

## **CONVERSION FOR JUSTICE AND RECONCILIATION**

### **Communiqué at the end of the Second Plenary Meeting of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) at the Centre of Transfiguration Kafanchan, Kaduna State September 7 to 12, 2009**

#### **PREAMBLE**

1. We, members of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria, held our Second Plenary Meeting for the year 2009 at the Centre of Transfiguration, Kafanchan, Kaduna State, from September 7 to 12, 2009. After prayerful reflection on the state of the Church and on the state of our country, we now present our communiqué to the Church and to the nation.

#### **EVENTS IN THE CHURCH**

2. Since our First Plenary Meeting, which took place in March, the Church began the Year of Priests (June 2009 to June 2010). This year marks the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of St. John Mary Vianney, the Curé d'Ars (Parish Priest) and patron saint of priests. St John Vianney was renowned for an exemplary priestly life and ministry of personal holiness which he used to bring so many people to conversion. According to the Holy Father, this year is intended "to encourage priests in thus striving for spiritual perfection on which, above all, the effectiveness of their ministry depends." May the prayers of St John Vianney, and his example of holiness and pastoral zeal lead our Church and our nation to a profound renewal of life.

3. We have witnessed the retirement of Most Rev. Joseph Egerega, Bishop of Bomadi Vicariate. He is succeeded by Most Rev. Hyacinth Egbebo, hitherto Auxiliary of the same Vicariate. We ask the Lord to bless Bishop Egerega for his service to the Church, and to assist Bishop Egbebo to lead his people.

4. We thank God and our Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI for the appointment and Episcopal ordination of Most Rev. Oliver Dashe Doeme as Bishop of Maiduguri Diocese. With the same sentiment of gratitude, we appreciate the appointment of a Bishop to lead the Church in Port Harcourt Diocese. He is Most Rev. Camilius Etokudoh, who was transferred from Ikot Ekpene Diocese. He succeeds Most Rev. Alexius Makozi who has retired. Most Rev. Emmanuel Badejo, Coadjutor Bishop of Oyo, will be installed Bishop of the same Diocese on November 20, 2009, in succession to Most Rev. Julius Adalakun.

May the good Lord bless and reward the Bishops Makozi and Adalakun for their pastoral leadership lasting many decades, and may the newly-appointed Bishops be strengthened by the prayers of the people he has entrusted to their pastoral care.

5. After five and a half years of working in Nigeria as Papal Representative, Most Rev. Renzo Fratini is being transferred to Spain. We thank him for his congeniality and service to the Church in Nigeria. May the Lord guide him in his new assignment.

6. The Archdiocese of Kaduna is currently celebrating the Golden Jubilee of its erection. The Grand Finale of the celebration will take place on December 10, 2009. We rejoice with the Archbishop, the priests, religious and lay faithful of the Archdiocese. We pray that the Church in the Archdiocese of Kaduna may continue to grow.

7. Having lived a life of unreserved dedication to the Church, it pleased the good Lord to call Most Rev. Ephraim Obot, Bishop of Idah, to his eternal reward. May he taste the joy of unending happiness in the Father's house. May the Lord be with the Church in Idah Diocese and with Most Rev. Anthony Adaji who will be installed his successor on September 19, 2009.

## **THE NIGER DELTA**

8. We commend the federal government for the general amnesty it has granted to militants in the Niger Delta. We ask that this programme of amnesty be implemented with sincerity, and with sensitivity to justice and reconciliation. We advise that the government continue on the path of drastically improving the quality of life of the people of the Niger Delta. It is not enough to wave an olive branch. The situation in the Niger Delta is deeply rooted in injustice. It is simply unjust to impoverish the people who live on the land that produces the bulk of Nigeria's wealth. We urge government to fulfill its promise on the development of the people of the Niger Delta. We equally appeal to the militants to accept the amnesty.

