RELIGION, CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY AND THE BUILDING OF A BETTER NIGERIA

A Communiqué issued at the end of the Second Plenary Meeting of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) at Chida International Hotel, Utako District, Abuja, 7 to 15 September 2023

1. PREAMBLE

We, the Catholic Bishops of Nigeria, held our Second Plenary Meeting for the year at Chida International Hotel, Utako, Abuja, from 7 to 15 September 2023. Having prayerfully reflected on issues affecting the Church and the Nigerian State, we issue this Communiqué:

2. RELIGION AS AN INSTRUMENT FOR NATION BUILDING

From the beginning of time, Religion has contributed immensely to the building and sustaining of nations and empires. It has done this through socialization processes, both formal and informal, societal integration and social control. Religion, as it were, brings to focus the inalienable place of God in human history. In Nigeria, we have three main religions: Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion. These religions have enjoyed mutual co-existence over time and agree on the sacredness of human life, moral uprightness, justice for all, especially for the poor and the vulnerable, respect for elders and those in authority, and many other common values. True as the above is, religion has had its share of negative impact on some nations, especially in multi-ethnic and diverse cultures. In our country, religion is sometimes unfortunately used as a tool and justification for violence, oppression, division and manipulation. It has been instrumentalized. We call for a return to the true value of religion as a positive force in rebuilding our nation. We invite all Christians, and indeed all people of good will, to be salt of the earth (Cf. Matthew 5:13-16), in the quest for rebuilding our nation through political participation, contribution to sustainable development, promotion of the common good, social justice, the rule of law, and shunning primordial interests that inhibit peace and development of the society.

3. THE 2023 GENERAL ELECTIONS AND THE ROLE OF THE JUDICIARY

The 2023 General Elections have come and gone. However, the process is not fully over as many of the announced outcomes are still being challenged in the tribunals and courts. In the Communiqué issued after our First Plenary Assembly in February this year, we urged the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and its officials to ensure transparency, honesty and fairness in the conduct of the elections. We also thanked the Federal Government for enacting the Electoral Act 2022 and the Commission for introducing the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IReV) as well as for repeated assurances that the results of the elections would be transmitted electronically in real time from the polling units. On the strength of these, we enjoined all eligible citizens to come out en masse to vote in the elections as a fulfilment of their civic responsibility. Nigerians trooped out and voted during the elections, looking forward to a free, fair and credible process. For this we congratulate them.

In spite of the above, the conduct of the elections was marred by many pitfalls and irregularities. As reported by many of our commissioned observers all over the country, there were threats, intimidation, violence, poor logistics, inducement, impunity, manipulation of results as well as lack of transparency. We fear that the effects of these irregularities may engender voter apathy and adversely affect the confidence of citizens in future elections. Nevertheless, we still encourage the electorate to always hope in God and not to despair in the exercise of their civic duties. We are pleased to note that many of the aggrieved persons opted to seek redress through the courts rather than inciting people to violence. As the judicial determination of the election petitions is ongoing, we continue to call on the tribunals and the courts to be fair, just and credible in their judgements. This will inspire confidence in the process and encourage every citizen to work for the common good. By so doing, the people will have more confidence in the electoral process. Furthermore, we urge civil societies to put more pressure on government to initiate further reforms in which all election petitions would be determined before the swearing-in and inauguration of new administrations.

4. SOME CHALLENGES FACING OUR NATION

i) Escalating Insecurity in our Country and the sub-region

Insecurity has remained a persisting problem in our country as insurgents, herdsmen militia, bandits, and the so-called unknown gunmen have continued to unleash terror in different parts of the country. Kidnapping for ransom has continued. Some of our communities have been completely taken over by criminals. The result is that many have fled their homes, abandoned their farms, shops, businesses and other sources of livelihood. The throng of internally-displaced persons in our country is ever-growing, with many children out of school, making them easy prey to human traffickers. This state of affairs has been compounded by the incessant sit-at-home orders in the South-East issued by non-state actors. Many have lost their lives for failing to adhere to such illegal directives. We vehemently condemn the killing of the young seminarian, Stephen Na’aman Ngofe Danladi, of Kafanchan Diocese and all the other victims of such violence in all parts of the country. We condole with all the bereaved and pray for the eternal repose of the dead. We continue to call on governments at all levels to stand up to their primary responsibility of safeguarding the lives and property of Nigerians. The blood of the innocent continues to cry out to God for vengeance like Abel’s (Cf Genesis 4:10).

