

**First All Nigerian Congress of Catholic Prison Chaplains
Held in DRACC Emene, Enugu
27th - 30th November 1994.**

Communiqué

From 27th to 30th November 1994, several interested and public spirited individuals - priests, sisters, social workers, lawyers, judicial officers, university dons, officers and government officials - gathered at the Divine Love Retreat and Conference Centre (DRACC) Emene Enugu from various dioceses in Nigeria (Ibadan, Oyo, Enugu, Jos, Abuja, Ondo, Issele-Uku, Awka, Owerri, Lagos, Pórt Harcourt and Nsukka) to discuss, within the context of an all Nigerian Congress of Catholic Prison Chaplains, the very urgent and rapidly deteriorating situation in Nigerian prisons and its bearing upon the prisoners' rights and dignity as human persons.

After much prayer and reflection with six brain-storming sessions of lectures and three workshop sessions, the following communiqué was issued:

- 1. We thank the Almighty God whose providence continues to fecundate the Church with the gifts of the Holy Spirit for stirring up in our conscience an awareness of our responsibility in the Prisons Apostolate and for making it possible for us to hold this first all Nigerian Congress of Catholic Prisons Chaplains.**
- 2. We call on all Catholics, and indeed all men and women of goodwill, to embrace the prison apostolate as an integral part of the gospel. The words of Jesus in Mt. 25:37 "I was in prison and you visited me" does not leave us with any alternative in the matter.**
- 3. We therefore welcome every support and sign of solidarity given to prisoners and their families by christian communities and public**

spirited individuals and Non-Governmental Organisations. Such efforts should be intensified.

4. The Prison Chaplaincy services as they now exist in Nigeria fail to address adequately the needs of the prisoners who, by reason of their incarceration and deplorable living conditions, are in need of special pastoral care. We therefore call on the Bishops to appoint chaplains to the various prisons in their respective dioceses. In the short term, emphasis should be on appointing people who are mature and have an aptitude for the work. In the long term, professional training and competence should be a prerequisite for such appointments.

5. The Prison is a world of its own with its unique language and culture, its problems and prospects which will not be readily obvious to an outsider. We therefore call on Government to promulgate necessary laws integrating chaplaincy work into the Prisons Services. The Army Chaplaincy service is a model for an integrated Prisons chaplaincy services.

6. We deplore the barbarically inhuman and criminally unhealthy sanitary conditions in Nigerian Prisons and call for urgent remedy.

7. It is blatantly unjust and a gross violation of the United Nations Human Rights Charter and the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights to detain people for long periods of time without charge or trial and under unhealthy and debilitating sanitary conditions. We therefore call on government and law enforcement agents to discharge without delay all persons who have been detained, without charge or trial, for up to four weeks.

8. The over-crowded nature of Nigerian Prisons and the lumping together of First Time Offenders and mere suspects with Hardened Criminals all living under conditions of horrid squalor occasioned by intractable delays in the dispensation of justice not only violates human sensitivity and honour but contradicts the entire correctional purpose of the Penal Code. We therefore call for the release of all

minor offenders whose trial cannot commence within one week of their arrest and detention.

9. We condemn in the strongest terms the attitude of some Prisons officials who either divert foods and various supplies meant for prisoners to their own use or exploit the prisoners and their families by asking for financial inducements to perform towards the prisoners even the most routine of their duties. We call for adequate remuneration of Prisons staff to reduce the temptation of pilfering of various gifts items meant for prisoners.

10. We note with shock and alarm that over 60 percent of Nigerian Prisoners are suspects awaiting trial, which makes the over-crowding of the Prisons quite an artificial creation. Such suspects must be presumed innocent until proven guilty. That is the law. If they cannot be tried they must be released without further delay. Their continued detention is neither justifiable in law nor to common sense.