## **VIOLENCE IN SOME NORTHERN STATES**

9. A culture of violence prevails in our country. We see this in armed robbery, ritual killing, dangerous driving on our roads, killing in the name of religion, to name but these. It is in this regard that we express grave concern over recent happenings in some parts of the north. We deeply regret and strongly condemn the loss of life and property caused by the religious sect, Boko Haram. We offer our deepest condolences to all the bereaved, and our sympathy to all those who have suffered grave material losses, irrespective of ethnic or religious affiliation. We pray for God's mercy on all the dead.

10. The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria guarantees freedom of religion of every Nigerian citizen. But some Nigerians misunderstand their right to religion as right to persecute other Nigerians of different religious persuasion. The right to propagate one's religion must not be exercised in ways that violate the right of people of other religions. We deplore the use and abuse of religion to trample on the rights of others. We condemn violence on whatever excuse or disguise, and from whatever direction. We condemn it, above all, when its perpetrators blasphemously and fraudulently claim religious justifications. We wish to note that those who claim that they love God while hating their fellow human beings, even to the extent of killing them, are liars. God has not given anyone the right to kill in his name. Neither has he authorized anyone to violate the dignity of other human beings.

11. We note with sadness and disappointment that despite fore-knowledge of existence and plans of the Boko Haram sect, and despite reports made to appropriate authorities, inaction of government allowed the sect to destroy more than 2000 lives before the insurrection was brought down. We remind the federal government, and every state and local government in Nigeria that it is the responsibility of government to protect the rights of religious minorities wherever they may be found in this country. We have no democracy worth the name if government cannot protect life and property of the citizen. Failure on the part of government to secure life and property of every Nigerian is less than commendable.

## **PARALYSIS OF TERTIARY EDUCATION**

**12.** For the past three months, the strike action of unions of academic and non-academic staff has brought tertiary education in Nigeria almost to a halt. But it is not just the strikes that have paralyzed tertiary education, it is also the failure of government to invest sufficiently in the education of the Nigerian citizen. We are concerned about the high salaries of political office holders and we ask: a government that can afford to pay political office holders such salaries, does it not have an obligation to offer better conditions of service to those who work in our institutions of higher learning? A government that can afford to spend millions of dollars on individual members of the national football team, can it not fund education? While we encourage government and the striking university teachers and workers to go back to the negotiating table, we must warn that solution to this problem is not just in calling strikes and negotiating them away. We challenge the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), as a body of academicians, to use this opportunity to propose a blueprint for tertiary education in Nigeria, and be sensitive to the plight of students.

## **THE 2011 ELECTIONS**

**13.** We observe that the Chairman of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) is already expressing some concerns about the 2011 elections. We call on all parties and intending candidates to ensure that we have credible, free and fair elections.

## **THE BANKING SECTOR**

**14.** We receive with mixed feelings recent revelation in our nation's banking sector. While the need to ensure that sanity prevail in the sector is not to be argued, the mode of sanitization and its possibly damaging effect on our national image and economy give enormous room for concern. We ask relevant government operatives to ensure that those who might have acted unjustly be treated justly.

## **THE ROOT OF DISTRESS IN OUR NATION**

**15.** We wish to reaffirm the observation we made on the distress of the nation in our communiqué at the conclusion of our 2<sup>nd</sup> Plenary in 1997. We stated then: "The social ills of armed robbery, violent crimes, unemployment, official corruption, deteriorating infrastructure... falling standards of education and health care, have continued unabated to such an extent that the quality of life of most Nigerians has degenerated to a level that is below human dignity."

Twelve years later, indices of distress abound in our country. Our country continues to suffer under the weight of corruption, and our people live in fear because of insecurity of life and property. The evil of corruption has made of us an impoverished people inhabiting a land of immense riches. The level of poverty in our land and the problem of insecurity go hand in hand. Strike actions, embarked upon by numerous associations and unions in the country, are further signals of a country in distress and in dire need of direction.

