

A PASTORAL MESSAGE PRESENTED AT THE END OF THE 17TH GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE CATHOLIC ARCHDIOCESE OF JOS, HELD AT THE SACRED HEART PASTORAL CENTRE, JOS, FROM THE 26TH TO THE 30TH OF AUGUST, 2019.

PREAMBLE

We the delegates to the 17th General Assembly of the Catholic Archdiocese of Jos, representing our 33 Parishes, 16 Pastoral Areas and 6 Chaplaincies as well as all the Archdiocesan sodalities gathered at the Sacred Heart Pastoral Centre, Jos, to reflect, pray and reassess our missionary thrust as a local Church, through the interface between the Archbishop, the Priests, Religious and the Laity. We reflected on the theme: An Evaluation of the Youth Apostolate in the Catholic Archdiocese of Jos, and present this pastoral message to the good people of God in the Archdiocese of Jos, Plateau State and Nigeria at large.

WITH GRATEFUL HEARTS

As we looked at the past, we sincerely lift our minds and hearts to God in appreciation for the numerous unmerited favours we continually receive from Him. With the Apostle Paul we say: Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual [and material] blessing (Eph. 1:3-4). We express our profound gratitude to all our Parishes, Pastoral Areas and Chaplaincies for the fervent prayers, wonderful support and for the commendable sacrifices we have so far made in contributing towards the new cathedral building and other projects of the Archdiocese. You have sacrificed tithes, harvest and bazaar proceeds from each Parish, Pastoral Area, Chaplaincy and individuals and families have donated cement blocks and bags of cement respectively. The result is our new Divine Mercy Cathedral project which has witnessed such a remarkable progress from our internally generated material resources. We appreciate our people for such generosity and expression of faith.

THE EXHORTATION OF POPE FRANCIS ON THE YOUTH

Our reflections on and evaluation of the youth apostolate in our Archdiocese have brought to mind the opportunity of the Synod convened by Pope Francis in October 2018. The Synod highlighted the significance and the positive contribution of our youth and reminds the Church and indeed the larger society of what we can and should do to improve youth welfare and progress. In the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christus Vivit*, the Holy Father urged all Catholics to listen to young people “taking their questions seriously, recognizing them as full members of the Church, patiently walking with them and offering guidance, as they discern the best way to live their faith”.

In evaluating the Archdiocesan policy by which the Catholic Youth Organization is bound, to know its impact on our youth it was clear to us that:

The threat to security in our land which has led to the suspension of the public celebration of the Solemnity of Corpus Christi/Christ the King where our Catholic youth publicly proclaim Christ as the Universal King at the Archdiocesan level which was - and still is - a deep expression of our faith, has gradually led to the loss of the sense of Catholic identity among our youth. With the near absence of conflict in Jos and other parts of the State, we call on the government to lift the ban on public procession that we may restore the Corpus Christi/Christ the King procession so as to once again build confidence in our Catholic youth and enable them to publicly proclaim Christ as the Universal King.

The youth are no longer active in our annual harvest thanksgiving and bazaar sales which were for them activities or programmes that enhanced a sense of community, family reunion, participatory assembly, fraternity and faith-building, because they lack the financial capacity

to participate in the new fund-raising activities. We encourage our parishes to restore annual harvest and bazaar, where such is suspended, if it is safe and convenient to all. Let our people (including the youth) freely and cheerfully give from their produce.

The nonchalant behavior of some youth towards liturgical functions such as the proclamation of the Word of God, singing in the choir and cleaning the Church and its surroundings which is now left for the aged, may have resulted from the lack of mentors in the Church and encouragement by adults. The Priests, Religious and the Laity should be mentors to young Catholics.

These notwithstanding, we take the cue from the Holy Father to assure our youth that Christ is alive and he wants the youth to be alive: “He is in you, He is with you and He never abandons you. However far you may wander, He is always there, the Risen One. He calls you and he waits for you to return to him and start over again. When you feel you are growing old out of sorrow, resentment or fear, doubt or failure, He will always be there to restore your strength and your hope” (Christus Vivit no. 2).

CONCERNS OF THE YOUTH

We have interacted with our youth during the General Assembly and listened to concerns about their faith building and wellbeing. The youth have resolved to work together, with their Priests and Religious; to be available for programmes and activities designed to help them in their faith formation. We therefore encourage Catholic adults to provide leadership to the youth and guide their conduct. We also urge our Catholics in high places to help them to secure employment.

