

# THE CHURCH AS AGENT OF RECONCILIATION AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION\*

By

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I greatly appreciate the opportunity to be part of this landmark conference on *The Church as an Agent of Reconciliation and Social Transformation*. It is a greater privilege for me to be in the distinguished company of so many outstanding princes and princesses of the Church, distinguished Statesmen and thinkers, and contribute on this most timely and challenging subject of our times. I am certain that the ever-attentive Nigerian public is full of great expectations for the outcome of your conference because they believe that the Church can help our peoples of the African continent to live as genuine neighbours rather than predators.

## *Crises, Conflicts, Challenges in Africa*

Your Graces, my Lords, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, we are living in a period of grave danger and moral crises. As we meet today, it has never been more obvious that the state of every nation (particularly each of our nations) depends on the state of the world.

Regional conflicts present a real challenge for the maintenance of peace and security as well as resolution and management of contending issues, reconciliation and the healing of wounds, because Africa is going through a period marked by profound changes and grave crises. The theme of the Conference "The

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Church as an Agent of Reconciliation and Social Transformation” is both relevant and timely. Relevant because we live in an interdependent world, where crisis in one region reverberates in others. Timely, because of the global proliferation of crises and conflict situations, which require appropriate regional and global responses. In all these, Africa has more than its fair share of conflicts, straining the very fabric of our sovereignties. In the last thirty years alone more than thirty wars have been fought in Africa, with the attendant loss of human lives and resources, wanton destruction of infrastructure and the displacement of persons. The potential for massacre and genocide is always threatening. From the Horn of Africa to Central Africa, from Southern Africa to the Great Lakes Region and down to West Africa, we are all caught in a collective convulsion of war and violence.

We are also all familiar with the fatal and catastrophic costs of the conflicts. How can we quantify the ferocity, the needless deaths, the desperation and permanent trauma of Africa’s legions of displaced persons? How can we make the strategic shift from militarization and arms race to demilitarization and socio-economic and political transformation? How can we move beyond massive ecological degradation to restore the pact between humans and nature?

At the dawn of a new millennium, Africa faces not only an enormous responsibility but most significantly faces a challenge that eclipses all else: that of fighting poverty, reducing and managing conflicts, decelerating the arms race, building plural societies, and making a comprehensive peace pact among its peoples.

We must face these challenges without equivocation: first, by inventing and pursuing variants of conflict resolution mechanisms; second by ensuring that we prevent future conflicts from erupting, third and more significantly, mobilising our institutions and plural societies to spearhead the much needed

social transformation.

Thus, the Church in West Africa in particular is challenged by a myriad of problems centering around war and conflict, post-conflict reconstruction, socio-economic crises and deepening poverty, democratic consolidation, and the pace and content of regional integration. We might also want to examine the challenges posed by these wars and crises on lifestyles in our increasingly over-crowded cities and impoverished villages. The resultant collapse of social values, the scourge of systemic corruption and decadent welfare systems have not only undermined the quality of life of our peoples, but have also fed into our systems unbridled materialism and opportunism can best be described as “violent implosions”.

In facing this formidable task the Church has attempted to proactively intervene to ameliorate some traumas inflicted on our societies. It is instructive to note the positive impact of Liberia’s *Radio Veritas* in serving as a propelling force of the nation’s conscience, which has continued to reverberate across the region. Indeed, the democratic revolution in our countries, especially in Nigeria and Ghana can be attributed in part to the sustained pressures and unequivocal pronouncements of the Conference of Catholic Bishops. I may not have specific details, but I am aware that the Church is making concerted efforts in other places in the region.

Your Graces, my Lords, distinguished guests, we must bring our collective focus to bear on the problems in our region in order to bring about genuine reconciliation and free up our resources and energies for the vital task of social transformation.