**16.** When huge sums of money allocated for the provision of infrastructure end up in the pockets of a few, the collapse of infrastructure has a negative impact on economic activities. When the

economy is in turmoil, millions of young Nigerians cannot be gainfully employed. Perceiving their country, Nigeria, as a country that dashes their hopes, many of such young people end up on the payroll of people who arm them to be political thugs, kidnappers, or armed robbers. Many others are used even by state and local governments in this country to extort money from Nigerians such that travelling from one local government area to another has become a nightmare. Corruption breeds poverty, poverty breeds insecurity and greater poverty.

**17.** We recognize that there are millions of honest and hardworking men and women in this country. We also know that corruption is not only at the higher levels of public life. It is not only found among the big men and women in government, it is also found at the lower levels of our life: from the filling station attendant who tampers with the dispensing machines, the messenger or clerk who hides files, the stockbroker who manipulates the markets, the policeman or woman who extorts money from the citizen, the banker who defrauds shareholders and customers of his bank, the judge who fiddles with justice, the lawyer who sells out his client, the politician who rigs elections, the teacher who solicits favours from students, the student who cheats while writing an examination, the religious leader or preacher who manipulates the people in the place of worship for his own purpose, the farmer or seller of farm produce who hides rotten foodstuffs under fresh ones, the hawker in traffic who runs away with your change (cf. Homily at the Opening Mass of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Plenary Meeting, 2009).

**18.** At the root of our distress is the absence of right relationship between us and God, and the absence of right relationship amongst ourselves. The absence of right relationship is the absence of justice, and the absence of justice is the beginning of conflicts. The absence of right relationship is sin. Our seemingly incurable social ills are symptoms of a deeper and more chronic sickness, namely, sin. Sin has made us into a nation of sick and wounded people.

## **URGENT NEED FOR A CHANGE OF HEART**

**19.** Since sin, the absence of right relationship between God and human beings and among human beings, is the root cause of our problems, the solution is conversion, and this conversion must be personal and collective.

**20.** Whereas good laws are needed, and institutions such as the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC) may be necessary, these measures alone are very much insufficient in tackling the evil of corruption. Laws are made by human beings. Institutions are established and managed by human beings. If human beings who make laws and who run institutions are not converted from sin to righteousness, their efforts will be in vain and those who are appointed to fight corruption will easily become agents of the same corruption. Incorruptible lawmakers cannot emerge through an electoral process that is driven by corruption. That is why the rot and the decadence in our country requires nothing short of a change of heart on the part of every citizen. There is an urgent need for a manifold conversion: conversion to what is true, to what is good, to justice, to reconciliation, and to love. This can only be sustained when we are truly converted to God.

## **CONCLUSION**

**21.** We in Nigeria worship God in our millions. But our worship will always remain hypocritical, a tragic contradiction, if we do not submit to God from the depths of our hearts. The human heart must become the sanctuary of the Spirit of God so that the human person

can be recreated in the image of the Son of God. When we open our hearts to the Holy Spirit, our worship will please God, and our actions will be acceptable in his sight. Then shall we be just to God and to our neighbor, then shall peace and justice reign amongst us in our land.

**22.** In our longing for justice and reconciliation, we look forward to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Special Assembly for Africa on the Synod of Bishops which will take place in Rome from October 4 to 25, 2009. The theme of the Assembly shall be: “The Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace”. We also look forward to our 1<sup>st</sup> Plenary of the Year 2010 with the theme: “The Ministerial Priesthood”.

**23.** In this 150<sup>th</sup> year of the death of St John Vianney, a year specially dedicated to renewal of the spiritual life of every priest, we too recognize that, as religious leaders—leaders of worship—we are called to be examples of conversion. Our conversion must express itself in authentic pastoral ministry. Our position as pastors must never be used to manipulate the people confided to our care.

**24.** Without strength from above there can be no genuine conversion. We therefore commend our country into the hands of God. And we pray, through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Queen of Nigeria, and of St John Vianney, agent and example of conversion, that Nigerians be granted the grace to cooperate with God in solidarity with one another to transform our nation.

Most Rev. Felix Job  
President

Most Rev. Alfred Martins  
Secretary