

DO NOT BE AFRAID, DO NOT BE DISCOURAGED” (Deut 31:8)

(An Invitation to Action for National Harmony and Peace)

A Communiqué issued at the end of the Second Plenary Meeting of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) at Pinnacle Guest Inn and Resort, Sokoto, Sokoto State, 6-14 September 2018.

1. PREAMBLE

We, the Catholic Bishops of Nigeria, held our Second Plenary Meeting for the year at Pinnacle Guest Inn and Resort, Sokoto, Sokoto State from 6 to 14 September, 2018. Having prayerfully reflected on the issues affecting the Church and our Country, we now issue this Communiqué.

2. DO NOT BE AFRAID

As people of faith, we believe in the abiding presence of God and his faithfulness. As we read in the Scriptures: “He will not leave you nor forsake you, do not be afraid, and do not be discouraged” (Deut 31:8). When the disciples of Jesus were threatened by the raging storms and their boat was sinking, Jesus appeared and reassured them saying: “Do not be afraid” (John 6:20). In another context, Jesus promised his disciples: “I am with you always to the end of time” (Matt: 28:20). These assurances are still relevant in our time. In the face of the prevailing crisis, tensions and anxiety, we invite all Nigerians to put their trust in God, while working hard to build a harmonious and peaceful nation.

3. THE STATE OF THE NATION

Persistent Violence and Insecurity

We have in our past communiqués and other statements condemned the spate of violence and high level of insecurity in our land. Yet, to our greatest dismay, these have continued unabated. We observe with deep sadness how unarmed Nigerians are brutally slaughtered, owing to religious and political differences, boundary disputes, and other such reasons. We equally observe that Government is often slow in responding to these violent occurrences and often allows many of the perpetrators of these heinous crimes to go unpunished, thus creating a culture of impunity. We totally condemn these killings and call on Government to defend the life and property of every Nigerian citizen. Furthermore, we strongly appeal that the thousands of our internally displaced compatriots be helped to return to their homes and their land restored to them as quickly as possible.

The Imperative of Good Governance and Religious Freedom

Although political parties are the platforms through which people seek political offices, political office holders ought to know that they are to provide services for the entire citizenry, irrespective of political, religious or ethnic affiliations. They equally have an inescapable duty of providing good governance. In keeping with the provisions of our Constitution regarding freedom of religion, we continue to urge Governments at all levels to respect the rights of citizens and groups to practise their religions unhindered. In this spirit, Governments should make it possible for religious groups to acquire land for the building of places of worship, schools, hospitals and social welfare facilities whenever the need arises. At the same time, we enjoin everyone to avoid acts of religious fanaticism in order to promote peaceful co-existence and harmony. Religion is a matter of conviction, not coercion.

The Rule of Law and National Development

We note that the rule of law connotes equality of all under the law, seeks the protection of fundamental rights of citizens, and guards against abuse of power. Accordingly, individuals, groups and Governments shall submit to, obey and be regulated by the laws of the land, and not by any arbitrary action. We recognize the role of Governments at all levels in providing policies for national development, in the areas of economy, politics, provision of social amenities, security, etc. Nevertheless, we hold that all forms of pursuit of national interest should be guided by the rule of law and respect for human dignity and development. We continually encourage the legislatures to enact good laws and abrogate bad ones, so as to ensure order, safety, good conduct and safeguard the Common Good. We also enjoin the judiciary not to allow itself to be used as an instrument of subjugation, oppression, discrimination, and injustice.

2019 General Elections

As we look forward to the elections of 2019, we refuse to give up on our hope for a great, prosperous and peaceful nation. For our dreams to be achieved, we must embrace a new way of governing ourselves. There is need for genuine repentance and sincere moral transformation. We encourage all registered voters to ensure that they are equipped with their voter's card, reject and denounce the illegal practices of selling and buying of votes. Despite the deception and defections, Nigerian voters must be wise enough to show some of our politicians, who may have so much to hide, that "they can run, but they cannot hide."

It is the right of Nigerians to fully participate in the electoral process without intimidation and violence. The responsibility for this lies on all of us. We demand that the choice of the electorate, once made, be respected by all. Although elections are not enough to enthrone good governance, they are an important stage in that project. And unless we get our electoral process right, elections in Nigeria will only become expensive cosmetic exercises that legitimize corruption and ineptitude.

The Release of Leah Sharibu and Others in Captivity

We demand that the Federal Government secure the unconditional release of Leah Sharibu. She is still being held captive because she refused to denounce her Christian faith. We further demand that the Federal Government ensure the safe release of the remaining Chibok girls and all other persons in captivity against their will. We urge their families to remain hopeful and steadfast in prayers, while assuring them of our prayers as well.

