

OUR HOPE IN DESPAIR: TOWARDS NATIONAL RESTORATION

A Communiqué issued at the End of Second Plenary Meeting of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) at St. Charles Borromeo Pastoral Centre, Jalingo, Taraba State, 7-15 September 2017.

1. PREAMBLE

We, the Catholic Bishops of Nigeria, held our Second Plenary Meeting of the year at St. Charles Borromeo Pastoral Centre, Jalingo, Taraba State, from 7 to 15 September 2017. Having prayerfully reflected on the issues affecting the Church and our country, we now issue this Communiqué.

2. URGENT NEED TO ADDRESS GRIEVANCES

Our country is currently passing through a phase that is marked by tension, agitation and a general sense of hopelessness and dissatisfaction. This we believe is as a result of years of injustice, inequity, corruption, and impunity. There are agitations in many sectors of the country against the one-sidedness in appointments to key institutions and sensitive national offices, against marginalisation, and unfair distribution of resources and amenities. There are also allegations of cases of selective application of the rule of law.

In his inaugural speech as civilian President of Nigeria on 29 May 2015, the President sent out a message of hope and of his commitment to national integration and cohesion. He said: *"Having just a few minutes ago sworn on the Holy Book, I intend to keep my oath and serve as President to all Nigerians. I belong to everybody and I belong to nobody. A few people have privately voiced fears that on coming back to office I shall go after them. These fears are groundless. There will be no paying off old scores."*

More than two years later, the reality on ground and the verdict of most of our people across the nation – irrespective of religious affiliation, ethnic group or social status – point to the contrary. The inability of the Government to address the inequitable situation in the country has provided breeding ground for violent reactions, protests and agitations, which exploit the grievances of different segments of the country. We call on Government at all levels to urgently address these anomalies, remove everything that smacks of injustice, and give everybody and every part of our country a sense of belonging. We insist that merit and ability should be the primary criteria in making appointments and genuine needs the criteria for the distribution of amenities. We also urge the Government to be always sensitive to the multi-religious and multi-ethnic configuration of the nation.

As Catholic Bishops, we affirm that the legitimacy of every Government derives from its ability to listen to the legitimate yearnings and genuine cries of the people and honestly seek to address them. We therefore urge the Government at all levels to engage the aggrieved sections of the citizenry in a conversation worthy of a democracy. We are concerned that the deployment of soldiers in the midst of already restive youths could increase the nervousness among the populace with the potential of igniting a fire that could turn into an uncontrollable conflagration. On the other hand, we enjoin all aggrieved persons and groups to employ peaceful means within the framework of the existing laws of the land to express their grievances or even exercise legitimate pressure on the Government. Care must be taken by all to avoid actions and utterances capable of causing yet another armed conflict in the nation or any of its parts.

We demand fair treatment from those State Governments in the North that deny some of our Dioceses their rights to own landed properties for mission work by their refusal to issue them with Certificates of Occupancy. People of different religions need to co-exist, communicate, and be allowed to freely practise their respective religions everywhere in this country.

Furthermore, the other members of the political class in all the arms of government have, as a matter of urgency, to reduce drastically the immodest cost of running government in this country. If for no other reason, they have to do this as a sign of solidarity with most of their compatriots for whom the basic necessities of life – feeding, clothing, shelter, healthcare, energy, quality education – have almost become unrealizable dreams.

3. ARMED HERDSMEN AND THEIR THREAT TO SECURITY

The continued havoc caused by armed herdsmen in various parts of our country, can no longer be treated as mere clash between pastoralists and farmers. For apart from wanton destruction of farmlands and crops, some of these armed herdsmen are known to have laid siege on entire villages, killing, maiming, kidnapping, and raping. Besides, there are also reports that some of them are foreigners who have entered the country without proper checks by the competent authorities. Such persons are therefore to be considered a great threat to our national and individual security and their activities treated as acts of terrorism. We demand that adequate and prompt action be taken and be clearly seen to have been taken to stop their onslaught.

4. SOME LIGHT IN THE MIDST OF DARKNESS

Along with other groups in Nigeria, we acknowledge the modest success recorded in the ongoing fight against corruption, the substantial curtailing of the activities of Boko Haram, and the release of some of the Chibok Girls. We note the positive report about the economy gradually coming out of recession. Nevertheless, we expect the Government to put in place economic policies and strategies that will make positive impact on the lives of our people, thereby reducing hardship and advancing the socio-economic welfare of citizens.

We commend the vast majority of Nigerians for standing together and remaining law-abiding citizens in the face of many difficulties, challenges and even provocation. We condole with the victims of terrorism, natural disasters, conflicts and violent crimes, while we continue to pray for the deceased. The solidarity shown by many Nigerians to those affected by the recent floodsthat affected some parts of the country is a sign of hope for our common peaceful co-existence. We equally commend the assistance rendered by individual Dioceses and other humanitarian agencies to the displaced and distressed persons. We appeal to the Government to carry the Church along in the work of the rehabilitation of such persons.

5. NATION-BUILDING: A COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

Since the founding of our country Nigeria, too much attention seems to have been focused on “sharing the national cake” rather than on “baking that cake” by first building a strong and stable nation. The task of nation-building is a responsibility that rests on all the citizens of the country. We therefore call on all Nigerians to put more effort into working for the common good according to the principles of subsidiarity and solidarity. Individuals as well as smaller groups ought to have enough space for development while all contribute to the commonweal.