We equally encourage the leadership of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU) to continue to embrace dialogue and negotiation as a solution to the crises of leadership in some African countries. We note that good governance and the pursuit of the common good are antidotes to the frustration that leads to conflicts and violence.

ii) Our Nation’s Economy and Citizens’ Increased Suffering

Our failing and worsening economy has continued to make living difficult and hard for our people. Nigerians have been subjected to a life of poverty, hunger, hardship and suffering. The condition has been aggravated by the removal of fuel subsidy which has led to high cost of food items, transportation and meeting up with other essential needs. As if these are not enough, the hike in school fees has made it difficult for the children of the poor to continue their education.

Based on past experience, we consider the resort to palliative measures as a treatment of the symptom rather than the cure for the disease. We, therefore, urge government to address the fundamental defective structures that deepened inequality and poverty. We call on governments to provide the enabling environment for the creation of more jobs for our teeming unemployed youths. We equally encourage government to put in place measures that will curb the persistence of theft of oil and other minerals. At the same time, we enjoin the government to radically review programmes aimed at alleviating the suffering of the Youths. We equally advise the youth not to resort to violence and crime as a substitute for hard work.

We reject the ever increasing scandalous comfort and remuneration of elected leaders to the detriment of the poor. We therefore demand that the governments cut the increasing cost of running government in our country and that the money saved be used to provide essential amenities and services.

5. BUILDING A BETTER NIGERIA IN THE SPIRIT OF SYNODALITY

Synodality is a way of life. It means journeying together as a people of God by way of communion, participation and mission. It fosters collaboration, forgiveness and reconciliation. Synodality is facilitated by listening, a deeper form of hearing, shared responsibility and dialogue. To listen is to seek to understand; to understand is to seek reconciliation. Reconciliation brings forgiveness; forgiveness brings collaboration which promotes growth and development. We, the Catholic Bishops, wish to share with the nation the principles of Synodality as a true path to rebuilding our country. As we seek to do this, the different ethnic components, political affiliations and religio-cultural diversities should be helped to come together to work for peace, progress and development. In effect, Synodality has the power to break all artificial barriers through cordiality and right relationships.

6. MORAL REGENERATION OF THE CITIZENRY

The moral integrity of any nation is paramount to its growth and development. One who has moral integrity does the right thing always, takes responsibility for his or her actions, treats others with respect, and is honest. These qualities are necessary for rebuilding a strong and cohesive society. Unfortunately, our country is in serious deficit of moral rectitude which is demonstrated in increasing corruption, cyber-crime and other forms of criminality, blatant lies, and dishonesty. As Bishops, we are concerned that moral education is not given adequate attention in the families, schools, formation programmes and public institutions.

The media have not been of great benefit in the fight against moral decadence as it has been abused for fraudulent and self-serving purposes. To reverse moral decline in our country, we call for integral formation. We urge parents to be alive to their responsibilities by word and example in raising their children according to ethical values. As Church, we are committed, more than ever before, to the catechetical formation of all our faithful. We enjoin individuals, families, institutions, and the government at all levels to put integrity and moral rectitude as a priority in their relationships and operations. We equally call on our youth to have renewed faith in God and abide by good moral principles in their daily life, since they are the driving force that determines the future and hope of the nation.

