



Committee on International Justice and Peace

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April 2, 2024

The Honorable Antony J. Blinken
Secretary of State
United States Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken:

As Chairman of the Committee on International Justice and Peace, I write to support the concerns of my brother bishops in Nigeria as stated in their recent Plenary Communiqué entitled, **“Journeying Together for the Common Good in the Church and Our Nation,”** which I have attached for your reference.

The bishops of Nigeria have decried the unabated violence perpetrated by terrorist groups such as Boko Haram and the Islamic State-West Africa Province in the northeastern states. Local vigilante groups have risen up to defend farmers in the middle belt of the country from armed herdsmen while bandits and gunmen attack villages and motorists, and kidnap innocent people for ransom across the northwest and middle of the country. As a result, Nigeria is now home to around [3 million internally displaced people](#) most of whom have escaped this relentless swell of violence. Our brother bishops in Nigeria conclude, “Insecurity has attained yet a higher scale than we had ever seen before in the land.”

Adding to this crisis, the Nigerian bishops argue that the termination of fuel subsidies and a drastic devaluation of the Nigerian currency are only benefiting the elite while increasing poverty amongst the most vulnerable people in society.

The Catholic Church, along with many academics and observers, argue that the root causes of the nationwide violence is pervasive corruption and endemic poverty and a massive failure of governance at the federal level. This analysis echoes what the bishops said in 2021, that this longstanding crisis, “has left the sad and dangerous impression that those who have assumed the duty and authority to secure the nation are either unable – or worse still, unwilling – to take up the responsibilities of their office.”

Now in 2024 the bishops declare that it is time to run government for the common good and allow all capable Nigerians to participate in the task of national rebirth. To that end, they urge the government to:

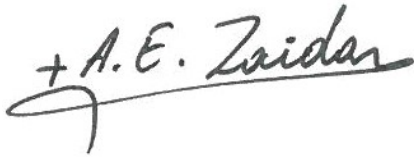
- urgently address the increasing disaffection and restiveness spreading across the population to avoid a descent into chaos and anarchy,
- carefully study the idea of decentralizing security responsibilities to a state police force or to other security outfits,
- Invest in the creation of small businesses, especially agricultural enterprises,
- Address the corrosive impact of corruption on people and society.

The Catholic Church points out that Nigeria has all it needs to rise to these challenges. If government is the problem, civil society must be empowered to become the solution. The Church has numerous assets including Veritas University, the national and diocesan Development, Justice, and Peace commissions and a network of clergy and lay leaders from all walks of life. The Catholic Church is also a trusted interfaith partner among Muslim communities, and with its vast grassroots networks, the Church is willing to channel its efforts and credibility to exert influence at the highest levels of government to affect change.

I urge you and your colleagues in the United States Embassy to engage with the local Catholic Church leadership to put these ideas into action. The deterioration of stability in the Sahel region and West Africa generally is in many ways worse than Nigeria. Yet, I believe that we need to be very proactive in Nigeria to address the growing and alarming level of fragility that exists in Africa's most populous nation before the forces in the Sahel intensify the crisis. This region of Africa needs a partnership and the leadership of the United States if it is to withstand the forces of violence and extremism.

We and our partners in Nigeria are ready to work with you to reach this goal.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ A. E. Zaidan". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

Most Reverend A. Elias Zaidan
Bishop of Maronite Eparchy of Our Lady of Lebanon
Chairman, Committee on International Justice and Peace

Enclosure

CBCN COMMUNIQUE: FIRST 2024 PLENARY



JOURNEYING TOGETHER FOR THE COMMON GOOD IN THE CHURCH AND OUR NATION

A Communiqué issued at the end of the First Plenary Meeting of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) at the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria Resource Centre, Durumi, Abuja, 16 to 22 February, 2024

1. PREAMBLE

We, the Catholic Bishops of Nigeria, held our First Plenary Meeting for the year at the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria Resource Centre, Durumi, Abuja, from 16 to 22 February, 2024. Having

prayerfully reflected on the theme: **Synod on Synodality: Areas of Concern for the Church in Nigeria** as well as on the situation of our country, we issue this Communiqué:

2. THE SYNOD ON SYNODALITY: OUR JOURNEY SO FAR

The Church is no stranger to synods, which have their roots in the early Christian Community. The word Synod from which synodality is derived conveys the idea of a journey undertaken together, listening to the Holy Spirit and to the voices of all segments of the faithful, where decisions are made collectively, dialogue promoted, and active participation encouraged. The first part of the Synod on Synodality for the Universal Church, was held at the Vatican from 4 to 29 October 2023. It was an enriching and engaging experience within the Church. The second part will be held in October 2024.

