and refused to sign any death warrants.

A sense of fairness and basic decency led President Mwanawasa to take the position that brought him international attention in the last days of his life. This was his courageous criticism of the regime of his neighbour to the south, Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe. The President saw the tactics of Mugabe to stay in power at the cost of immense suffering of his people, failing to acknowledge his own serious failings and cruel practices, to be a great danger to the progress of African democracy. Surely Mwanawasa will be remembered for this honesty and courage.

Finally, I think it is appropriate to mention another characteristic that is deserving of praise. President Mwanawasa was a Christian in a so-called “Christian country” who did not use his religious affiliation for political purposes. He never fell into the dangerous trap of considering himself the “anointed of the Lord” and did not go to Churches on Saturdays and Sundays to woo converts to his political positions – a temptation too many “leaders” succumb too regularly. And that is surely deserving of praise!

IMITATE VIRTUES

“Let us now praise famous men....” Yes, indeed, let us now praise President Levy Patrick Mwanawasa! And let us do that in the best and most lasting way possible, by imitating the virtues for which he now deserves to be praised.

In the election days ahead, let each candidate be examined in terms of her or his distance from taint of corruption, commitment to a development that really benefits the poor, willingness to take firm stands on principle and not on personal gain, and religious character of commitment and not convenience.

And may God bless the late President, his family, and the entire nation!

phenriot@jesuits.org.zm

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Peter Henriot
Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection
Lusaka, Zambia

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