

GOOD FAMILIES MAKE GOOD NATIONS

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 20 – 26, 2015)

PREAMBLE

1. We, members of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria, held our First Plenary Meeting of the year at the Daughters of Divine Love Retreat and Conference Centre, Lugbe, Abuja, from February 20-26, 2015. Having prayerfully reflected on the theme, "Good Families Make Good Nations", we now present our communiqué to the Church and to the nation.

EVENTS IN THE CHURCH

2. Since our last plenary meeting, there have been moments of joy and sorrow in the Church. On October 19, 2014, we witnessed the beatification of Pope Paul VI. On September 20, 2014, Most Rev. John Ayah, hitherto Bishop of Ogoja, was installed as the new Bishop of Uyo. The Episcopal ordination of Most Rev. Wilfred Anagbe Chikpa, CMF, as Coadjutor Bishop of Makurdi took place on October 4, 2014. The new Bishop of Uromi, Most Rev. Donatus Ogun, OSA, was ordained on January 31, 2015. We joyfully look forward to the Episcopal ordination on May 1, 2015 of the newly appointed Auxiliary Bishop of Onitsha, Rev. Monsignor Denis Isizoh. We rejoice with our new bishops, with the Diocese of Sokoto which celebrated its golden jubilee on December 19, 2014, and with Bishop Emmanuel Badejo of Oyo who has just been elected Chairman of Communications for the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM).

3. We mourn the passing away of two of our Bishops. Bishop James Daman, OSA, of Shendam, who died on January 12, 2015, and was buried on January 29, 2015. Bishop Vincent Ezeonyia, CSSp, of Aba died on February 8, 2015, and will be buried on February 27, 2015. May the Lord grant them eternal repose, console the people of God entrusted to their care, and provide new shepherds for the dioceses they have left behind.

THE FAMILY AS COMMUNITY OF FAITH, LOVE AND LIFE

4. The family is a divinely instituted community of persons made of husband, wife, children and relatives open to life in love. In the words of Pope St John Paul II, "Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it" (*Redemptor hominis*, 10). Consequently, the first task of the family is to be the first school where fidelity to one another, love, sanctity of life, solidarity, mutual respect and values that promote human dignity are learnt.

The family is at the service of love and life when parents educate their children on the essential values of human life—to love the truth, to love the good, to love and to be loved, to love God. This is itself the ministry of the Church in which the family is able to participate when husband and wife live in fidelity, love and mutual respect. In this way, parents teach their children to love in the wider society, and good families build good nations.

5. A nation is itself a family of families, a community of persons who share common core values, and the family is the nucleus of the community of persons that a nation is. Every nation needs effective institutions and leaders of intellectual, moral and technical competence to administer these institutions. The family, as vital cell of the society, is where such leaders are born and nurtured. Hence, both the effectiveness of such institutions and the emergence of good leaders in the nation largely depend on the family. The family, as a community of persons, gives birth to and

nourishes the nation and every other institution critical to the life of that nation. Nations are built on and secured by values, and the family is the first place of acquisition of values. That is why the state of a nation is a reflection of the state of its families.

6. The primary responsibility of parents is not just to pass genes unto their children, but also, to bring them up in every aspect of life in the society. Christian parents in particular have the responsibility of inculcating civic and religious values to form them into good citizens and good Christians. The religious education they provide for their children is the foundation on which their civic education rests. This is best achieved by the witness value of the parents, by the spiritual and moral fruits which they hand unto their children by their own personal example. For, as the saying goes, examples are better than precepts.

CHALLENGES FACING THE FAMILY

7. We witness today a shift from solidarity to self-centredness, a frightening erosion of values that reduces the ability of the family to respond to its vocation. The family faces many formidable challenges such as selfishness, materialism, infidelity, to mention but these.