Synodality is an expression of the nature of the Church as communion. It obliges us as Church to walk together within the Apostolic Tradition which without ignoring the signs of the times takes cognizance of what has been held as the Deposit of Faith, always, everywhere and by all.

There is no doubt that the way the Church is run in most parishes and dioceses in Nigeria bear laudable marks of Synodality such as Parish Pastoral Councils, Presbyteral Councils, and College of Consultors. Also there is the active participation of the different sodalities and other lay organizations in the life of the Church. Nevertheless, there is the need to strengthen these Institutions by promoting the principles of listening and dialogue. In fidelity to the Deposit of Faith, we renew our call on Priests to cultivate greater respect for the liturgical norms and avoid abuses, in celebrating the Eucharist and other sacraments. A Synodal Church, no doubt, generates healthy citizens who, in turn, work for the promotion of the dignity of the human person and the development of the Country.

3. *FIDUCIA SUPPLICANS*: SOME CLARIFICATIONS

The Declaration by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Fiducia Supplicans* (on the Pastoral Meaning of Blessings) has generated a lot of controversies. Many Episcopal Conferences have taken their position on this document. We re-affirm the age long teaching of the Church on the Sacrament of Marriage as a union between one man and one-woman Code of Canon Law, Canon 1055); Catechism of the Catholic Church, N. 2335). We reject the reading of the Declaration that suggests that Priests could bless same-sex couples or other couples in irregular situations such as those of polygamists, and the divorce and remarried, in a way that legitimizes such unions.

We, the Catholic Bishops of Nigeria affirm our loyalty to the teaching of Christ and the Holy Father the Pope. As we have already stated as Conference and as part of Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM), we reiterate that Priests are not to bless same-sex couples in Nigeria. Homosexual acts are acts of grave depravity which are intrinsically disordered and, above all, contrary to natural law (Genesis 2:24; Ephesians 5:31; Matthew 19:5-6); CCC. N. 2357)

4. SITUATION OF THE NATION

We express strong solidarity with our people who are suffering in the seriously deteriorating situation of the nation, especially in the areas of security and economy.

Insecurity has attained yet a higher scale than we had ever seen before in the land. Insurgents, armed herdsmen, bandits, and the so-called unknown gunmen have continued to unleash terror in different parts of the country. Kidnapping for ransom has reached homes and areas where in the past it was thought impossible. The result is that many have fled their homes, abandoned their farms, shops, businesses and other sources of livelihood. The number of internally-displaced persons in our country is ever growing. We are making yet another passionate appeal to Government to act immediately to stem the tide. The legitimacy of government depends on its capacity to protect life and property.

Our worsening economy has continued to make living hard and difficult for our people who have been subjected to a life of grinding poverty, continuing hunger and untold hardship. The situation is worsened by the high unemployment rate in the country, which has further impoverished and degraded our citizens.

We note the efforts of the Federal Government in addressing some of our key economic problems. While we understand the reasons behind some of the reforms, it is our view that some of these policies seem not to have been properly thought through and as such the outcomes seem to fall short of expectations. For instance, while the fuel subsidy removal was meant to help improve government's revenue which has been the case across the three levels of government, the impact on Nigerians has been debilitating. Similarly, we note that the decision to "float the Naira" has had unintended negative and harsh consequences. In the light of this, we urge government to urgently address the increasing disaffection and restiveness spreading across the population, in order to avoid a descent into chaos and anarchy.

Way Forward

1. Promoting social cohesion and good governance

In view of the government's effort to end insecurity, we recommend that the ongoing discussion about the creation of State Police be carefully studied. Furthermore, government ought to assess the impact of all other already existing security outfit in this regard.

Given the diminishing purchasing power of the Nigerian currency, and the capacity of agriculture to be the bedrock of our survival, we urge government to create the necessary and conducive environment that would enable our people to return to their farms.

We commend government's decision to transfer some items, such as electricity and railways, from the exclusive list to the concurrent list. We urge that this be extended to such other areas of the economy like mining. These measures, along with transparency and accountability in governance, are some of the factors that promote social cohesion.

We enjoin government at all levels to establish small scale industries in the rural areas to increase productivity and reduce unemployment. It would be helpful if such industries are agro based.

The Media play a critical role in nation building. They have the capacity to inform, enlighten and guide the government and citizens on important matters of governance, citizenship and patriotism. They also act as watchdogs for good governance. Rather than seek to repress or intimidate the media, we call on government and other relevant authorities to help the media perform their role responsibly and optimally. To this end, we recommend that the fundamental rights of media workers be respected. We equally advocate for the responsible use of the mainstream and social media by all.

