

CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE OF NIGERIA, COMMUNIQUE: A CALL TO TRUE CONVERSION OF HEART

A Communiqué at the End of the Second Plenary Meeting of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) at the Pastoral Centre, Igwuruta, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, September 10-18, 2015.

1. PREAMBLE

We, the Catholic Bishops of Nigeria, held our Second Plenary Meeting of the year at the Pastoral Centre, Igwuruta, Port Harcourt Rivers State from September 10 to 18, 2015. Having prayerfully reflected on the issues affecting the Church and our country, we now present our Communiqué.

2. EVENTS IN THE CHURCH

We thank God for his infinite mercies and for the many blessings he has continued to shower on the Church, Family of God, in Nigeria. On the 28 March, 2015, the resignation of Most Rev. Athanasius Ushu as Bishop of Makurdi was announced. In accordance with Canon Law, the Coadjutor Bishop, Most Rev. Wilfred Chikpa Anagbe CMF, has already taken canonical possession as the fourth Bishop of Makurdi Diocese. Most Rev. Denis Chidi Isizoh has been ordained as the Auxiliary Bishop of Onitsha Archdiocese. We joyfully unite with Archbishop Joseph Ukpo who marked his sacerdotal Golden Jubilee, with Most Rev. Lucius Ugorji who celebrated his Episcopal Silver Jubilee. With deep sorrow but with strong faith in the resurrection, we pray for the repose of the soul of Bishop Malachi Goltok of Bauchi diocese, who passed on after our First Plenary. The *Veritas* University of Nigeria, Abuja (the Catholic University of Nigeria), has been granted full operational license by the Nigeria Universities Commission.

3. THE ENCYCLICAL LETTER OF POPE FRANCIS, LAUDATO SI

We welcome the recent Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'*, on care for our Common Home issued by His Holiness Pope Francis on 8 June 2015, followed by the announcement, that the "World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation" be henceforth celebrated annually in the Church on 1 September. The changes we have noticed in our climate are affecting everyone. Locally, the degradation of our environment is worsened by such collective bad habits as littering everywhere with plastic sachets and bottles, loss of tropical forests, lack of proper disposal of waste and a contemporary throwaway culture. The ecological crisis that we experience today summons nations, international communities, Christians, Muslims, people of other religions, local communities, families, individuals, all persons of good will not only to the responsibility of justice but also to a profound spiritual and ecological conversion: from consumerism to sacrifice; from greed to generosity; and from wastefulness to sharing (*Laudato Si'*, 216, 156 and 159).

4. THE EXTRAORDINARY JUBILEE OF MERCY

His Holiness Pope Francis has also announced the celebration of the Jubilee Year of Mercy, which will begin on 8 December 2015, to coincide with fiftieth anniversary of the closing of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council and the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception. We hope to see in our nation, from our leaders, in our communities, churches, mosques, interpersonal relationships, businesses, practical demonstrations of mercy and compassion. Through the grace of this celebration, may the poor find fulfilment and comfort; may the wounded be healed, the destitute and migrants find shelter, love, care, rehabilitation, and hope. We pray that the broken-hearted may experience love, forgiveness, healing and mercy. We also hope that during this Year

of Mercy the voiceless may be heard, those discriminated against may find true acceptance, those deprived and exploited experience justice, the marginalized find strength, the sick healing, and those unjustly detained given freedom.

5. MARRIAGE, FAMILY AND HUMAN SOCIETY

After our First Plenary meeting from 20 to 26 February, 2015 in Abuja, we issued a Communiqué entitled “Good Families Make Good Nations”. As we look forward to the celebration of the World Day of the Family in Philadelphia from 20 to 27 September, 2015 and the General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in Rome in October this year, we re-affirm the validity of the family as a divinely instituted community of persons made up of a man and a woman who are open to life in love, together with their children and relatives. We commend His Holiness Pope Francis for the *Motu Proprio, Mitis Iudex Dominus Iesus* (Jesus Christ, the meek Judge) aimed at accelerating the process for the declaration of the nullity of marriage. We pledge to use this new process for the pastoral and spiritual benefit of our people.

We observe with deep concern the rise of the orientation towards homosexuality and lesbianism as well as bisexual and transgender activism in many parts of the world (perhaps not excluding our own). We re-iterate our unreserved condemnation of all acts of homosexuality as sinful and opposed to the natural law of creation. We call on our government to continue to resist the attempt by some external governments and agencies to impose an acceptance of same-sex unions. Nevertheless, we maintain that persons with these orientations should be assisted pastorally, spiritually and psychologically, with respect for their dignity as human persons created in the image and likeness of God.

6. YOUTH CHALLENGES AND PRIESTLY MINISTRY

We acknowledge the contemporary challenges that confront our nation especially the teaming youth population. These pose problems to priests in the exercise of their ministry. We encourage priests who work in very difficult situations to draw strength from the cross of Jesus. We the Catholic Bishops of Nigeria are resolved not only to assure priests of their paternal solidarity, but also to encourage them to be united in the intimate sacramental priesthood they share, be diligent in their duties and seek for holiness of life. Priests should love their Church as Christ does. This era more than ever requires that priests be modest and honest. The Youth are crucial agents of transformation that require our sincere pastoral concern. We note however the many challenges confronting the youth in their lives especially in the practice of the Christian faith. We invite the young people to be courageous and proud of their faith and while investing in the life of the Church seek the truth of the gospel in which lies freedom.

