

WHITHER NIGERIA!

A COMMUNIQUE ISSUED AT THE END OF THE FIRST MEETING OF THE CATHOLIC BISHOPS OF IBADAN PROVINCE FOR 2018 HELD AT THE JUBILEE CENTRE, OKE-ADO, IBADAN. Oyo State.

PREAMBLE

We, the Catholic Bishops of Ibadan Ecclesiastical Province, comprising Ibadan Archdiocese, Ilorin, Ondo, Ekiti, Oyo and Osogbo Dioceses, after our first meeting for the year 2018, hereby issue the following Communique:

1. The Release of the Eucharistic Heart of Jesus Sisters

We give thanks to God Almighty for his goodness to our Church and our people in uncountable ways since we last met. We are particularly grateful for the safe release, after 55 days in captivity, of three Aspirants and three Reverend Sisters of the Eucharistic Hearts of Jesus (EHJ) who were kidnapped in November 2017 from their convent in Benin, Edo State. We thank all those who prayed and worked for a happy outcome to this unfortunate kidnapping and ask the Congregation of the EHJ Sisters to remain steadfast and focused in their holy vocation of love and service to God and humanity. We pray for the quick and safe release of all who are in captivity in Nigeria and for the conversion of the perpetrators. We once again call on the Nigerian government and security agencies to do more to curtail the ugly incidences of kidnaping which has become a national embarrassment to Nigeria as a country and prosecute those who commit such crimes.

2. Pastoral and Liturgical Matters

We reiterate the necessity for Priests, Religious, agents of pastoral work and the faithful, especially in our Province, to preserve and promote the integrity of the Liturgy and Divine Worship. Occurrences of undue or exaggerated creativity during the Holy Mass tend to undermine the solemnity and decorum of divine worship and this should be a concern to all. To give free rein to sentiments and acts of exuberant “worshiptainment”, merely to please worshippers and court public opinion, simply has no place in the Catholic Liturgy. Authentic liturgical worship is directed to the Triune God and great care should be taken by Priests and other Church leaders to study the guidelines for worship and liturgical rites as laid down by competent Church authorities, even while paying due attention to Inculturation. Priests especially, are servants at the altar of worship, not masters who may choose to do as they like without consideration for laid down rules. We all should remember that when the Liturgy is authentically celebrated, it becomes a potent instrument of evangelization and sanctification.

3. Piracy and Interpolation of Religious Texts

We call the attention of our Clergy, Religious and Laity to the growing phenomenon of piracy and interpolation of religious texts and contents. Our hymn books, prayer books and even the Bible are all being pirated and, even more seriously, the texts and contents interfered with. Verses of Church hymns have been illegally rewritten and in a batch of the Good News Bible currently in circulation, the Gospel of Luke is printed as “Luck”, apart from other errors. When contacted, some of the distributors pleaded that so many copies have been pushed out and therefore “the dissemination of errors must continue”. While Church authorities seek to put directives and strategies in place to address this malaise, we call for vigilance on the part of all Catholics to reject pirated and interpolated texts being offered for sale for Church and spiritual use.

4. Pro-Life, Pro-Family Catechesis

We are happy to invite our Priests, Religious, the Faithful and the general public to the public presentation of long-awaited publications on Human Life, Marriage and Family. The event will hold at the Pope John Paul II Centre, the Catholic Chaplaincy at the University of Ibadan, on Thursday, February 15, 2018. The publications are the outcome of the historic Pro Life, Pro-Family Conference, held at the same venue, 3 years ago. The publications aim to empower Christians and all men and women of goodwill with information and resources, with which to cope with questions and challenges concerning human life, marriage and the family, that may be encountered in the course of daily living. These books will surely raise the moral standard of those who endeavour to utilize this question-and-answer resource in their quest for truth and authentic Christian living. We urge everyone, especially the Catholic sodalities and groups in Ibadan and Lagos Provinces, to be part of this public presentation. Even more importantly, we urge everyone to avail themselves of the opportunity to learn and live by the commandments of God, the Creator of all, and the voice of the Catholic Church as articulated in these publications.

