

## **THE LORD COMFORTS HIS PEOPLE! (ISAIAH 40:1)**

**Communique at the End of the Second Plenary Meeting of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) at the Diocesan Conference Centre, Bishop's Court, Effurun, Delta State, September 11-19, 2014.**

### **1. Preamble**

We, the members of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria, held our Second Plenary Meeting for the Year 2014 at the Diocesan Conference Centre, Bishop's Court, Effurun, Delta State. Having prayerfully reflected on issues affecting the Church and our country, we now present our communiqué.

### **2. Some Events in the Church**

We rejoice with Bishop Martin Olorunmolu of Lokoja Diocese and Bishop John Afareha of Warri Diocese and their Catholic Faithful for respectively celebrating the Golden Jubilee of the Erection of their Ecclesiastical circumscriptions. We welcome and congratulate Msgr. Simon Faddoul, the first Apostolic Exarch, appointed by the Holy Father, Pope Francis, to direct the new Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction created for Catholics of the Maronite Rites in West and Central Africa. We pray that his mission may encourage the Lebanese communities in Nigeria in their Christian witness. In June, two new Bishops were ordained, namely, Most Rev. Michael Gokum for the new Diocese of Pankshin and Most Rev. Peter Kayode Odetoyinbo for Abeokuta Diocese. In August, Msgr. Jonas Benson Okoye was ordained the Auxiliary Bishop of Awka. We look forward to the installation of Bishop John Ayah as the Bishop of Uyo on 20<sup>th</sup> of September, 2014, who also continues to serve as the Apostolic Administrator of his former jurisdiction, the Diocese of Ogoja. Msgr. Wilfred Chikpa Anagbe will be consecrated the Coadjutor Bishop of Makurdi on 4<sup>th</sup> of October, 2014. We welcome the new Counsellor to the Apostolic Nunciature in Abuja, Msgr. Javier Domingo Fernandez González. We congratulate all those mentioned here and pray for the success of their respective assignments.

With deep appreciation of a life dedicated to God and His people, we announce the glorious exit of the Bishop Emeritus of Awka, Most Rev. Simon Akwali Okafor, who died on 29<sup>th</sup> of August, 2014, and will be buried on 7<sup>th</sup> of October, 2014.

### **3. Extraordinary Synod of Bishops on the Family**

Pope Francis has announced the event of the Extraordinary General Assembly on the family taking place in Rome from 5<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> of October, 2014. The Synod will, among other things, discuss the challenges families face in the modern world. Let us continue to pray for our families to be more the sanctuaries of life and love, the irreplaceable and basic school of humanity. We urge you to pray for the success of the Synod. We call on Dioceses to intensify their pastoral care for the families through adequate marriage preparations; support for the young and elderly couples; those in mixed marriages; irregular marriages (*de facto unions*); families in crises; the separated and the divorced and remarried persons; as well as singles.

#### **4. Education Summit**

We happily announce the Second National Catholic Education Summit scheduled for 28<sup>th</sup> to 31<sup>st</sup> of October, 2014, at the Women Development Centre, Abuja. We once again reiterate our willingness to continue to partner with the Government at all levels in the provision of Quality Education for our children. At our First Plenary Assembly for this 2014 in Abuja, we made this declaration and looked at the success stories and challenges in areas where partnership is established. In that same conference, we acknowledged the return of schools from some State Governments. We are still expecting other States to emulate this gesture.

#### **5. Veritas University, Abuja (VUNA)**

It is heartwarming to communicate that the long awaited movement of Veritas University of Nigeria Abuja (VUNA) to the permanent campus is being actualized by the commencement of full academic activities at all relevant levels in September 2014. We continue to call on the members of the Laity and people of good will to support the initiative of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria. We use this opportunity to invite you to the Second Convocation ceremony to hold at the permanent campus in Bwari, Abuja, on the 28<sup>th</sup> of October, 2014.