### *A Global Perspective to the Church*

The Church, the body of Christ is the moral foundation of human dignity and life. Through its redeeming power of faith and love, it is the light of the world, the last bastion of hope for hundreds of millions of people in many nations. In a world assailed by materialism, greed, and afflicted by oppression, violence and injustice, the Church's weapons of truth, love and faith are refuge for the oppressed, the poor, and disadvantaged. It is also the voice of the voiceless.

Our choice as followers of Christ and doers of His word offer no alternatives. For the Church to remain relevant in the world today, it must respond to the social and spiritual challenges that underpin our development as a people.

In fulfilling its prophetic mission the Church has at its disposal the pulpit, the hearts and minds of billions of the faithful and the truth. These key elements are vital in advancing the message of reconciliation and social transformation in our times. This is also in consonance with our common concern in placing people at the heart of development.

Under the leadership of Pope John Paul II, the Catholic Church has been undergoing a quiet, but profound revolution. The Church has built new bridges of reconciliation and love across nations, religious divides, races and generations. The Pope has been the voice of the voiceless, taking the gospel of universal salvation to the four corners of the globe, preaching love, forgiveness and reconciliation, canonising many new saints in all parts of the world and spreading the gospel of faith and social justice. In many ways, the world has become the Pope's pulpit as he carries his message in his numerous travels across the globe to hundreds of millions of people. In addressing the problem of spiritual blindness, the Pope succinctly stated that ... the Kingdom of God is also the Kingdom of justice; and missionary activity throughout the world must go hand in hand with the

introduction of conditions ... that allow people to live with dignity.

It is in this Kingdom of faith, justice and dignity that the Church in a rapidly changing and complex world like ours can fulfill its mission of reconciliation and social transformation.

### *Conflict and Reconciliation*

In dealing with the twin issues of conflict and reconciliation, several questions emerge: how can we make reason triumph over the kind of spiritual blindness that the Holy Father referred to? How can moderation eclipse extremism, how can tolerance override violence, how can peace achieve pre-eminence over war? To whom do we look for solutions? The answer as Brutus did say in Julius Caesar, “the fault is in ourselves, but not in our stars”. For conflicts begin in the minds of men – its perception of rights and wrong, enemy and friend, is conceptualised from the senses i.e. what can be seen, felt, learnt by hearsay in the absence of other information.

To achieve our objective of reconciliation, we must know the causes of conflict, its roots, manifestations, evolution and most significantly, the triggers. Most conflicts are historically rooted; often in the manipulations of men’s emotions of defeat, revenge, being victims, the dispossessed attempting to right old wrongs – real or imagined, or not losing out on a current *state* or *stage* of advantage.

Conflicting interpretations of history as to winners and losers can also be a critical source of conflict. Almost invariably, the will of winners to continue to win and losers to turn the table erodes the middle ground creating spaces for conflict.

Also significant is the struggle for power in context where power has been the monopoly of a select group, which closes entry to other groups, and is self-serving in its management of

public resources and allocation of public goods. An important corollary of this is the struggle over control of resources. In resource-rich economies where the economy is based on rent, the political game tends to assume a zero-sum struggle for access to state, and then, power over resources.

Unfortunately, there emerges an overbearing emphasis on the sharing of nature's bounties without regard to real production of wealth – the kind of wealth that constructively utilises human capital, talents and ingenuity which really constitute the human basis for the industrial revolution that is the true basis of socio-economic transformation. We cannot of course, ignore metropolitan interests seeking advantage and or niches of economic and ideological influence and preponderance.

Perhaps, the raw and unprocessed youth energy exacerbated by high rates of youth unemployment and frustration, poor citizenship values, absolute lack of leadership training, disappointment with the conduct of elders, urban and moral decadence and the alarming spread and entrenchment of a culture of violence constitute the greatest sources of conflict in today's world.

### *Reconciliation and Social Transformation*

Having established the context of conflicts we can now turn to their management and resolution – the kind of management that could lead to a lasting and genuine reconciliation. But the serious question that is posed is: can we find complementarities in the efforts of the State and the Church? I believe that we can.

