1. PREAMBLE

We, the Catholic Bishops of Nigeria, held our First Plenary Meeting of the year at Daughters of Divine Love Retreat and Conference Centre, Abuja, from 4 to 10 March, 2017. Having prayerfully reflected on the issues affecting the Church and our country, we now present our Communiqué.

2. EVENTS IN THE CHURCH

We are grateful to God for the successful Episcopal Ordination of Most Revd Philip Davou DUNG, Catholic Bishop of Shendam Diocese, on 11 January, 2017. The Year of Mercy was also celebrated and concluded successfully in Nigeria. We thank all the nine Ecclesiastical Provinces who sent representatives at the national prayer event in Abuja. The Colloquium on the Catholic Church and Pentecostalism held at Daughters of Love Retreat and Conference Centre, Abuja, attracted a lot of interest. Also, The Pan African Congress on Missiology took place in Lagos, from 25 to 29 October, 2016 with emphasis on the need for evangelisation. In the light of this year being the centenary of the Marian apparitions in Fatima, Portugal, we have declared 2017 as a national Marian Year. We encourage all Archdioceses and dioceses to give the Marian Year the seriousness it deserves. We hereby invite you all to the national Marian Congress to be held in Benin City from 12 to 14 October, 2017. The Catholic Bishops have carefully examined and approved the Pilgrimage Centre of Eucharistic Adoration and Special Marian Devotion, Elele, Rivers State, as a recognised place where Catholics and indeed all who love and seek God can come together and worship God.

3. THE DIGNITY AND RIGHTS OF THE HUMAN PERSON

We recognise that the dignity of every human person stems from the fact that he or she is created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26-27). The dignity of the human person is inalienable. It cannot be detached from the personality of the individual nor taken away by anyone, not even by the state. It is inherent. From this inherent dignity derive some basic rights. “These rights...are universal and inviolable, and therefore altogether inalienable” (Pope John XXIII, Pacem in Terris, 9).

The human person is the rallying point of all human activities and policies. Every human person by its very nature stands completely in need of social life in the world and this social life is not something added or accidental to the human person but belongs intrinsically to his dignity as a person. We affirm that the human person is an end and not a means. We insist therefore that the dignity of every Nigerian should be recognised, respected and protected by all.

We affirm once again that right to life from conception to death is the most fundamental right (Pope John Paul II, Evangelium Vitae, 2). We highlight emphatically the right of every Nigerian to liberty and security. The security challenges in Nigeria are indeed enormous. Violence and insecurity fill many hearts with fear and anxiety. While we condemned the efforts of the government in the area of security, we notice the upsurge of sporadic incidents of terrorist attacks, armed robbery, menace caused by armed herdsmen, and kidnapping. The following questions need to be considered. Who are the murderers? What are the sources of their funding? Who are the instigators of this violence? Therefore, there is every need for the government to intensify her search on the immediate and remote causes of this violence.

4. THE CONCEPT OF CIVILISATION IN OUR COUNTRY

A citizen of a country is a person who has rights and duties in that particular country. The Nigerian Constitution provides for four ways by which one can become a Nigerian citizen, namely, by birth, by registration, and by naturalisation (1999 Constitution, Chapter III). We maintain that all Nigerian citizens should enjoy all fundamental rights and privileges wherever they live in Nigeria, and that no citizen places other than their own country or cities of their birth or birth of their ancestors they will no longer feel deprived of their citizenship rights. In this regard, it is time to review and correct the policies and practices of unjust discrimination among many Nigerians on the basis of state of origin and federal character.

5. CIVILIS T RIGHTS

Civil rights are rights to life and dignity; personal liberty; fair hearing; private and family life; freedom of thought, conscience and religion; freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association, freedom of movement, freedom from discrimination, and acquisition and ownership of property (1999 Constitution; Chapter IV). In addition to these civil and political rights are also economic and social rights that would make for a good and quality living (1999 Constitution, Chapter II). As Church we have, over the years, through our various organs of health care, pastoring, education, and other social activities continued to perform our duties in promoting citizenship rights. For instance, the Justice, Development and Peace Commission (JDCP) has continued to strengthen our democracy by creating awareness on citizenship rights, by monitoring elections and by voter education.