In a contemporary society that promotes selfishness and individualism, the value of marital love, that is, the mutual self-giving of husband and wife which bears fruit in good families, faces relentless attack. The promotion of the self to the detriment of the common good is reinforced by a movie industry and social media that promotes primacy of the erotic and marital infidelity; by pressure groups funded from within and without fighting to impose a redefinition of marriage, as well as abortion and contraceptive mentality on our society; by bad examples and scandals found among persons in position of authority in homes and in offices, in politics, and even in religious communities.

Alongside promotion of the self at the expense of the common good is the problem of materialism. The pursuit and possession of material prosperity without regard for the morality of its means, negligence of children by parents who sometimes have to live apart in order to earn their means of livelihood, working conditions that have negative consequences on the life of the family—these and related factors pose challenges to the family.

BOKO HARAM INSURGENCY AND INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS

8. We cannot speak of challenges to the family without referring to the Boko Haram insurgency and the heightened tension occasioned by the coming general elections. We cannot ignore the plight of internally displaced persons. The Boko Haram insurgency has not only led to loss of innocent lives, it has also led to separation of members of the same families. Our hearts go to children separated from their parents, especially our beloved daughters, the Chibok girls, and others who have been abducted by mindless terrorists. We think of many others who live in camps far away from their homes lost in the insurgency.

We are saddened by the use of young and innocent minds indoctrinated by Boko Haram and used as suicide bombers. We deplore the fact that young children are used to commit such crimes, and the fact that young Nigerians are used by politicians to intimidate and inflict violence on their political opponents is a disturbing symptom of breakdown of family values in our society. We wonder: who are the parents of these young Nigerians? Do these young ones not belong to families?

Neither can we forget some of our young and gallant soldiers and other security operatives who have died while fighting to put out the insurgency, leaving young spouses and children behind. May their souls rest in peace, and may their families be consoled. May the Lord grant the government and people of Nigeria the wisdom, courage and sincerity to overcome this insurgency and bless us with the gift of peace.

NIGERIA AS A FAMILY AND THE COMING ELECTIONS

9. Events leading to the 2015 general elections make millions of Nigerians apprehensive and show that we are yet to see Nigeria as a family to which we all belong irrespective of our diverse ethnic, religious and political affiliations. We have been witnessing an electioneering campaign largely devoid of issues of national interest but full of threats of violence, falsehood, rumour mongering, mudslinging and suspicion.

It is clear that Nigerian politicians, with very few exceptions, speak and act in ways that negate the consciousness of a nation as a family, a community of persons in pursuit of the common good. All political actors and all political parties in the coming elections should know that they are individually and collectively responsible for the process and its outcome. Utterances and conduct capable of undermining the credibility of the democratic process must be avoided. On their part, Nigerians should assume the responsibility of evaluating the performance and antecedents of those who ask for their votes.

10. The time has come to realize that Nigeria is bigger than any individual, bigger than any of her ethnic, religious or political groupings. Our diversity is a beauty to celebrate in gratitude to God. Every Nigerian has a right to be different in so far as such difference is not inimical to the common good and the ideals we share in common. This is the time to reflect and to identify those ideals summed up in the words of our old national anthem: “Though tribe and tongue [and creed] may differ, in brotherhood we stand.” Faced with the challenge of nationhood, let us enlarge our traditional African concept of family. Let us liberate ourselves from the shackles of ethnocentrism, of malicious ethnic and religious solidarity. Let us, in our diversity, recognize our common humanity. For the sake of our children, and for the sake of generations yet unborn, let us see one another, irrespective of the families to which we belong, as members of the same family—the family of Nigeria.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE

11. The good health of nations depends largely on the good health of the families within them. Faced with the challenges of insurgency and insecurity, a deficit of good and transparent leadership, and rarity of good citizenship, we affirm that there is need to rediscover, protect and promote the value of the family in our nation Nigeria. This task requires the synergy of the family, the Church and other religious bodies, and the whole society.