7. TOWARDS A BETTER DEMOCRATIC POLITICS

Politics is inevitable in nation building. It serves the purpose of harnessing human potentials and structures for the organization and distribution of resources for the benefit of the people. We reaffirm the teaching of the Church to the effect that those with a talent for the difficult yet noble art of politics should prepare themselves for it and engage in political activity forgetting their own convenience (GS 75). This teaching is addressed not only to Catholics, but also to the political community at large. We observe that the attitudes, objectives, and behaviour of our political class at all levels are far from the ideal. To attain a better and stronger nation a radical change of heart among all politicians is urgently needed. We renew our call on our Catholic Lay Faithful with talent for politics to make themselves available for this moral political duty. In this regard, we remind all the Clergy and Consecrated Persons that partisan political activities and holding of public offices are, by Church Law, primarily the roles reserved to the Lay Faithful. We the Catholic Bishops of Nigeria, forbid the participation of our priests and consecrated persons in partisan politics. We, therefore, remind them that there are grave consequences should any of them disobey their Bishop or Superior on this matter

8. NEWS FROM THE CHURCH

We are grateful to God for the successful celebration of the World Youth Day (WYD), which held in Lisbon, Portugal. Seventy-two Nigerians including Four Bishops participated in the exercise. We pray that we continue to harvest the fruits of the event. We look forward eagerly to the celebration of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on Synodality, from 4 to 23 October, 2023. We pray for a fruitful dialogue that would promote faith and animate the evangelizing mission of the Church. We look forward to the 5th National Mission Congress (NAMICON-V) holding from 24 to 27 October, 2023 in Owerri, Imo State. This Congress is a collaboration with Pontifical Mission Societies (PMS).

We sympathise with the people of Libya and Morocco for the devastating effects of the flooding and earthquake respectively. We pray for the repose of those who lost their lives in the incidents. We pray that the world continue to hearken to the voice of the Holy Father regarding the care of the earth our common home.

To the glory of God, the Church in Nigeria has continued to grow and expand, resulting in the creation of new jurisdictions and the appointment of new Bishops. We rejoice with the faithful of Aguleri Diocese for the successful inauguration of their Diocese and congratulate Most Rev. Denis Chidi Isizoh on his installation as its pioneer Bishop on 17 March 2023. We thank God for the newly created Diocese of Wukari and the ordination and installation of its first Bishop, Most Rev. Mark Maigida Nzukwein, which occurred on 13 April, 2023. Similarly, we are grateful to God for the appointment of Most Rev. Christopher Naseri as the Auxiliary Bishop of Calabar Archdiocese. He was ordained on 22 July, 2023. We are grateful to God for the celebration of the 60th Anniversary of the Diocese of Oyo on 23 June, 2023 and thank God for the Bishop Emeritus, Most Rev. Julius Adelakun, who marked the Golden Jubilee of his episcopal ordination on the same day. Furthermore, we felicitate with Archbishop Patrick Ebosele Ekpu of Archdiocese of Benin city for his episcopal Golden Jubilee. We are grateful to Most Rev. Antonio Guido Filipazzi, the former Papal Nuncio to Nigeria (2017-2023), for his outstanding work among us. We wish him every grace and blessing in his new assignment.

With firm hope in the resurrection of all who die in the Lord, we commiserate with the Archdiocese of Calabar on the death of their Archbishop Emeritus, Most Rev. Joseph Edra Ukpo, who was called to the Lord on 1 March, 2023 and was buried on 23 March, 2023. May he sleep in the peace of Christ and rise in his glory. Amen.

9. CONCLUSION: MOVING FORWARD WITH HOPE

As Christians, our faith teaches us not to be discouraged or despondent (Cf Rom. 5: 5). Though the story might not be positive, we should move away from the precipice. The task before us as a nation is great. Greater, however, is our trust in God and in His power to deliver us from our afflictions and tribulations. We must not be afraid to confront the issues facing us as a nation nor fall into cynicism borne out of resignation to fate. Our hope in a better Nigeria stems from the emergence of altruistic and patriotic Nigerians across the different strata of the society. We are indeed confident that a better Nigeria is possible, but surely not without us. It calls for belief in our country Nigeria, generous and selfless disposition to serve the common cause, enthronement of strong ethical values and a renewed vigour in rebuilding a nation founded on truth, justice, fairness and peace. We call on our young people, the not so young, the elderly and indeed all cadres of society, to adjust their belt for a good run into a better, united and strong Nigeria. Through the powerful intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of hope and all consolation, Queen of Nigeria, we shall overcome.

+ Lucius Iwejuru Ugorji + Donatus A. Ogun, OSA

Archbishop of Owerri Archdiocese Bishop of Uromi Diocese

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