

FAITHFULNESS IN THE SERVICE OF GOD AND NATION

Communiqué at the End of the First Plenary Meeting of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) at the Daughters of Divine Love Retreat and Conference Centre Lugbe, Abuja February 22 - 27, 2010

PREAMBLE

1. We, members of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria, held our First Plenary Meeting for the year 2010 at the Daughters of Divine Love Retreat and Conference Centre, Lugbe, Abuja . In the spirit of the Year for Priests (June 19, 2009 to June 28, 2010), declared by the Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI, we prayerfully reflected on the theme: "The Faithfulness of Christ to His Father as Model for Priests". We now present our communiqué to the Church and to the nation.

EVENTS IN THE CHURCH

2. We recall that on April 18, 1950, Pope Pius XII declared the Catholic Church in Nigeria a local Church. Sixty years ago, Lagos and Onitsha were erected Metropolitan Sees, while Calabar , Benin City, Ondo and Owerri became dioceses. Today, to the glory of God, the Church in Nigeria is constituted of 9 Metropolitan Sees, 41 dioceses, and 2 vicariates. In 1950, there was no single Nigerian Bishop, today, out of 64 Bishops, only two are non-Nigerians. Thanks to the tireless efforts of the missionaries of old who brought the faith to us, and the generous response of our people, the Church in Nigeria has come of age. Indeed, three of our clergy have become Cardinals, a few are in the diplomatic service of the Church, and a good number in the Curia of the Holy See and of different religious institutes. Our lay men and women participate actively in Commissions in the Vatican . They are a pride to the local Church and to our country.

3. Since our last Plenary Meeting, which took place in Kafanchan, Kaduna State from September 7 to 12, 2009, the Second Synod of Bishops for Africa took place at the Vatican City from October 4 to 25, 2009.

On February 2, 2010, the Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI appointed a new Apostolic Nuncio to Nigeria . He is Archbishop Augustine Kasujja who is from Uganda . We congratulate him, and we look forward to years of collaboration with him as he arrives Nigeria on March 20, 2010.

Through the ministry of the Successor of St Peter, Christ, our Good Shepherd and High Priest, who never ceases to care for his Church, has appointed Right Rev. Msgr Jude Ayodeji Arogundade as Co-adjutor Bishop of Ondo. His episcopal ordination will take place in Akure, Ondo State , on May 6, 2010. We rejoice with the Bishop-elect, and we ask the Lord to bless him in his new ministry.

On September 19, 2009, in succession to Bishop Ephraim Obot of blessed memory, Most Rev. Anthony Adaji was installed Bishop of Idah. On November 18, 2009, in succession to Bishop Julius Adelakun who has retired, Most Rev. Emmanuel Badejo took possession of the Diocese of Oyo. And on

May 1, 2010, in succession to Bishop Michael Fagun, who is retiring, Most Rev. Felix Ajakaye will take possession of the Diocese of Ekiti. May the Lord bless them as they assume the task of shepherds in their dioceses.

4. Three of our brother Bishops have answered the final call. Bishop Anthony Saliu Sanusi, Emeritus Bishop of Ijebu Ode, the oldest Bishop in Nigeria, died on December 8, 2009, and was buried in Ijebu Ode on December 17, 2009. Bishop Christopher Abba of Yola died on January 10, 2010, and was buried in Yola on January 28, 2010, while Bishop John Moore of Bauchi died in Ireland on January 20, 2010, and was buried on January 23, 2010. There will be a Memorial Mass for his happy repose on May 20, 2010 in Bauchi. May these faithful and devoted shepherds rest in the eternal comfort of the Father's house.

In the meantime, Archbishop Ignatius Kaigama of Jos has been appointed Apostolic Administrator of Bauchi until a new Bishop is appointed, while Rev. Fr. Boniface Atajiri has been elected Diocesan Administrator of Yola.