SUPPORT FOR THE FAMILY

12. On the part of the family, we urge married couples, especially Christian spouses, to restore and strengthen love and mutual respect in their marital lives. In our need to restore family values, let husband and wife mirror the love of God to each other. By their example as parents, let them be the first and the best teachers to their children. The family is the first school of virtue. The Christian family is the domestic Church, the first school of evangelization, the first school of faith, and an indispensable pastoral collaborator. The family also has a responsibility to the society. Every family must be involved in the way the nation is built. “The social role of families is called upon to find expression also in the form of political intervention: families should be the first to take steps to see that the laws and institutions of the State not only do not offend but support and positively defend the rights and duties of the family” (*Familiaris Consortio*, 44).

13. The role of the Church is summed up in the *Instrumentum Laboris*, the working document of the 2014 Synod: “In her pastoral activity, the Church is called to assist families in the upbringing of children, beginning with Christian initiation. Catechesis and formation in the parish are an indispensable means of assisting the family in educating, particularly during preparation for Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist” (*Instrumentum Laboris*, 132-133). To this we must add

that there is need for adequate preparation of intending couples and a well-designed pastoral care of married couples. Such pastoral care should educate couples on responsible parenthood based on natural family planning, and explain what marital love is in the plan of God: a mirror of God's love, a covenant between two equal partners, coheirs who form a community of life and love for bringing forth and bringing up children in the way of the Lord and for the good of the society.

14. On the part of the state, lawmakers and public officials are to ensure that laws and policies protect the family. They should bear in mind that marriage as a divine institution must not be subjected to arbitrary legislations. An area of concern in matters of state intervention is the education sector. Nigeria needs to move away from an era of education policies formulated by government bureaucrats depriving families of their right to choose the kind of education they want for their children. The ill-advised and illegitimate take-over of schools in the military era simply violated those rights. While we commend the return of schools to their owners in some states, we observe that government gives little room for independent administration of the affairs of such schools. Education policies are still being formulated and implemented without the input of parents. Government still dictates what type of education our children must have, even in private schools and universities. The state is not to educate the child without the family, neither can the family educate the child without support from the state. But providing support is different from usurpation of functions. "The family and society have complementary functions in defending and fostering the good of each and every human being. But society—more specifically the State—must recognize that 'the family is a society in its own original right and society is under a grave obligation in its relations with the family to adhere to the principle of subsidiarity'" (*Familiaris Consortio*, 45).

15. The Church appreciates ongoing government initiatives that assist the Nigerian family. She remains, as always, ready and willing to collaborate with government in initiating and running programmes that promote the welfare of the Nigerian family especially in the areas of education, health care delivery and economic empowerment.

We commend those who have remained faithful to their marital vows and to their responsibilities as parents. May the grace of God continue to sustain them. We also pray for families going through difficulties and pain. May the Lord heal their wounds and bring them solace.

CONCLUSION

16. We announce the re-election of Most Rev. Ignatius Kaigama, Archbishop of Jos, as President of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria; of Most Rev. Augustine Akubeze, Archbishop of Benin, as Vice President; of Most Rev. William Avenya, Bishop of Gboko, as Secretary; and of Most Rev. Felix Ajakaye, Bishop of Ekiti, as Assistant Secretary. May the Spirit of the Lord guide them in their new tenure.

17. When Jesus the Word of God became man, he was born and nurtured in a human family. Families pray when they recognize the presence of the Word made man in their midst, and the family that prays together stays together. That is why we pray: through the intercession of Mary, Mother of the Holy Family of Nazareth, may Nigerian families live out their vocation as first schools of religious and civic virtues. May Nigerians be blessed with leaders who will unite and not divide, leaders who will manage the abundant blessings with which the Almighty has endowed Nigeria for the good of the family of Nigeria.

Most Rev. Ignatius Kaigama
Archbishop of Jos
President, CBCN

Most Rev. William Avenya
Bishop of Gboko
Secretary, CBCN