

**FAITH AND THE DIGNITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON**  
**Communiqué at the End of the First Plenary Meeting of the**  
**Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) at the**  
**Daughters of Divine Love Retreat and Conference Centre**  
**Lugbe, Abuja**  
**February 16 –22, 2013**

**Preamble**

1. We, members of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria, held our First Plenary Meeting of the year from February 16 to 22, 2013, at the Daughters of Divine Love Retreat and Conference Centre, Lugbe, Abuja. Having prayerfully reflected on the theme: "Faith and the Dignity of the Human Person", we now present our communiqué to the Church and to the nation.

**Events in our Church and Nation**

2. We thank the Lord for his many blessings on the Church in our land. We rejoice at the elevation by Pope Benedict XVI of Most Rev. John Onaiyekan, Archbishop of Abuja, to the College of Cardinals. The Church in Nigeria has also been blessed with the appointment of Msgr Peter Okpaleke as Bishop of Ahiara in succession to Most Rev. Victor Chikwe who died in 2010. We prayerfully look forward to Msgr Okpaleke's Episcopal ordination as Bishop of Ahiara. Msgr Fortunatus Nwachukwu, hitherto Chief Protocol Officer to the Holy Father, was appointed Papal Nuncio to Nicaragua with the rank of an Archbishop. Two new dioceses, Gboko and Katsina Ala in Benue State, have been created, while Most Rev. William Avenya, hitherto Auxiliary Bishop of Makurdi, and Msgr Peter Adoboh have been appointed their pioneer Bishops respectively. Most recently, Most Rev. Joseph Ekuwem, hitherto Bishop of Uyo, was appointed Archbishop of Calabar. He succeeds Most Rev. Joseph Ukpo who has retired after several years of meritorious labor.

At the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, Fr. Raphael Madu was appointed Secretary General in succession to Msgr Michael Ekpenyong, while Fr. Zachariah Samjumi was appointed Deputy Secretary General in succession to Fr. Peter Okonkwo.

In November 2012, we successfully held our 2<sup>nd</sup> National Pastoral Congress and the 4<sup>th</sup> National Eucharistic Congress. We pray that our nation be spiritually enriched by these joyful events.

3. As we rejoice for the blessings on the Church, we congratulate the Nigerian national football team, the Super Eagles, for bringing glory to Nigeria by winning the 2013 edition of the Africa Cup of Nations in South Africa. We urge the government and our fellow citizens to use the opportunity of this great

achievement to inspire one another to bring the best out of one another and our nation.

4. In the midst of our blessings, we regret to announce the death of Most Rev. Joseph Egerega, Bishop Emeritus of Bomadi Vicariate. He will be buried on March 14, 2013 at Bomadi. We also announce the death of Most Rev. Patrick Sheehan, Bishop Emeritus of Kano. May their souls rest in perfect peace. Amen.

### **Pope Benedict XVI and the Year of Faith**

5. We note that this is our First Plenary Meeting since the opening of the Year of Faith by Pope Benedict XVI and the Synod on New Evangelization convoked by the same Holy Father. We express our gratitude to him for his many years of service to the Church. We pray the Lord to continue to be his strength as he advances in age in his well-earned and freely chosen retirement.

6. In the spirit of the Year of Faith, and in the Spirit of the New Evangelization, we have reflected on the theme: “Faith and the Dignity of the Human Person”. With the Holy Father, we recognize that “To rediscover the content of the faith that is professed, celebrated, lived and prayed, and to reflect on the act of faith, is a task that every believer must make his own, especially in the course of this Year” (*Porta Fidei* 9).

### **The Gift and Task of Faith**

7. We recognize that faith is indeed a gift from God, described in the letter to the Hebrews as evidence of what we hope for (Cf. Heb 11:1). As task, faith is the human response to God’s self-revelation (Cf. *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 6 art. 2). Since our faith comes from revelation authentically interpreted by the teaching office of the Church, adherence to faith requires communion with the Church.

### **The Faith We Profess**

8. The Nicene Creed is the signal prayer for the Year of Faith. It is the summary of what the Church has believed, preserved and transmitted over the ages. Numerous saints and martyrs have shed their blood to profess and live that creed. We profess it on every Sunday and on every Solemn feast, and from this can be drawn many lessons.

In the creed, we profess our faith in a God who, “in accordance with the utterly gratuitous and mysterious design of his wisdom and goodness, created the whole universe”, making every human person—male and female—in his image and likeness, and thus capable of sharing in his divine life (*Lumen Gentium* 2). When we sinned through Adam, God did not abandon us but sent His Son, Jesus Christ, model of a new humanity, to redeem and remake us in His image. Hence, every violation of human dignity is an act of rebellion against divine sovereignty. The dignity of every human being is rooted in the

fact that God made us in his image and likeness. Human dignity is not dependent on race, ethnic affiliation, gender, age, nationality, physical ability, talents, religion, or economic status. It can neither be conferred nor withdrawn by anyone. It simply belongs to human nature given by Almighty God.

### **Faith and Human Solidarity**

9. The grace of God moves us to union with God and with our fellow human beings. Faith then takes the form of charity, which is, primarily, love of God above all things, and secondarily, love of neighbor. The Church's faith, which takes the form of charity, is the basis of her mission which is to bear witness to the Good News that God loves every human person that his love invites every human person to live in communion with God and in unity with all human beings (*Lumen Gentium* 1). Therefore, to be true worshippers of the one true God is to be respecters of the dignity of every human person.