1. b) *Journeying Together*

We enjoin government to open up to the contribution of all segments and levels of the Nigerian community, so that together we can face the emergency situation in which we now find ourselves. It is no longer acceptable for our leaders to surround themselves only with their political supporters and cronies. The general elections and determination of petitions are now over. It is time to run government for the common good. The nation needs to leave all polarizations behind and come together in unity and cohesion. We have both the natural and human resources to get this done. But those now in political power owe the nation the duty to create the enabling environment for all capable Nigerians to participate in the task of national rebirth. Politicians who are not in power and all other Nigerians now should be ready to offer their positive contribution, beyond all political party affiliation and sensitivity.

1. c) *Hope in God and our Need for Repentance*

In spite of the challenges facing our nation, we cannot give up hope. All is not lost. We have all it takes to rescue our nation. Our confidence is based on our trust in God and in our capability as a nation, with the grace of God in whom almost all Nigerians believe. Our prayers for Nigeria are not futile and should continue. Nevertheless, our trust in God must go hand in hand with our human efforts. Religious leaders should promote sincere and genuine godliness and righteousness in their religious communities, upholding among their followership honesty and hard work and condemning corruption in all its forms, in both private and public life. We equally call on the entire Nigerian elite including professionals, business people, and financial operators, many of whom have for long benefited from the corrupt system to repent and change their attitude of greed and selfishness. Furthermore, civil servants and public office holders, who have not been running our public institutions with honesty and rectitude, need to change their ways. As the government demands additional sacrifice from the citizens, one expects to see a drastic cut in the cost of running government at all levels. We urge all to have a sincere change of heart. Nonetheless, we call on government to prosecute crime and criminality wherever they are found. We commend those who have been trying to behave well against all odds, and encourage them not to give up.

5. NEWS FROM THE CHURCH

We acknowledge God's bountiful blessings on the Church in Nigeria as we thank the Holy Father, Pope Francis for the following appointments: Most Reverend Gerald Mamman Musa as the bishop of the newly created Diocese of Katsina the ceremony took place on the 12 December, 2023; Most Rev. Habila Tyiakwonaboi Daboh as the Bishop of Zaria Diocese the ceremony took place on the 14 December, 2023; Most Rev. Anselm Pendo Lawani as the Bishop of Ilorin Diocese the ceremony took place on the 2 February, 2024. We are equally grateful to the Holy Father, Pope Francis for the appointment of Most Rev. Simeon Okezuo Nwobi as Auxiliary Bishop of Ahiara Diocese. His episcopal ordination took place on the 19 December, 2023 and the recent appointment of Rt Rev. Msgr Thomas Ifeanyi-chukwu Obiatuegwu as Auxiliary Bishop of Orlu diocese. His Episcopal Ordination comes up on 20 March, 2024. May the Church of Christ continue to flourish in our country. We rejoice with the Dioceses of Minna, Abakaliki and Issele-Uku for the Golden Jubilee of their erection. We pray for a more fruitful pastoral life in these Dioceses, while we thank God for the achievement.

We congratulate the Pan African Episcopal Committee for Social Communication for the 50th Anniversary of its establishment which held from 18 to 21 November, 2023 at Lumen Christi Retreat and Media Centre, Lekki – Lagos. May the fruits of the celebration continue to animate our pastoral life in the Church and society. We thank the Archdiocese of Lagos for hosting the event on behalf of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria.

In Prayer, we look forward to the International Eucharistic Congress holding in Quito, Ecuador from 8-15 September, 2024.

6. CONCLUSION: STARTING AFRESH WITH GOD

The season of Lent affords us the opportunity to start afresh with God as individuals, as Church and as a nation. This holy season draws our attention to reparation, reconciliation and sanctification. In prayer, we deepen our relationship with the God. In fasting and abstinence, we discipline our bodies, deny ourselves of legitimate pleasure and yield our bodies to the direction of the Spirit. In almsgiving, we demonstrate our concern for the needy and the less privileged. By so doing, our synodality as a Church and as a nation becomes strengthened and impactful.

As we commit ourselves to the Lenten observances we pray: may your love be upon us O Lord as we place all our hope in you (Ps 33:22). May our Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of hope and of all consolation continue to intercede for us. Amen

+ Lucius Iwejuru Ugorji

Archbishop of Owerri Archdiocese

President, CBCN.

+ Donatus A. Ogun, OSA

Bishop of Uromi Diocese

Secretary, CBCN.