Integrating Church and State action for lasting reconciliation and social transformation in our societies constitute the greatest challenge to the Church. Among the various mechanisms for the management, resolution and conciliation in our conflicts, the Church can deftly assume responsibilities in key areas.

Nation States that promote dialogue and tolerance, develop the minds of the people through education, develop their environment, constructively utilise their ethnic diversity and pursue open channels of communication to all stakeholders will as of necessity be less vulnerable to internal or external triggers. In essence by addressing the sources of internal conflict and introducing genuine confidence-building measures, they can create enduring path to reconciliation.

### *The Challenge for the Church*

The Church must map a course for socially concerned Christians, to move them to follow it, and to guide them along it. The map must provide bridges to life, social security, bridges to inherent and equal rights, bridges to brotherhood, bridges to human dignity, freedom and liberty.

Of central importance in our immediate context is the role of the Church as the provider of an enduring moral framework round which individuals, groups and communities organize their lives. Indeed, at the height of Nigeria's tribulations, the Church came out with 'the prayer for Nigeria in distress'. The conference of bishops in our countries, Nigeria, Ghana and the Gambia, spoke up, denouncing oppression and advocating justice and peace, while giving the people hope that a better future lay ahead.

Closely related to this, is the way the Church itself intervenes in public discourse and debates as an advocate of the people. A well-known instance is the role of the Church in Nigeria in advancing the course of democracy in the years of military rule. One will be correct to argue that it was in acknowledgement of the role of the Church and the Catholic Secretariat in the defence of human rights and democracy, that our own Reverend Hassan Mathew Kukah 'secured' a seat at the Oputa Panel for the Investigation of Human Rights Violations in Nigeria. There is no

doubt that recognition and appointment to an official commission on national reconciliation is in itself a great milestone in the history of the Catholic Church in Nigeria.

Our approach to particular issues is to try to ask where the justice of it lies, which position on it makes for a more just society. But if justice is the first virtue of our social institutions we need to know what it means in practice and in the structural arrangement of institutions and relationships. We might wonder, too, if justice possesses peculiarly religious forms and reasons. Does religion have contributions to make to legal and political thought, let alone social action? Yes, justice means taking care of one another. Parents need to care for their children, and people need to work to support themselves and take care of the community. The community needs to enable people to work and care for one another, to enter in and have a public voice. It needs to care for the poor.

The Christian Church draws mainly on biblical sources for this vision of a just society, defined by mutual care and responsibility, not simply by individual rights, fair contracts and due process of law. For many in the Church, this vision is clearest in the prophetic literature of the Old Testament and in the Gospels' Great Commandment to love God and neighbour. Look at Isaiah for example [Isa 1:17] "learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow." You find a society being measured in God's eyes by the justice and care it gives to the sick, the powerless and the uneducated. You see God most active, when things are most critical, on behalf of those who have the least. People have a sense of justice that is religiously inspired: "God made us all, and we should love our neighbour and give our earthly treasure to help one another."

But this biblical vision does not alone define our practical sense of justice. That is also conditioned by our pragmatic experience of how laws and power and money actually work 'out there' in the world, and the ethics we think will work in relation

to them. You can stand against the tide of *realpolitik* but you cannot ignore its force. When a society loses its way, *realpolitik* can't tell it which way to turn. It does not know anything about the right direction to go. That is where the Church has to step forward.

We must find a context. We must provide examples of biblical insights into public issues, charging them with a sense of moral gravity and urgency. In a pluralistic, participatory democracy, the Church constitutes a vital interest group, a vital pressure group, far beyond a moral voice. What can the Church do together with secular governments? The Church will need to practice being different from the state and staying connected with the state. We need astute political skills; we need organisational skills to effectively meet this challenge.

### *Youths and Women: The Burden of the Church*

A society that focuses on its youth is a society that cares for the future generation. "The Youths of a nation", said Benjamin Disraeli, "are trustees of prosperity." The future prospects of our nation states can be directly measured by the prospects of our youth.