### **Defense of Human Dignity as an Obligation of Faith**

10. Our Christian faith obliges us, not only to respect, but also to recognize and tackle all threats to human dignity. The Second Vatican Council already spoke on this. "...all offenses against life itself, such as murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia and willful suicide; all violations of the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, physical and mental torture, undue psychological pressures; all offenses against human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children, degrading working conditions where human beings are treated as mere tools for profit rather than responsible persons: all these and the like are criminal: they poison civilization; and they debase the perpetrators more than the victims and militate against the honour of the creator" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 27).

11. Today, Nigeria faces many challenges, veritable threats to human dignity: the challenge of good governance and the attendant stifling of the potential of the governed, the problem of insecurity, the epidemic of corruption, the collapse of moral and technical infrastructure, violation of the rights of the Nigerian citizen on the grounds of ethnic affiliation, religious creed, gender, state or local government of origin. These and other discriminatory practices pose threats to human dignity in our land today.

### **Human Dignity and Public Accountability**

12. To respect the dignity of a person is to concede his rights to him as fully human. We cannot fail to point out that the pervasive lack of accountability and transparency in governance in Nigeria has become a serious abuse of human rights. A government that is negligent in this regard assaults the intelligence of the citizen. This, too, is a gross violation of human dignity. We call on leaders in every sphere of our society to be more accountable and more transparent in the conduct of public affairs. The lack of accountability, especially in the oil industry in Nigeria continues to give our country a bad name, impoverishes the citizenry, and threatens national security. It is a gross violation of human dignity

that Nigerians, citizens of a richly endowed land, live in dehumanizing poverty. That is why the government and the governed must renew sincere efforts to fight corruption and the theft and wastage of public funds in Nigeria.

We call on relevant arms of government to adequately provide for the welfare of the men and women in the police, the army and other security agencies who risk their lives in undertaking responsibilities for security and the fight against corruption.

### **Human Dignity and the Right to Life**

13. The right to life is the first of all fundamental human rights. Every threat to life is a violation of human dignity. In this regard, we must not fail to emphasize that the primary responsibility of government is the protection of life and property. We denounce the fact that Nigeria remains a place where some people wantonly kill in the name of religion, a land where the right to worship is restricted only to certain people. Religion and matters of faith should no longer be allowed to divide us. As we approach the centenary of Nigeria's existence, the time has come to move beyond religious tolerance to recognition and acceptance of our common humanity and respect for religious and ethnic differences. This is an essential step in our march to nationhood.

14. Respect for human dignity includes respect for the human body. It precludes unwholesome sexual relationship outside the plan of the Creator. It also calls for responsible parenthood. We therefore condemn the sad novelty of our government spending public funds on an artificial family planning programme that sacrifices morality on the altar of techniques of population control. We again call on our leaders and government to be wary of adopting policies and strategies which compromise cultural and spiritual values as a solution to challenges, no matter how serious those challenges may be.

### **Declaration of a Pastoral Emergency**

15. The unfortunate destruction of life and property in some parts of Northern Nigeria is yet to be brought under complete control. We cannot begin to assess the immense damage which has been done to churches and pastoral structures and facilities in the entire area. Catholic Churches as well as other Christian Churches have been affected. We express deep gratitude to individuals, groups, and institutions who have graciously given assistance and support to all the affected people and institutions thus affected. Territories within the Diocese of Maiduguri have certainly borne the brunt of the killings and bombings which have occurred in the last few months. It is in view of this that we as a Conference hereby declare Maiduguri diocese “a Pastoral Emergency Area”. In effect, we have, as a Conference, initiated plans and strategies to more directly support and sustain pastoral life in the Diocese of Maiduguri without neglecting to help other affected areas. We call on all our faithful and other men and women of goodwill to make a special commitment to this task through prayers, visits, technical assistance and funds.

In this Year of Faith we reiterate our faith in God and our strong belief that, as in the past, the Church will emerge stronger and holier from the current crisis.

In the quest for dialogue with those who carry out acts of aggression on innocent Nigerians, government should ensure that victims of such aggression are compensated, while aggressors, rather than benefit from their aggression, should be made to account for their crimes.

### **Our Commitment to Christian Unity**

16. In the name of our faith and its corresponding obligation to protect human dignity, we reiterate our commitment to the cause of Christian unity in Nigeria. The Catholic Church in Nigeria co-founded the Christian Association of Nigeria. She has worked to nourish and sustain it all these years. Our commitment is a call to dialogue on fundamental issues regarding the Association. These issues concern those areas that have strained our unity and can keep Christians further divided if not promptly addressed. We seize this opportunity to reconfirm our continued full membership of CAN

### **Conclusion**

17. Seeing how sin diminishes the image of God in us and in others, and seeing how God has inaugurated in a new humanity in Christ our Redeemer, let us all use this holy season of Lent to turn away from sin to the love of God and our neighbor. Protection and promotion of the dignity of every human person is integral to faith in God. These constitute the only way in which we can build a better world, a better Nigeria (cf. Joel 2:14ff).

Let us fervently pray that through the powerful intercession of Mary, Queen of Nigeria, the Holy Spirit of the Father and the Son, the Spirit of love may reign in Nigeria and renew the image of God in us.

Most Rev. Ignatius Ayau Kaigama  
Archbishop of Jos  
President

Most Rev. Alfred Martins  
Archbishop of Lagos  
Secretary