5. Signs of Persecution of Christians/Issues of Religious Freedom

We sympathize with the Bishop of Ilorin Diocese, Most Reverend Ayomaria Atoyebi, with the Priests, Religious and Laity of the Catholic Diocese of Ilorin on the mindless attack and vandalization of the Catholic Cathedral of St. Joseph’s in Ilorin, and with the Methodist Church and Christ Apostolic Church which suffered the same fate, in the same vicinity in Ilorin in the early hours of New year day by armed youths chanting anti-Christian slogans. We firmly denounce this attack which was also directed at innocent homebound worshippers and citizens after the New Year vigil worship. This and such acts all over the country only add to the bad image which Nigeria already bears in the eyes of the world, as one of the least

safe countries for Christians to live in. We cannot insist enough that the government of Kwara State fulfil the now-clichéd promise to bring the perpetrators of this act to justice, support the restoration of damaged structures and work hard with sincerity to prevent future occurrences, so as to restore the confidence of our people. On a general level, time has come to firmly and sincerely protect religious freedom as the fundamental right of every citizen in Nigeria and make it impossible for anyone to take it away from another by acts of violence and destruction.

6. The Crisis in Benue State

The continuous conflicts provoked by so-called Fulani herdsmen in Nigeria attained a tragic climax with the brutal slaughter of over 70 people recently buried in Benue State, with little coordinated effort from the Federal Government to prevent or assuage the tragedy. The unfortunate, by-now-familiar “siddon-look” attitude of the Federal government to such tragedies involving cow-herders in parts of the country has made many Nigerians to question whether animal rights could indeed be placed above human lives. Most people wonder who owns these “sacred cows” anyway, because of which farmlands and human life could be so wantonly destroyed. As we offer our deepest condolences to our bereaved compatriots in Benue State, we fervently pray for the repose of the souls of the dead and divine comfort for those left behind to mourn them. All hands must be on deck to put a stop to the bloody charade witnessed so frequently from encounters with Fulani herdsmen. Lack of preemptive action and delay in reacting to crises all over the country, on the part of government and the security agencies, must be rectified so that innocent lives may henceforth be protected. We also call on the government at all levels to support the legitimate yearnings of peoples all over Nigeria to live and thrive in peace within their rights as citizens of Nigeria. Surely, cattle-rearing is practiced in other countries in Africa and the world. We therefore urge that our governments consider improved ways of catering for cattle with minimum stress to other legitimate professions, as is done elsewhere in the world and apprehend and prosecute all those who have brought so much pain upon so many people in Nigeria.

7. The Menace of Fake News

Like elsewhere in the world, “fake news” has become a real concern in Nigeria. Due to the democratization of information and the instruments of media, all have almost unlimited access to the means and methods of dissemination. This has turned everyone, to informers of almost equal status, regardless of their intention and objective. As a result, fake news adversely affects practically all facets of modern society, government and Church inclusive. Given that such news has already brought down families, associations, governments, even other institutions all over the world, and even destroyed many innocent lives, every citizen has the responsibility to

double-check the authenticity of information before believing or disseminating it. The matter becomes more worrying however when credible institutions of society deploy fake news to achieve ends considered profitable to them. We caution our politicians, institutions, associations and people to be vigilant and minimize the adverse effects of fake news around us. The end never justifies the means and anything built on falsehood eventually collapses. Only the truth can set us free. We also urge all institutions of the Nigerian society to promptly and effectively disseminate necessary information that can build up, not destroy society. Ineffectual clichés like being “on top of the situation”, being on the trail of hoodlums or attributing serious tragedies to “communal clashes, simply will not do, because whenever meaningful information is lacking, fake news manufacturers seize the initiative to cause havoc. Not for nothing that Pope Francis’ message for the next World Communications Day on May 13, 2018, appropriates the words of Jesus Christ: “The truth will set you free” (Jn. 8:32). Fake news and journalism for peace”.

8. Conclusion: Whither Nigeria!

Nigeria is still going through very hard times. We may be able to point out areas of improvement in power supply, agriculture and other matters in some parts of Nigeria. Unfortunately, our woes today seem to weigh far more than these blessings. We challenge the government and competent authorities in Nigeria to be more responsive to their responsibilities. If we do not find a credible solution to problems of unemployment, human trafficking, terrorism, kidnapping, nepotism, religious bigotry and corruption, Nigeria might face a most uncertain future. We call on our people to continue to work and pray to bring about God’s kingdom of justice peace and love. God’s plans for our country like for all his children are good and enduring. Ours is the duty to take advantage of his promise and steadfastness. “Yes, I know what plans I have in mind for you, Yahweh declares, plans for peace, not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope. When you call to me and come and pray to me, I shall listen to you” (Jeremiah 29: 11-12).

Signed:

Most Rev. Gabriel Abegunrin
President

Most Rev. John Oyejola
Secretary.