YEAR FOR PRIESTS, YEAR OF RENEWED FOCUS

5. For us priests, this special year has given us an opportunity to renew and deepen our own focus on Christ, the one and unique High Priest, who has counted us worthy to stand in his presence and serve him (Cf Second Eucharistic Prayer). In faithfulness to his Father's will, and in the depth of his love for all men and women, he who came not to be served but to serve offered on the cross an acceptable sacrifice to his heavenly Father by giving his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). On the night before he died, he gave a lasting memorial of this sacrifice in the Holy Eucharist when he commanded his disciples: "Do this in memory of me" (Luke 22:19). This one and unrepeatable sacrifice that Christ offered to the Father on Calvary is made present once again in the Eucharist where his word and the Holy Spirit transform the bread and wine into his body and blood. In the Eucharist, the Gospel of salvation is proclaimed to us, and we receive our High Priest who serves us himself as food for our nourishment. Christ continues to make the sacrifice he offered once and for all present through the action of his priests.

In the Sacrament of Ordination, he communicates his Holy Spirit to his priests and thus configures them to himself. He who is the Priest, the Prophet and the King makes them into new persons sharing in his three-fold office. Acting in the person of Christ (*in persona Christi*), they are not to lord it over the people (cf. 1 Peter 5:1-5). As St Augustine of Hippo wisely wrote: "We are leaders and we are servants. We lead, but only if we serve." Called to be imitators of Christ in his faithfulness to the Father and in his limitless love for all men and women in the total gift of ourselves, we too can only lead when we serve ourselves as food, as bread broken to satisfy the hunger of many, and as wine, poured out as blood to give fullness of life to the lifeless. Christ leads us to salvation by his death on the cross. We who are his priests are to lead by dying to self.

6. Nigeria is blessed with many priests who serve within and outside Nigeria. We who used to receive missionaries now send missionaries to other countries. While we thank the Lord for the gift of missionary vocations in Nigeria, we commend all our brother priests, our closest collaborators, for their life and ministry, and for the witness value they represent in the Church and in the world. As Bishops, we

pledge to lead in the renewal of faithfulness to values of the Catholic priesthood: simplicity of life, humility and celibate chastity. We rededicate ourselves to the task of ensuring that only those who desire to serve and not to be served will be trained for and accepted to the priesthood. We urge our lay faithful to be mindful of the fact that good priests are born and raised in good families and good parish communities. Since, according to the letter to the Hebrews, “Every high priest is chosen from among men and appointed to serve God on their behalf, to offer sacrifices and offerings for sins” (Heb 5:1), it follows that the quality of Christian family life is itself an antecedent to good and sincere priestly vocations.

A NATION IN NEED OF FAITHFULNESS

7. We note that the Year for Priests and the 50th year of Nigeria ’s Independence providentially overlap. Fifty years after Independence , our country faces many challenges. We are in dire need of good governance at federal, state and local levels. We need to imbibe a culture of organizing free and fair elections. We must have the political will and build the capacity to fight corruption. The challenge of providing infrastructure is exemplified in chronic energy crisis and a dangerous road network. Nigerians must have equal opportunities to gain access to the wealth of our land. We as a nation have the obligation to tackle the twin problem of unemployment and poverty which largely explains the high level of insecurity in the country. While we commend government for the amnesty process which has brought relative peace to the Niger Delta, we insist that post-amnesty programmes must be faithfully implemented. As was said at the end of the last Synod of Bishops for Africa , “We call on all to allow themselves to be reconciled to God. It is this that opens the way to genuine reconciliation among persons” (Message of the Second Synod of Bishops for Africa , n.7). As priests, we offer ourselves as agents of reconciliation in a country where many are wounded.

How can we live with the contradiction of providing large contingents of peace keeping forces in the troubled spots of Africa while, in our own country, hostility between ethnic and religious communities recur within our borders? How is it that Nigerians end up as refugees in a country they call their own? With the spreading scourge of abduction, we must ask: why and how is it that Nigerians do not feel safe in their homeland?