We encourage parishes to set up micro-credit schemes and recruit people with requisite credentials to run them. The schemes would help to keep our indigent youth in school and boost Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) in which they are engaged. We also urge our Catholic professionals – teachers, engineers, doctors, lawyers to mentor youths who desire to pursue careers in their professions. Parish Priests should identify lecturers in their communities and appeal to them to support young Catholics seeking admissions in our tertiary institutions for the task of investing in our youth is for all.

PRACTICAL MEASURES IN CARING FOR THE YOUTH

Having discerned and reflected on our theme, we recognize the frustrations of our youth who are largely unemployed due to our nation’s slow industrialization, weak systems and institutions which have hindered the creation of jobs and our economic and social progress. Our youth have not sufficiently benefitted from a robust social investment programme, and vocational and skills acquisition initiatives that will translate to wealth creation. Although our government is said to be doing something in this direction, it has not made profound impact on our youth. We therefore implore the government to be committed to its responsibility by being ‘sensitive to the needs and difficulties of young women and men [...]’ (National Youth Policy 2009, pp.14-15, Article 3.3) who yearn for a better life through the revamping of education and agriculture, the provision of health care services, rail transport, power, water and sanitation, rural and urban roads.

We urge our youth to explore their talents and engage in useful schemes that will improve their wellbeing. As a Church, we remain committed to our prophetic mission of caring for souls and helping our youth to grow in faith, recognizing Jesus Christ as the Way, the Truth and the Life through whom salvation is gained (cf. Jn. 14: 6). Our youth should realize that this is our mission and we are committed to it. They should separate our role from the government’s. We have continued to complement the role of our government by offering education, health and social services through our institutions and various intervention

agencies such as the Justice Development and Peace/Caritas (JDPC), the Archdiocesan Women Empowerment Programme (AWEP) and the Dialogue, Reconciliation and Peace (DREP) Centre. We are concerned about the economic wellbeing of our youth. While we do not have the capacity to engage all our youth as teachers, doctors, nurses and social workers in our institutions, we will continue to support them to achieve their goals. As a fruit of our General Assembly, we shall begin the process of developing the Catholic Youth Economic Programme (CYEP) and raising an economic team that will initiate, plan and execute economic programmes for our youth in the Archdiocese.

We shall organize a platform for interaction between our Priests, Religious and Laity with our young Catholics to make the youth gain deeper understanding about the essence and functioning of the Church. We are concerned about the low level of knowledge of our young people about the composition and structure of the Church and the material resources available to the Church. The youth need to know that the Church is not an abstraction but the body of Christ which is comprised of the Priests, Religious and Laity (including the youth). They should not point to the 'Church' as if it exists without them. This forum will help the youth to know that the Church cares for all her members, especially the children, teenagers, adolescents and young adults. They need to realize that the Archdiocese, as always, will use the resources available to it to design and execute programmes that will strengthen their faith and improve their wellbeing. They too should volunteer their time, energy and talents to make the Church stronger and an inclusive home for us all.

WORKING WITH OUR YOUTH

The time has come to invest more in our youth who will live out the faith and hand it on to future generations by identifying their needs, understanding the distractions that may stand in their way and helping them to follow Christ fervently. Our priests and Religious should open their arms to receive them and offer them some help. Priests and Religious are teachers of faith, counselors and spiritual parents who provide care for the youths and all the faithful. They are mentors - demonstrators of good character that young Catholics can emulate. They should be ready to correct young people sensibly and avoid taking unnecessary measures that are punitive.

Parents should begin faith formation in their homes by an act of sincere commitment to the faith - praying as a family and teaching their children that salvation is attained through Jesus Christ. They should prepare them for Catholic education and get them to enroll. If they do not have this opportunity, parents should take them to schools that will not interfere with their religious traditions. They should not abandon their children when they grow older. Parents should not leave young people in hostels and other locations without regular supervision, to avoid migration to other faiths. Pope Francis reminded young Catholics at the World Youth Day in Panama that: 'You are the today of God, the today of the Church! Not just the future, but the today [...] Today, the Church needs you, so that she can be fully herself'. If we want to keep them, we need to be sensitive and handle them responsibly. The youth are a gifted people with talents, energy, creativity, resourcefulness and vision which they must all bring to bear on the Church and on the wider society. We urge our youth to use these gifts and talents sensibly and efficaciously and to imbibe and allow the culture of volunteerism to be ingrained in them, that is, to serve without expecting a material reward and to give of oneself in charitable activities selflessly and without expecting any pay.

Every parish or outstation must seek new ways and means of improving and enriching our liturgy if we are to keep our youths. We may be excited that religion is our culture; but we must recognize that it is our duty to make our young people embrace it by constantly engaging them in faith-based programmes to keep them afloat. We want a Church that

responds to the ongoing transformations in the world to which the youths are sensitive. We want the youth to have a home in our Church so that we may safely keep and nurture them. We urge the youth to be committed and responsive to such programmes. We also call upon our youth to be disciplined, respectful, obedient to constituted authority and to be accountable.