Irrespective of nomenclature, we sincerely believe that most Nigerians earnestly desire a truly federal system of government that enhances the welfare of all citizens. This would not only address the allegations of marginalization, but also make the fight against corruption more successful. Nevertheless, no matter what system of government we adopt, without a true conversion of heart by all and the readiness to make sacrifices for the common good, especially by persons in public office, we shall only be reshuffling our problems without solving them and shifting the epicentres of our national tragedies.

6. HIGH QUALITY EDUCATIOIN FOR ALL

As a Church, we reaffirm our commitment to the integral development of the citizens of Nigeria, especially through the provision of quality education. In this regard, we once more call on all

State Governments to return to the old tradition by which Church and State collaborated in the provision of high quality education for all our citizens

We also enjoin the Federal and State ministries and departments of education to ensure adequate and comprehensive curriculum for Christian Religious Studies (CRS), in such a way that individual right to religious freedom and the right of the Church to teach and disseminate the Christian faith is not infringed upon. We totally condemn the so-called Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) and dubious Maternal Health techniques that are not only contrary to divine law but also would encourage immorality. All health related programmes ought to show respect for the dignity and sanctity of human life, *every human life*, from conception to natural death.

We note with great concern the ongoing strikes among various members of professional groups in our country. We appeal to the federal government to honour all legal agreements with these organisations so as to limit the grave damage that is already being done to our society.

7. CHRISTIAN COMMITMENT TO NATION-BUILDING

In our journey towards national restoration, the role of Christians, the Clergy as well as the Laity, is fundamental. As priests, our commitment to Christ in our total and obedient self-giving to him through prayers and service of our brothers and sisters not only makes us grow in holiness but also contributes immensely to the restoration of our nation. While not permitted to participate in partisan politics, clerics are urged to foster among people peace and harmony based on justice (cf. Canon 287). The lay faithful, on the other hand, are expected and encouraged to bear witness to the Gospel in their private, public and political lives. In the words of Pope Benedict XVI: “The Mission of the lay faithful is... to configure social life correctly, respecting its legitimate autonomy and cooperating with other citizens according to their respective competence and fulfilling their own responsibility” (*Deus Caritas Est*, 22). We therefore earnestly call on the Lay Faithful to intensify their efforts in bringing the light of the Good News to those places only they can reach. They are by their life of witness to bring Christ into the temporal order such as politics, business, and in their places of daily engagements (*Christifideles Laici* 42). By their vocation they are to challenge government policies that negate fundamental human rights and their individual and collective right as Christians.

8. THE MODERN MEDIA AS ALLY

We observe that modern media, especially social media, can be effective means of information, education and evangelization. We, however, note that rather than tap their great potential benefits for expanding knowledge, many, especially our youth, have become exposed to such negative dimensions of the social media as organs for crime, the dissemination of hate speeches, slander, for peddling outright falsehood and misinformation. In these difficult times, we appeal to our people to be more circumspect and positive in the use of information obtained from and disseminated through the modern media.

9. THE MARIAN YEAR – PRAYING FOR PEACE IN NIGERIA

The Catholic Church in Nigeria declared the year 2017 a Marian Year, in honour of the Centenary of the apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Fatima, Portugal. We invite all Christ’s Faithful to participate actively in this national celebration and to its solemn conclusion scheduled to take place in Benin City from 12 to 14, October, 2017. During this celebration we shall re-consecrate Nigeria to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. In doing so, we entrust Nigeria to the Blessed Virgin Mary, Queen of Nigeria, asking her to intercede on our behalf to stabilize the Nigerian ship of state. May she also obtain for us all the blessings and graces that we need as a nation. May she pray for us to attain peace in our hearts, unity, and tranquility.

10. GRATITUDE TO GOD FOR EVENTS IN THE CHURCH

We are grateful to God for the appointments, ordinations and installations of new Catholic Bishops in Nigeria: Most Rev Donatus AKPAN, ordained and installed Bishop of Ogoja Diocese on 7 July 2017; and Most Rev Hilary DACHELEM, ordained and installed Bishop of Bauchi Diocese on 17 August 2017. We heartily congratulate them and warmly welcome them into the CBCN. We are grateful to His Holiness Pope Francis for the appointment of a new Apostolic Nuncio to Nigeria, Archbishop Antonio Guido FILIPAZZI. We welcome him to Nigeria and pray that his tenure be blessed with a resounding pastoral and spiritual growth for our Church and the nation.

We thank the Holy Father Pope Francis for intervening directly to definitively resolve the crisis in Ahiara Diocese, which has lingered for nearly five years. We urge all the priests and the lay faithful of Ahiara Diocese to unconditionally embrace the paternal gesture of the Holy Father.

11. CONCLUSION: OUR HOPE DOES NOT DISAPPOINT US

We, the Catholic Bishops of Nigeria, do hereby make a passionate appeal to all our Christians and the rest of Nigerians not to lose hope. We may be traumatized but we shall not be broken (cf. 2Cor.4:8). We advise that Nigerians look at themselves and the country in a better light. Much cheering news abounds in the land amidst the suffering and hardship, the pain and the feeling of helplessness. We are hopeful that Nigeria will survive the present hardship and will become the better for it. "And our hope does not disappoint us" (Rom 5:5). We all are stakeholders in the Nigerian project. We must therefore work hand in hand with a better understanding of ourselves to build the Nigeria of our dreams.

We welcome back our President, Muhammadu Buhari, from his medical leave. We thank God who brought him back safely to the country to continue to work assiduously for the betterment of our land.

May our Lady Queen of Nigeria continue to intercede for us now and forever. Amen.

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