In this regard, we bear a heavy responsibility. We are called upon to promote and protect the interests of our younger citizens. In many African States, over 50% of the population is under 15 years of age. While we can safely assert that the Church has an enduring record of youth programmes, we can also begin to take long-term strategic steps to bequeath to them a legacy of productivity, respect for human dignity, tolerance and peaceful co-existence.

The Church can institute counselling centres for the training of professional counsellors who will help train the population of traumatised youth. The Church can help the traumatised youth

recover from the psyche of violence and restore their sense of dignity. Think about the lost innocence of child-soldiers barely in their teens conscripted, deployed to flash points around the continent. How can we reintegrate them into normal society after a trail of blood on their hands? These children are bound to scrutinize what we have done to them and they will wonder – did we give them the peace and prosperity they deserve? Now is the time to invest in our youth.

In our society today, poverty has assumed a moral equivalence of war. To avert the crisis that arises from despair among our youth, we must set up vocational training centres to give our children skills. We must set up as a matter of urgency clubs where the unemployed can interact positively with their colleagues.

The Justice Development and Peace institution can begin to intensify its demands on the system to empower the people and utilise the weight of the Church to ensure that national resources are used prudently.

The Church can move beyond the Oputa concept [the Panel for Investigation of Human Rights Violations in Nigeria] and take concrete steps to champion reconciliation. An establishment of Reconciliation committees with representatives of youth, women and a cross-section of the community could help nip crises in the bud and even provide early warning signals before the crisis erupts.

### *Women*

The test of a good society is its attitude towards women. No society can develop without this vital resource. Indeed, in today's world gender equality has become a moral imperative and a development objective.

Some observers like Ellen Berg have described women as the “different voice” in conflict situations. This comes from recognition that the contextual concrete ethic of care that women bring to moral dilemmas is a resource for solving conflicts.

Yes, the Church has a moral and empowering role; but in the same vein has a marginalizing structure. The Church can begin to explore the positive capacities that women can bring to reconciliation and social transformation in a more participatory and equal manner.

In today’s world, women are not at the peace table. We are not there where our commitment to peace, our capacities to find solutions through dialogue-debate, our sensitivities to human needs, human rights are sorely needed.

### *Recommendations*

Our recommendations flow naturally from the foregoing discourse. The Church, wielding the mantle of moral leadership, taking cognisance of its social and integrative roles must face the challenge of reconciliation and social transformation. We need to convince our states and peoples of the superiority of democracy over authoritarianism, dialogue over violence, and love over hate.

The church needs to set up counselling centres to train experts that will enable us rescue our traumatized youth and women. To instill in them a new sense of purpose we need to evolve institutions at the parish, diocesan and community levels for purposes of reconciliation and transformation. Part of their functions should include early warning signals and monitoring of conflicts as a strategy of avoiding conflicts and building peace.

The Church has a very special role in defining the nature of the new leadership in our various countries. By leadership, I refer specifically to the elite. We must insist on high moral standards for members of our holy flock, including those who seek to serve

at the community, regional and national levels. Already there are new opportunities such as the return of missionary schools to the Church in some of our states. We must capitalize on such opportunities to infuse new values of love, faith, and selfless service to the community and humankind in general in our new leaders.

The activities of the Justice, Peace and Development Commission in our Church need to be greatly strengthened. It should be involved in civil education, public debates on issues of critical national importance, and in defining a more socially engaged role for the Church. Beyond this, it must empower the people to make demands for accountability from our leaders, and ensure that our wealth and natural resources are used prudently for the benefit of all.

In sum, our youth, our women, and our men are the very salt of the earth. The Church is the present and the future, the last hope of the common man. The challenge is to give life, vision and energy to this reality.

As Catholics we have answered the call and we triumphed under inspiration, but today, we are summoned again. For the first time, turning the global vision of peace into a new and better world is indeed, a realistic possibility. It is a hope that embodies our Church's tradition of pragmatism, which has made us unique among churches and uniquely successful.

May God sustain us as we labour in His Vineyard!