8. The many challenges we face may be reduced to one. It is the challenge of faithfulness. Indeed, the 50th anniversary of Nigeria ’s Independence challenges us to reflect on the challenge of faithfulness in the life of our country. In reflecting on the faithfulness of Christ to the mission his Father gave him, we recognize that to be faithful to Nigeria , every citizen must be truthful to our God-given identity and mission as a nation and as individuals. To be faithful is to be truthful to God, to others, to our compatriots, and to our own selves. In the National Pledge, the Nigerian pledges to our country “to be faithful, loyal and honest” and “to serve Nigeria with all my strength”.

We reflect on the faithfulness of Christ at a time when an air of uncertainty surrounds our beloved country. For over three months, we have been faced with a crisis of leadership that is rooted in unwillingness to be truthful in handling issues of governance, we recognize that the faithfulness of Christ challenges all who lead in religious and civil spheres to be faithful to their responsibilities as leaders.

9. As we prepare to mark 50 years of Independence , we need to build a nation motivated by truth, founded on truth, with an orientation to the truth, governed by truth and governed in truth. Our children and our children’s children deserve nothing less than this from us. Government and its functionaries

should not be seen as working very hard to show that they cannot be trusted. We deplore the contempt with which Nigerians have been repeatedly denied knowledge of the whereabouts of Mr President and the true state of his health. When leaders truly serve they are truthful to those they lead. The immorality of dishonesty undermines the authority of government. When leaders truly serve that is when they truly lead.

Government officials assault the psyche of the citizen when their exercise of authority is lacking in transparency and honesty. They violate the citizen's right to good governance. A leadership that truly serves is accountable to the people. It is by so doing that government really protects the people, and protection of the people is the first obligation of government.

News reports say President Umaru Yar'Adua is back in the country. We thank God and we pray for his continued recovery. But in the meantime, the nation should be promptly restored to the path of stability and progress under a clear constitutional leadership. We pray for our Acting President and Commander-in-Chief, Dr. Goodluck Jonathan, who now oversees the affairs of our nation. May God bestow on him the wisdom to know what needs to be done and the courage to carry it out promptly and effectively.

10. Faithfulness and credibility also oblige us as a nation to fight the evil of corruption which has made of us an impoverished people living in a richly endowed land. Organs of government put in place to fight corruption must be manned by faithful and competent patriots who will protect the interests of Nigerians and not the interests of those who steal with impunity. Government must make public the outcome of investigations into riots that took place in Jos and other cities. The resources with which the Almighty has blessed Nigeria are such that Nigerians should live in comfort in their own country and not have to be subjected to indignities in foreign lands. If Nigerians are deprived of comfort by corrupt government officials who go unpunished, if the Police that is expected to protect the Nigerian citizen intimidates, tortures and kills the same citizen, it will be difficult to insist that foreign countries respect the human dignity of the Nigerian at their embassies, immigration posts, and in their cities.

THE 2011 ELECTIONS

11. The year 2011 will be another year of test of our faithfulness as individuals and as a nation. Faithfulness to Nigeria must show itself in a credible electoral process. The fact that we are a young democracy is no excuse for a flawed electoral process. Fifty years after Independence, we must exercise a collective will to organize elections we can be proud of. For at the end of such elections, there are no losers, all are winners. We call on political parties and their members, the electoral commission and its officials, the police and the electorate to work together so that ours can be a democracy in name and in fact. We also call on the National Assembly to expedite action in making effective laws for the reform of our electoral process. The fact that the recent gubernatorial election in Anambra State took place in relative peace and tranquility, despite its logistical problems, shows that we have a positive experience to build upon.

CONCLUSION

12. The many problems we face in Nigeria can be overcome if we are faithful in doing the will of God and if, renouncing selfishness, we place ourselves at the loving service of our brothers and sisters. This is the time for us to show the positive transformation that our religious traditions can bring to this country.

On our part, we pledge to use our priestly life and ministry to serve God and our nation. We commend our country Nigeria into the hands of God. We ask our lay faithful to continue to support their priests especially with prayers and wise counsels.

Through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of Priests and Queen of Nigeria, may the blessings of Christ, the faithful High Priest, be upon Nigeria .

Most Rev. Felix Alaba Job
President

Most Rev. Alfred Adewale Martins
Secretary