11. There is a causal linkage between the socio-economic situation of the people and the crime rate in society. For instance, offences against property for which most people are sent to prison increases proportionately with increase in inflation and corresponding decrease in per capita real incomes. We therefore call on government to address urgently through social welfare schemes and adequate provision of public utilities the rapidly deteriorating living standards of Nigerians if the country will not slide into anarchy and complete lawlessness.

12. The Congress is extremely worried by the continued proscription of some media houses by the present military government in Nigeria. Besides denying hundreds of Nigerians of their legitimate means of livelihood, therefore exposing them to crimes and delinquency, such closure violates the rights of Nigerians to freedom of expression and free access of information. We therefore call for the immediate de-proscription of the affected media houses and advice government to adopt the due process of

law in dealing with its perceived enemies if it wants to be obeyed as legitimate authority.

13. The near collapse of formal education occasioned by incessant strikes, and the high rate of youth unemployment provide great impetus for the involvement of youths in serious crimes. We call on government to take urgent steps to address the issue of dysfunctional formal education and its attendant youth unemployment.

14. The Nigerian Prisons as they now exist seem incapable of fulfilling any correctional roles. We therefore call for a complete overhauling of the Prisons Service with adequate provisions for separate treatment of various categories of offenders: juveniles and adults; males and females; First Offenders and Habitual Criminals. The Penal Reform System must also consider alternative more efficient and effective ways of correcting delinquents. For example: caution and discharge, fines, suspended sentences, compulsory community service schemes, paroles and sending offenders back to their local council areas for some period of time.

15. The Government as well as all agents of the law (judges, the police and prison staff) must see to the responsible and efficient fulfilment of the law they make for the common good. It is plainly irresponsible to overcrowd prisons with offenders without caring for their dignity, correction and livelihood.

16. The Prisons as they now exist and function constitute a devastating drain on the nation's dwindling resources. We therefore call for a reformed prison service in which the prisoners would be gainfully employed and capable not only of providing for their own sustenance but also of contributing to the growth of the wider society.

17. We declare our compassion with all who are detained without charge or trial and especially those whose detention is for oppressive or political or ethnic reasons.

18. We are greatly concerned about the continued detention of Chief M.K.O. Abiola, the undeclared winner of the 1995 presidential elections and some pro-democracy activists like Chief Anthony Enahoro and Chief Frank Kokori, the Secretary General of NUPENG. Their continued incarceration, despite reports of their failing health, constitutes a regrettable regress into crude barbarism, an outrageous act of moral cynicism and a visceral affront on the political rights of the Nigerian People. We therefore call for their immediate release from detention and the stoppage of their trial which has made Nigeria the laughing stock of the world. Such also is the case with Mr. Ken Saro-Wiwa of MOSOP - a detained Minority Rights activist.

19. We announce the birth of the Nigerian Association of Catholic Prison Chaplaincies with its protem Secretariat at the Catholic Institute for Development, Justice and Peace Enugu to co-ordinate the activities of Catholic prison chaplaincies across the nation.

20. Finally, this Congress hereby calls and recommends for the Nigerian Church a Sunday in the year to be known as Prisoners Sunday with special church collections focusing attention on the situation in the Prisons and the challenges of Prisons Apostolate.

[Communiqué signed by: Revd. Fr. Prof. Obiora Ike (Director, CIDJAP, Enugu - Congress Convenor); Revd. Fr. Emeka Ngwoke (Secretary to Congress - Nsukka Diocese); Revd. Fr. Livinus Uka (Sec. Justice and Peace, Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, Lagos); Revd. Sr. Carmel-Mary Fagbemi SSL (Ondo Diocese); Revd. Fr. Anthony 'Detutu K. Adediran (Archdiocese of Ibadan); Revd. Sr. Tina Betiku SSL (Jos Diocese); Revd. Fr. Simon Bako (Archdiocese of Abuja); Revd. Sr. Bernadette Onwuzurigbo (Co-ordinator for Justice and Peace, Diocese of Port Harcourt).