#### **6. Insecurity in our Country**

There is, today, a widespread feeling of fear, due to insecurity in the land. Nigerians do not feel safe in their homes, at work, on the highways, at the airports, seaports, in the schools and even within the hallowed precincts of places of worship. There is an unprecedented rise in violent crimes and the alarming new dimension of organized terrorist activities, particularly in the North Eastern part of the country. The brutality and callousness with which people are killed, abducted and maimed, has assumed a frightening dimension. Many people across the country, but especially in the North Eastern part of the country have been forced out of their ancestral homes, and are rendered to the status of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), who now live in inhuman conditions, like in the caves, on the mountains and in the forest. Many others have become slaves and prisoners to the terrorist group called Boko Haram and Fulani Armed Herdsmen.

We condemn violence on whatever excuse, and from whatever direction. We condemn it, above all, when the perpetrators blasphemously and fraudulently claim religious justifications for their actions. We deeply regret and condemn in strong terms, the wanton loss of life and property caused by the armed group called Boko Haram. We offer our deepest condolences to all the bereaved and our sympathies to all those who have suffered grave injuries and losses. We further call on the Government of this country to ensure prompt restoration of peace and order in all the troubled parts of the country. Government and good-spirited individuals should also take immediate steps in providing relief materials to the victims. However, we encourage that this gesture should be done with the best of intentions and not to be turned into avenue for political gains and self gratification.

No nation can meaningfully develop or prosper in an atmosphere of insecurity. Many Nigerians are traumatized, given the menace of Boko Haram and other social upheavals,

such that the basis for cooperation, exchange and hope for a great nation is obliterated. Nigeria needs healing and restoration.

### **7. Ebola Virus Disease (EVD)**

The Ebola disease is a source of worry to all people, all over the world. We highly commend the Federal Government for the action taken to stop the deadly Virus from further spreading to other parts of the country. We also note the efforts of some western countries for stepping up action in search of adequate medical treatment. We appreciate the Medical experts and the Press for their efforts of disseminating adequate information on this matter. We call on all Nigerians to carry out periodic medical checkups. We recommend a healthy pattern of living to contain its spread and transmission. In the absence of a known cure, we have joined other Nigerians in the fight against this deadly virus and have imposed on ourselves certain discipline in our worship as precautionary measures. We pray for healing of all those infected by the virus. We commend those who have died as a result of the disease to the bosom of God, our Heavenly Father.

### **8. Religious Freedom**

We profoundly affirm the right to religious freedom and free expression as entrenched in the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. This right does not stop with freedom to choose, practice and express one's faith which is fatally denied in some parts of our nation, but includes the opportunity to contribute to the building up of the society as free partners in progress. This presupposes public recognition and respect for authentic religious values that meet the human deepest concerns, capable of furnishing ethical motivation for personal and social responsibilities.

We will continue to express our willingness for dialogue and collaboration with other Christians and other religious bodies for harmony and progress of our country and the good of humanity. We request that the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and Jama'atu Nasril Islam (JNI) to work closely to ensure coexistence that guarantees access to, and safety in places of worship.

### **9. The 2015 General Elections**

In 2015, Nigerians will once again have the opportunity to exercise their fundamental right to vote. Leaders will be elected to govern the affairs of our Nation. Efforts made over the years to avoid irregularities in the polling have not been perfect. As prophets of God, it is our duty to remind all political aspirants/candidates that they are public servants sworn to provide the electorate with legitimate needs.

We call on the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to improve on its electoral responsibilities in the forthcoming elections in order to fully guarantee the rights of citizens to elect leaders of their choice. Nigerians will then have opportunity to showcase their growth in electoral process that truly ensures free, fair, durable and credible elections.

