RESTORING CONFIDENCE IN NIGERIA
A STATEMENT OF THE CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF NIGERIA ON THE STATE OF THE NATION

1. Less than two years ago, from His throne, the Lord looked down upon Nigeria with mercy and compassion and then showed us how much He loved us. Against all odds, even when as a people we had almost given up on ourselves and the international community looked on, we were able to conduct one of the most peaceful elections in our history. When Nigerians voted for General Muhammadu Buhari, they demonstrated, beyond the pale of religion, region and ethnicity, that they indeed wanted to turn a new page in a history replete with broken dreams.

2. We hoped that drawing from past experience, the government would rally our people around to confront the behemoth of corruption that had destroyed the very foundations of our society. Again, after we successfully contained Boko Haram's murderous escapade, we had hoped that our nation would witness a massive programme of national rebirth and that the President would work assemble a cross section of patriotic citizens from diverse backgrounds to commence a programme of national rebirth and reconstruction.

3. One-sided appointments into public office have displayed a tendency towards a form of sectionalism that we have found difficult to associate with the high moral credentials of the President. A hurricane of violence by herdsmen and other agents of death has left in its wake a landscape of blood and destruction. Political violence, corruption, kidnappings, armed robbery, ritual murders and all the ills of the past, are still very much present and we seem to be progressively sinking deeper into the mud. Our people are now ravaged by disease and hunger. The result is the rise in the curve of violence both by the state agents and non-state actors among our own people.

4. We recall that in his address to us, the Catholic Bishops of Nigeria, on 11 February 2015, General Buhari as a Presidential candidate stated among other things: "Government has no business preferring one religion to the other. The role of government is to protect lives and properties of citizens and to respect and protect their constitutional rights. One critical right that every government must seek to protect is the right of citizens to exercise their respective faiths, Christians and Muslims or others, in a lawful manner without fear or hindrance and to prosecute those who use religion as an excuse to destroy
homes, schools, and places of worship. When governments fail in that duty, they must then assist in the rebuilding of the structures including destroyed places of worship and giving full restitution to property."

5. As things now stand, most Nigerians do not see a government committed to attaining these stated objectives. Furthermore, we find the calls for the expansion of the scope of Sharia law in public life at variance with the letter and spirit of the Nigerian Constitution. In view of all this, to restore confidence of our people in Nigeria, and to reverse the feeling of hopelessness and distrust, we make the following appeal:

To the People of Nigeria:

6. These are difficult and trying times for us as a nation and a people. We salute the courage and resilience of the majority of our people who, in the face of provocation and suffering, have continued to live by our traditional and genuine religious values of compassion and solidarity. While we must renew our commitment to the fact that God loves our country and that His promises never fail, we must stand together and remain resolute. We equally commend the courage of our young people, who, at various levels, sacrificed so much in the hope that this would mark the beginning of a new era. We call on them to resist all attempts to turn them into instruments of the destruction of the very legacy on which they have built their hopes. As Scripture says: “We glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, produces character; and character produces, hope. And hope does not put us to shame” (Rom 5: 3-5).

To the Political Class:

7. It is a tragedy that over sixteen years after our return to Democracy, the political class has still not come to terms with the fact that politics is a noble vocation. Political parties ought to be platforms for the realisation of the lofty goals of nation building and human development. Unfortunately, far too many politicians in our country have continued to use politics merely as a platform for self-enrichment, oppression and the pursuit of goals that are totally at variance with our common good, collective wellbeing and aspirations. The result is that ordinary citizens have lost confidence in the political class. They have also become more vulnerable and many have resorted to violence as a means of self-protection and personal wellbeing.

8. We wish to state firmly that the debate about the restructuring of our country should not be seen as an act of rebellion or as a call for division. It should rather be seen as an expression of our people’s desire that the political class return to the fine principles of democracy such as true federalism, negotiation and consensus building as means of achieving a more equitable distribution of the resources of our country. To this end, we urge the entire political class to rise beyond party and sectional interests and loyalties and to heed the yearnings of Nigerians. Only in this way can we possibly reverse the dangerous slide towards self-destruction.
To the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria:

9. We call on our President to wake up to the fact that most Nigerians are today disillusioned by the frittering away of the high hopes which they invested in his resolve to turn things around. The President can no longer safely ignore the very strong allegations of a rise in nepotism and sectionalism in federal appointments. This has further deepened the feelings of alienation and the rise of centrifugal forces that are threatening the foundations of our unity.

10. Nigerians have been shocked and traumatised by the rampaging criminals who, without let or hindrance and under various guises, have gruesomely murdered, raped, kidnapped and mutilated innocent citizens across the country. In the process, they have vandalized and destroyed homes, farmlands, oil installations and sacked entire villages and communities. The President should remember that his primary duty and responsibility is the protection of lives and property. Without this, nothing else has meaning in any society.

An appeal and a Prayer:

11. Finally, we acknowledge that our current woes did not begin with this administration. We also support the President’s genuine resolve and efforts through the various government agencies to tackle corruption. Nonetheless, we reiterate that this must not be at the expense of civil liberties and the rule of law. The President must ensure that Nigerians do not feel that our country is sliding back into dictatorship.

12. We acknowledge the deep sense of genuine commitment of our people to live by the tenets of their various religious beliefs. True religion has to do with the relationship between human beings and God, which in turn guides and nourishes correct relationship among people. However, unfortunately, religion in our country seems to have been hijacked and held hostage by some charlatans who continue to exploit religion to further their ambitions and interests. We therefore urge our people to be more discerning in their spiritual quest. Government should make sure that these charlatans, no matter their claims, are not allowed to hide behind the mask of religion to continue to commit crimes.

13. May God the Father of mercy and compassion, bless our country Nigeria and turn our hearts towards His will.

+ Ignatius Ayau KAI GAMA
Archbishop of Jos
President of CBCN

+ William AVENYA
Bishop of Gboko
Secretary of CBCN

Akure, 15 September 2016