COLLABORATION WITH FAMILIES AND THE GOVERNMENT

Families are the first schools for the children and youth. We encourage a return to our neighborhood parenting, which makes everyone responsible for the upbringing of children and youth. Before now, one could discipline a child or a young person in place of his/her parents but today, some parents have resisted that and even negatively influenced the academic performance of their children by paying some corrupt teachers or registering their children in dubious examination centres. The Nigerian government should, with great attentiveness, promote the healthy and disciplined growth of our children and youth in public schools and institutions where students are crowded in lecture halls in their thousands without seats or functional public address system; where students are forced to buy handouts or give favors in return for marks, where some teachers are not focused and always demanding monetary reward from their students.

COMMISSION REPORTS: We appraised the activities and services of our commissions: Education, Catechetical, Communication, Family Life, Health, Justice and Peace/Caritas, Pastoral/Liturgical and Youth. We commended them and urged them to sustain the good work and continue to seek new ways to improve their services.

The polarity of our society on ethnic, religious and political lines is breeding very sad casualties facing us directly today. The proactive efforts of the Dialogue Reconciliation and Peace (DREP) Centre and Damietta Peace Initiative (DPI) in building bridges of understanding across the dividing lines are very commendable.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

We urge all our children to belong to the Holy Childhood Association and our youth to identify with the numerous youth groups we have in the Catholic Church such as Catholic Youth Organization of Nigeria (CYON), National Association of Catholic Corps (NACC) members, Zumuntan Yan Mata, Nigerian Federation of Catholic Students (NFCS), Cadet, Scout and Young Catholic Students of Nigeria (YCSN). We encourage all our youth to study *Christus Vivit* thoroughly in their meetings. The Youth Mass in every Parish should be sustained with greater enthusiasm. Our people should be more interested in and support the activities of cadets, scouts, teenage girls, and altar servers.

We implore the Federal Government to introduce the Youth Entrepreneurial Investment Scheme (YEIS) as a programme of the National Youth Service Corps and to provide financial support to participants on completion of the programme. This scheme will enable participants with good business plans to secure funds to start off their businesses. There should be monitoring and evaluation of the process to check abuse.

We call on the Plateau State Governor, given this opportunity to serve his people once again, to do so diligently and with great attentiveness and to promote the healthy and disciplined growth of our children and youth who are anxious and expectant.

The call for revolution has become a much used word in contemporary Nigeria. This revolution should be a moral and attitudinal one, rather than a chaotic political change. Such a social and moral revolution should start from the family, the nursery, primary and secondary schools and go on to our tertiary institutions.

To safeguard the sanctity and the innocence of our children in the Altar Servers Apostolate, we limit their age to 12 years for girls and 14 years for the boys. Those above the age limit are to play advisory role and join other associations such as CYON, YCSN, NFCS and Zumuntan Yan Mata. The Mass dress code for the Altar Servers is white upon red skirt and red cape upon the white.

We congratulate Our Lady of Fatima Sisters for a successful General Chapter and the emergence of Sr. Theresa Dung as the new Superior General. We convey our felicitations to the Nigerian Conference of Women Religious, Jos Area, on the appointment of Sr. Nenlidang Gochin FMDM as the new President.

CONCLUSION

We must all understand that we must individually and collectively do something towards our youth and this is why we have chosen the theme on the young people to remind us of our various responsibilities whether as individuals, the Church, voluntary organizations or the government. It is incumbent on all to seek ways of bringing about sustained vocational youth empowerment programs to lessen the problem of unemployment among the youth. This is the thought that informed the establishment of the Bokkos Interfaith Vocational Training Centre by the Catholic Church in 2011.

We call on the youth to participate actively along with other groups as requested by Pope Francis to celebrate the Extra Ordinary Missionary Month of October 2019 by making a personal encounter with Christ, to be witnesses like the missionary saints and martyrs to engage in deeper biblical, catechetical, spiritual and theological reflection for missionary activity and missionary charity by investing time, talent and resources for the spread of the Gospel.

O Mary, the simple young girl, from the small village of Galilee, pray for us, and for all our young brothers and sisters, so that we can experience the love of God, a love that gives us the courage to carry forward what God asks of us, living our faith without fear or shame. Jesus we trust in you.

MOST REV. IGNATIUS A. KAIGAMA,
APOSTOLIC ADMINISTRATOR. VERY REV. FR EMMANUEL RAY IKPA
CHANCELLOR.