7. THE STATE OF THE NATION

We congratulate Nigerians on the peaceful 2015 General Elections. The doom that many predicted did not happen. We are indeed grateful to God and to all those who allowed God to use them for this positive development. The elections have come and gone. It is time now for real governance and we call on our leaders to work for the common good of all our citizens. We congratulate the Nigerian government and all the security agencies on the achievements recorded so far in the fight against the Boko Haram insurgency. The refugees and internally displaced persons are gradually returning to their homes. As we pledge our willingness to collaborate with the government on the modalities of their movement and resettlement, we enjoin the government and other humanitarian agencies to start putting in place practical measures necessary for immediate rehabilitation, reconstruction and the reconciliation of the victims and their families.

8. CORRUPTION AND INJUSTICE

Since it came into existence, this Conference of Bishops has constantly condemned corruption, violence and injustice and has consistently urged all Nigerians, especially those who hold public offices, to embrace a life of transparency and service. For many years, the Catholic Church has offered public prayers against bribery and corruption in Nigeria. It is therefore a welcome development that the present government has made the fight against corruption and insurgency central to its programme. We affirm that the war against corruption is not just a battle for virtue and righteousness in our land but a fight for the soul and substance of our nation. This is a collective responsibility that requires our collective efforts. All Nigerians should be part of this struggle, which ought to be carried out at all levels, in order that we may recover our wasted opportunities. To guarantee sustainable success in fighting corruption, Nigerians must transcend ethnic, religious and regional affiliations and sentiments. Those who are genuinely identified to have either stolen or recklessly used the national wealth must be compelled to make comprehensive restitution. In this process, we strongly urge all to eschew personal interest, political vendetta, and bitterness. Those with the mandate to facilitate this process should be guided by a true sense of justice and act in accordance with the rule of law.

9. THE ECONOMY

At the moment, the Nigerian economy is in distress. More and more Nigerians are now struggling or are unable to provide the basic needs for their families. Unemployment is growing beyond control, leaving many of our citizens, especially the younger ones, to migrate, both locally and to other countries. This exposes them to inhuman conditions, including different forms of immorality and criminality. In many cases, young promising lives are wasted on our streets, in the deserts of some African countries and on the shores of Europe. We therefore appreciate the desire of the government to re-invest in the agricultural sector and to seek other alternatives to oil and gas, which have fared very badly in the recent past. We encourage the federal and state governments, the private sector and individual Nigerians to intensify their efforts in exploring the means of diversifying the sources of national income, while initiating genuine policies that would protect the citizens, create wealth and absorb our teeming unemployed youth.

There is a serious outcry today against the high cost of governance in Nigeria. There are instances of enormous sums of money paid as allowances to public office holders (in addition to their already high basic salaries) and of legislators passing bills in view of future pension benefits for themselves and members of the executive arm of government. It is regrettable that this is happening in a nation where a large percentage of the population is living in dehumanizing poverty, where so many workers are not paid the recommended basic salary, and where massive decay of infrastructure has put much stress on the citizens and their lives in great danger. This situation is unjustifiable. It also represents a gross injustice against the poor. We therefore commend the initiative of some States in cutting the cost of governance and call on the Federal and other State governments to do the same.

10. CALL TO PRAYER AND CONCLUSION

As Christians we rely on God to make our efforts towards the emergence of a new Nigeria bear the desired fruit. At very difficult moments of our history, we, the Catholic Bishops of Nigeria, have called on all to pray. In many respects, it can be said that our Nation is today at the crossroads. Although the general elections were peaceful, our problems are far from over. We

therefore feel the need to renew our call to prayer. In addition to the prayers already being said for the Nation, we ask individuals, families and Parishes to intensify their prayer for a period of six months, beginning from the month of October and according to the following programme:

a) Family Rosary – Every Saturday evening;

b) Rosary and one hour Eucharistic Adoration in Parishes – Last Sunday of the month (between 3.00 pm and 6.00 pm).

The Family Rosary and the Eucharistic Adoration should always end with either the Prayer against Bribery and Corruption or the Prayer for Nigeria in Distress. This six-month prayer programme is expected to end on 4 April 2016, the Solemnity of the Annunciation of the Lord.

We, the Catholic Bishops of Nigeria re-echo in our hearts the very first words of Jesus as he began his public ministry: “The Kingdom is of God is at hand repent and believe in the Gospel” (Mark 1:15). We therefore invite all Christian faithful and citizens of this country to a true conversion of heart.

May our Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of Mercy continue to intercede for us to attain true conversion of heart and thus continue to grow in wisdom and insight which come from Christ Jesus the Lord.

Most Rev. Ignatius Ayau KAIGAMA

Archbishop of Jos, President, CBCN

Most Rev. William AVENYA

Bishop, Catholic Diocese of Gboko, Secretary, CBCN