4. THE CHURCH AND THE YOUTH

His Holiness Pope Francis has called for the Synod of the Bishops on the Youth. The Church is very much aware that young people, with their challenges and opportunities, are not only the future of the Church but much more, present resources in the Church and the larger society. We therefore urge them to continue to distinguish themselves with manifest good values and thus make a remarkable impact on the Church and the society. During our first plenary meeting for this year, we paid special attention to the need for promoting entrepreneurship among our young people. We followed up on this with other pastoral initiatives in our Dioceses directed towards the youth. These culminated in the National Youth Day, which was held in Calabar, 7 to 12 August 2018, with more than 7000 young people in attendance. We invite all to be attentive to the aspirations of the young people, especially those among them who are poor, internally displaced, victims of exploitation, orphans, and migrants. We are saddened by the evils of

human trafficking, slavery, drug abuse, war, disease, disability, and illiteracy and shall continue to work for their eradication, especially among our youth.

5. TRYING TIMES FOR THE CHURCH

These are indeed very trying times in the life of the Church. There have been some scandals caused by the clergy as a result of abuse of minors and vulnerable adults in parts of the world. No doubt, these have traumatised many people. Since the beginning of these crises, successive Popes over the years have expressed regret and sorrow. They have also apologized to all those affected. We, the Catholic Bishops of Nigeria, fully identify with these sentiments and actions of the Popes. We reaffirm our commitment to priestly celibacy and chastity as well as our unity with the universal Church under the Holy Father. As Church, we must see in all these scandals a wakeup call to stand up for the truth and grow stronger in witnessing to the Kingdom of God.

As pastors and leaders of the Christian community, we are committed, more than ever before, to protecting all those entrusted to our pastoral care, especially the weaker ones. To this end, we charge our clergy and religious to be mindful of their obligation to observe perfect and perpetual continence for the sake of the kingdom of Heaven (Matt: 19:12, Can. 277, 1).

6. EVENTS IN THE CHURCH

With deep sense of gratitude to God, we announce the Episcopal Ordination of new Bishops in Nigeria. Most Rev. Paul OLAWOORE was ordained Coadjutor Bishop of Ilorin on 13 July 2018 and Most Rev. Ernest OBODO was ordained Auxiliary Bishop of Enugu on 31 August 2018. In spite of these moments of joy, we also announce the death of one of us. Most Rev. Joseph BAGOBIRI, Bishop of KAFANCHAN Diocese, was called to eternal glory on 27 February 2018 and was buried on 15 March 2018. May he rest in peace, Amen. We are happy to announce the appointment of a new Secretary General for the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria. He is Rev. Fr. Zachariah SAMJUMI of the Catholic Diocese of Yola. We sincerely thank the outgoing Secretary General, Rev. Fr. Ralph MADU, for the selfless services he rendered during his tenure of office. We ask God to bless him in his future endeavours and to guide the steps of the new Secretary General.

7. NATIONAL INTEGRATION AND PEACE, STILL POSSIBLE

By holding our second plenary meeting for the year in Sokoto, we the Catholic Bishops of Nigeria wish to show that it is still possible for all Nigerians to join hands across religious, ethnic and political divides in order to build one, united and robust Nation that all of us would be proud of.

The warm reception by the Governor of Sokoto State, Aminu Tambuwal, and the Sultan of Sokoto, Alhaji Muhamadu Sa'ad Abubakar III, as well as the candid interaction with the many traditional and religious leaders who were present at our opening ceremony, testify to the cordial relationship that exists between them and our Brother, Most Rev. Matthew Hassan Kukah, the Bishop of Sokoto Diocese. We desire that this cordial relationship and mutual understanding become a model for the adherents of all religions in the area and the country at large. This would enable us to collectively build the great Nigeria of our dreams.

8. CONCLUSION: THERE IS POWER IN PRAYER

Our Lord Jesus Christ demonstrated the power of prayer during his earthly life. He prayed incessantly, especially, at very decisive and significant moment of his life (Luke 6:12-13; John 17). Following in his footsteps, we direct that our Church at various levels, parishes and families, intensify the daily recitation of the Holy Rosary and practice other forms of devotion to save our

country. We direct that we all pray for this intention all through the month of October during the traditional "October Devotion." Let us continue to say the "Prayer for Nigeria in Distress," especially as we approach the Election Year. We urge all Nigerians to continue to pray for our nation. It is our firm belief that our collective prayers will never go unanswered. We therefore say to all Nigerians: Do not be afraid, do not be discouraged.

May the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church and Queen of Nigeria intercede for us as we yearn for peace and security. May our Lord Jesus Christ shield us from the wiles of the evil one and calm the troubled storms threatening to devastate our Church and our nation. Amen.

Most Rev. Augustine AKUBEZE

President, CBCN

Archbishop of Benin City

Most Rev. Camillus UMOH

Secretary, CBCN

Bishop of Ikot-Ekpene