

HOMILY BY
MOST REV. IGNATIUS A. KAIGAMA, ARCHBISHOP OF ABUJA,
DURING THE OPENING MASS OF
THE CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE OF NIGERIA,
SUNDAY, 6TH MARCH, 2022,
AT ST. GABRIEL'S CHAPLAINCY, DURUMI, ABUJA

WE CANNOT AFFORD TO DESPAIR

Abuja Archdiocese warmly welcomes the Catholic Bishops of Nigeria and other invited guests. Despite the petrol scarcity, the insecurity and the seeming difficulty associated with travelling at this time, you have come. Bravo!

The COVID-19 Pandemic did not only disrupt economies, interpersonal relationships, distanced many from the warmth of fraternal encounters, but also threatened to cripple cherished ecclesiastical programmes and traditions. People were at times left exhausted, impatient, stunned and confused. Parishioners experienced a frustrating time, being unable to participate at Masses, with some confined to watching Masses on television.

Also, no thanks to the same Pandemic, we had to skip our CBCN meetings. The fact however is that the COVID-19 pandemic, and not even terrorists' attacks, kidnappers' menace, biting hunger in the face of spiraling prices of commodities, dehumanizing corruption,

etc., could cripple our faith and commitment to serve our country as ministers of the Catholic Church. If anything, all these bad news have sharpened our faith and fast-forwarded our resolve to do all that is possible for the love of God and neighbors.

We thank God that our nation was spared from the grim predictions of a colossal health disaster. Today, the opportunity to return the first plenary meeting of the Bishops' Conference to its traditional home is a big sign of hope; hope that things are beginning to get better even if we are still far away from the light at the end of the tunnel. God knows how to bring good out of evil. God is good!

Reflecting on "Fratelli Tutti: Path to Building Human Fraternity and Sustainable Peace in Nigeria", during this conference, the Bishops hope to draw from the rich wisdom of Pope Francis' encyclical, "Fratelli Tutti" which centers on fraternity, lasting social friendships, and sustainable peace among people of different cultures, social status and religions.

The timing of our plenary to coincide with the beginning of Lent is significant, as the Lenten season is a privileged moment for interior examination; to pray for the purification of our Church, and for our country's rebirth. Lent teaches us that today is all we have. Yesterday is gone forever and tomorrow is not certain.

In the first reading from Deuteronomy (26:4-10), Moses highlights God's intervention during the bondage of the Israelites in Egypt, after a test of their faith. When they returned to God, He rescued them from slavery.

The second reading (Rm. 10:8-13) presents faith as a necessary tool to overcome sin and temptation. Faith is the spiritual energy; call it the oxygen for our Christian journey. The Gospel (Lk. 4:1-13) tells about the forty days in the wilderness where Jesus fasted and was tempted by the devil.

During His confrontation with the devil, Jesus demonstrated totally that He was loyal to God's affairs, showing the devil that He was neither an economic miracle worker nor a political revolutionary; resisting the sensational display of power, or using political power to achieve temporal gains. If Jesus had given in to any temptation of the devil, He would have wrecked His Father's plans. If we give in to temptation we wreck God's plans for us.

Today, the temptation in the family is that of parents being so busy and distracted that there is hardly time for prayers; very little space for God. The family, the expected domestic church, the place of love and healing has become where members are strangers to one another. What of the intrusive nature of the social media? A mother told me how she took her two teenage children abroad for a holiday, only to discover that they were constantly buried in their phones even at meals. She wanted them to see some historic places, but they told her there was no need to go physically to the sites, as they could "Google" everything. She confessed that she had a miserable holiday, feeling so alone in the company of her two children!

Lent invites leaders, citizens, professionals, youth and even children to attitudinal change. It should worry us that our young people have learnt the bad ways of Corruption from the elders! When some of them tell you stories of what they have to do to graduate, or to get a good NYSC posting, or to be recruited into security bodies, it is indeed very sad. The declining sense of sin and guilt has elevated corruption almost to a cultural status, so that even when our leaders are asked to respond to the threats of terrorism, combat a pandemic, build roads, houses, bridges, et, corruption is the arithmetical determinant, Our politics is mainly determined by the two factors of religion and tribe and governance is also tainted with dishonest practices. The #endSARS protests were honest demands of the youths for a better Nigeria. I hope we can transcend selfish parochial interests.

In the realm of religion, we see leaders eager to sway the crowds to themselves, a sort of personality cult, while others take up to political prophecy or prosperity preaching. Worshippers prefer entertaining and dramatic religious services instead of making sober efforts to purge our hearts of evil in order to become the light of the world (cf. Mt. 5:16). The mad search for fertility, wealth, health, and power leads some to ritual killings, and bizarre spiritual practices.

Nigeria needs a complete turnaround, where we share our God-given resources equitably; merit should take priority in everything, and all should aspire to be patriotic citizens.

We are yet to find leaders who are prepared to die for our nation, as in the case of the late President of Chad, Idriss Deby, who died leading his people in battle, or recently, like the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who is courageously leading his people and

stoutly defending the territorial integrity of his nation by an invading hostile power. Please pray for Ukraine as requested by the Holy Father.

Leaders of both the Christian and Muslim communities must foster a new and sincere way of dialogue, friendship and interaction; break the barriers that keep us apart. We must remain pillars in our worship communities and not yield to the temptations of the evil one through the greed for possessions and worldly powers. These are the weapons in the arsenal of the devil to destroy our nation and indeed, humanity.

We urge our over 50 million Catholics in Nigeria to be instruments of change, not only spiritually, pastorally, but even politically, using our preparations for the Synod on Synodality as a new spring board.

We call on members of the Presidency, National and State Assemblies, the Judiciary, Governors, Local Government Chairmen, politicians, religious leaders, traditional leaders, security agents, youths, elders, etc. to make a new and strong determination to build a civilization of love, social justice, compassion, freedom and peace, and to overcome evil with good.

As we engage in prayer, fasting and almsgiving during this Lenten Season, may the swords, clubs, guns, bombs and knives used to maim, kill and destroy one another be beaten into ploughshares (cf. Is. 2:4).

Though the intercession of Mary, Queen and Patroness of Nigeria, may we experience lasting peace and restored social friendship. Amen.