In the same manner, we call on Nigerians to have a change of mentality, inspired by the sense of common good, equity, justice and peace. We call on the government at all levels to provide the enabling environment for everyone to exercise this fundamental right without fear, favour and intimidation. Let us eschew the unwholesome activities that usually characterize our electioneering process, such as thuggery, maiming, murder,

bullying, and violence of any kind, which are an affront to the dignity of the human person. More so, rigging of votes steals away the peoples' mandate, causing disharmony and conflict.

### **10. Patriotism, Unity, and Peace of our Nation**

The journey to nationhood may be long and tortuous, but it is possible with courage and determination. The country's unity is on trial due to corruption, waves of criminality, and terrorism. Corruption is ferociously destroying the fabric of our society. Generally, there is cynical abuse of power in governance with impunity, to the extent that the rights of citizens are constantly violated. When good governance is absent, patriotism is hardly possible or sustainable. Ethnicity is generally blamed as the bane of our journey to nationhood. It is known, however, that good governance contributes to turn ethnicity into a rich asset for mutual exchange, healthy rivalry, cooperation and solidarity.

Nigeria needs leaders with courage, vision and an authentic sense of patriotism, with political will to change the pattern of life of our society. Leaders should set examples of stewardship, accountability and transparency, in order to be trustworthy custodians of our land.

### **11. 2014 National Conference**

We thank God that we gathered to discuss some of the challenges facing us a nation. At the beginning of the National Conference, we sent our solidarity greetings and prayers to Nigerians and participants at the Conference. We commended the objective aimed at strengthening national unity, democratic governance and laying a stronger foundation for development. The Conference which began in March and concluded in August 2014, provided Nigerians in their diversity of ethnicity, religious persuasions and political affiliations, the opportunity to openly discuss the problems stunting our development as a Nation. Once again, Nigerians were able to sit together and through concerted effort, they discussed openly and agreed on a charter for national reconciliation, integration and transformation.

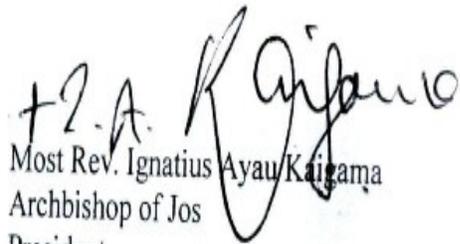
We pray for the moral courage and political will needed by our leaders to examine and seriously consider the resolutions in the Report of the Conference, for the good and development of our nation.

### **12. Conclusion: The Lord Comforts His People! (Isaiah 40:1)**

Our faith in God may be painfully undergoing some tests. Certain situations in our lives might surely be described as extreme. The threat of the pandemics of HIV-AIDS compounds with Ebola Virus Disease, just as the issues of armed robbery and kidnapping with Boko Haram savagery. In all of these, we should not, however, give up, but believe in God for whom nothing is impossible. Jesus Christ is our great Physician and Redeemer, who in his victory over the powers of darkness and evil, did not eliminate suffering nor did he explain every evil, but rather exposed the devil and cautioned against its deceptions, revealing the power of God, whom alone is to be feared. By willingly enduring his passion and death, Jesus gave human suffering its redemptive meaning, removed the fear of death, ushering in the hope of the resurrection (cf. 2 Cor 4:16-5:5). He promised his presence, healing and blessings to the weary and the overburdened (Matt 11:28). He consoles us so that we might with the same comfort meet and offer to others in their times of tribulation (2 Cor 1:4). Paradoxically, we are helped by moments of

weakness and suffering to draw closer to God - the solid and lasting foundation of our existence - and to discover His mercy, love and power (cf. 2 Cor 4:7-12). We must let Christ's word of consolation penetrate, illumine, purify and convert our interior, so that a new humanity may be born in us for the endurance of Christian hope. We call on all to be fervent in prayers to the God of consolation and hope for the restoration of our land. For this reason, we invite everyone to a National Rosary Prayer Pilgrimage in the National Christian Centre, Abuja on 13<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> of November, 2014.

May the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of consolation, be our model and intercessor, especially in this trying period of our country.

  
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