We are aware that government is doing some reforms in education sector. We demand that government’s curriculum reforms respect religious plurality in our country. We equally stress that children in mission and other voluntary agency schools are as much Nigeria citizens as are those in government schools. They are therefore, equally entitled to all the amenities and services provided to those in government schools. We also urge the government to support the religious leaders hasten the process of rehabilitating the Internally Displaced Persons now that the rainy and farming season is approaching so that the children can go back to school. Religious leaders on their part should join hands on this matter across religious lines.

6. RESPONSIBILITIES OF CITIZENSHIP

We are aware of the indissoluble link between enjoyment of rights and exercise of duties. We therefore call for the corresponding responsibility of all to respect the rights of others (Pope John XXIII, Pacem in Terris, 264). While urging the government to uphold the rule of law by obeying court orders especially in relation to Sheikh B Zakzaky, Nnamdi Kanu, Col. Sambo Dasuki, and all those who are unjustly detained, we equally enjoin every Nigerian citizen to be patriotic, to promote good neighbourliness, and to obey any constituted authority. We invite the judiciary to rise up to its responsibility of not only being the last hope of the common man but also the impartial and incorruptible arbiter for all. In spite of the present economic hardship in our country, government at all levels should regularly and promptly pay salaries and pensions to their workers and retirees respectively. We use this opportunity to commend those state governments which regularly pay salaries and pensions. We encourage other state governments to emulate these good examples. At the same time, eligible citizens are urged to pay their taxes as at when due.

A culture of respect for human rights and dignity requires a concerted effort. We therefore call on all citizens to support good policies of government and work towards a humane society. We should revisit some civic policies that failed the wheels of our national growth. Such policies include Operation Feed the Nation (OFN), War Against Indiscipline (WAI), Prison Welfare, National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAFEP), functional street lights, and installation of CCTV cameras, registration of SIM cards, among others.

7. GENUINE CONVERSION OF HEART AND PATRIOTIC ACTION

The period of Lent presents before us the opportunity to return to God with fasting, prayers and acts of charity. In this season, God calls each one of us to a genuine conversion of heart (Pope John Paul II, 17). These are very hard times for our people. Many are struggling to provide themselves and their families with the basic necessities of life. The temptation is strong to return to sycophancy and criminality. We urge our people to resist this temptation. This is the time to stand together with one another and with God and work for a better Nigeria. The myriad of challenges our nation is facing obliges us to be more united to pray for the whole nation. As religious people as well as patriotic Nigerians, we need to combine faith (prayers) and good works (James 2:16). Providentially, the Marian Year of Pilgrimage offers us a welcome and national opportunity to intensify and expand our love and prayers for our nation Nigeria. We therefore urge our Catholics to devotedly the programme for the Marian Year that our Conference has outlined. May we be resolved to translate our dreams for a better Nigeria into action. Corruption shall not be glorified, and criminals should not be celebrated.

Our democracy needs united and committed minds that can generate ideas that would walk us out of these hard times. A nation cannot grow in the midst of chaos and ineptitude. We call on our politicians to patriotically invest more efforts in political dialogue. At this point of our national history, we need a greater spirit of solidarity and sharing of our resources especially to those mostly in need, the poor.

7. CONCLUSION

We passionately call on all persons of good will to sincerely eschew all forms of violent religious extremism and embrace the civilisation of love. Finally, we repeat what we said on December 1, 1998 as the country prepared to return to democracy. “If we must stay together as Nigerians, we must imbibe a true democratic culture, embrace the principle of popular democracy, respect the fundamental rights of every citizen, including the freedom of association, the freedom of expression, the freedom of the press, the right to dissent, the right to basic amenities of life, and the right to aspire to any and every office in the land” (Statement of the CBCN, issued Tuesday, December 1, 1998).

With the entire nation, we commit into the hands of the Almighty and Merciful God our President, Muhammadu Buhari, presently on sick leave. We wish him a quick and full recovery as we await his return to us as soon as possible.

May our Lady Queen of Nigeria, intercede for us now and forever Amen.