

Plenary Meeting of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria Held at Enugu on September 12-16, 1994.

Communique

Preamble

The second plenary Meeting of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) for 1994 was held at the Divine Love Retreat and Conference Centre, Emene, Enugu, from September 12 to 16, 1994. The following is the communique issued at the end of the meeting.

1. The Mission of the Church in Society

It is the mission of the Church to bring the gospel message to bear, not only on individuals but also on the social, political and economic structures of nations, with the aim of promoting greater justice, integrity, love and peace among peoples. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria wishes to re-state the constant teaching of the Catholic Church, that justice is the only way to true and lasting peace. To the people of Nigeria, we are messengers of peace, and we recognize in the words of Pope Paul VI, that those who wish to have peace must work for justice. In pursuance of this mission, we have issued several statements since the onset of the current political crisis, declaring our stand on the side of justice, and the rule of law. These statements seem to have fallen on deaf ears, but not without the dire consequences on the nation and its people which we had foreseen.

2. Our Concern

The Conference observes with deep concern the prolonged distress of the Nigerian nation, and is moved by the misery and agony of the individuals and families in Nigeria, who are unable to live worthwhile lives and fulfil their obligations and

aspirations. There is widespread hunger and starvation in our country, a land so richly blessed by God but callously devastated by greedy and opportunistic Nigerians. The educational and health-care systems and resources have suffered a grievous assault as a result of the political impasse, while the indices of economic, social and political welfare have all virtually collapsed. The rich human and family values associated with our people are being swept away in the process. Some Nigerians are dying, victims of the prolonged distress. Some are thrown out on the streets to roam like lunatics, while others are living under sub-human conditions. In the face of this distress many Nigerians are trooping out to foreign countries where some of them live and work under intolerable conditions, and some even engage in drug peddling and prostitution, bringing down further the image of the country. This widespread misery and agony is not God's design but a fallout of the endless political crisis that is daily increasing in complexity.

3. Cause of the Present Crisis

The annulment of the June 12, 1993 election and the events thereafter, have continued to draw the nation further and further towards disaster. The issue of June 12 election should be urgently resolved in such a way that future elections can be conducted and their results nationally accepted. We call upon all parties responsible for the crisis to consider the misery of the people and the good of the nation, and to take such urgent steps that will bring the nation back to the course of stability, democracy and good governance. We urge all those involved in the discussion to take the path of justice, dialogue, maturity, reconciliation and the spirit of give-and-take, for the good of Nigeria.

4. Yearning for Good Democratic Government

Among the people of Nigeria, the yearning for freedom and democracy and the loss of confidence in military rule, and all those associated with it have been expressed in incessant strikes, demonstrations, and at times violent protests.

Nigerians have said it loudly and clearly, and through the events of the last few months they have demonstrated that they no longer wish to subject themselves to bad government or military rule, however benevolent. After ten years of continuous military presence in power, Nigerians are convinced now more than ever before that the military has no monopoly of political wisdom, nor is patriotism a virtue to be found only in the rank and file of the armed forces. Under military regimes, evidence abound of ethnic and religious bigotry, corruption, greed and graft. Yet these are the ills the military purportedly came to correct. Therefore any attempt to prolong military rule under any guise whatsoever is a direct violation of the people's express will.

5. Government Response

The present military government has always spoken of dialogue, but it is disheartening to note that faced with the crisis of credibility and legitimacy, it has often resorted to one panic measure after another, and besieged Nigerians with a barrage of oppressive decrees, rather than appreciate fully and respond honestly to the people's anger and anguish. The consequence is a vicious circle of widespread protests, repressive decrees, and further protests. The cumulative effect of this vicious circle is the loss of confidence in government and in public institutions, and a collapse of the moral, social and economic order in present-day Nigeria.

6. The On-going Constitutional Conference

Although this administration has set up the Constitutional Conference with the declared aim of addressing our fundamental national problems, and resolving the present political crisis, the constitution, composition and the conduct of the Conference hardly inspires the trust and confidence of the generality of Nigerians. The fact that the election of members was done in an atmosphere that was not conducive to free and fair elections, and the fact that some members of the Conference, especially, among Government appointees, have a poor track record, raise serious doubts on the integrity of

the Conference, and the eventual achievement of the aims proclaimed by this administration. Besides, the performance of the Conference so far has not changed our earlier perception, but rather confirms the fears that we expressed in our Statement of July 16, 1994. Can the future of our country be tied to the deliberation of such a Conference?

7. The People's Responsibility

We observe with dismay that the people themselves are responsible in some measure for the distress of the moment. For while many God-fearing Nigerians continue to work tirelessly towards the building of a just and peaceful nation, others persist in plundering our resources and even exploiting the on-going crisis for their selfish gains. Many Nigerians carry on a life of injustice and corruption, and others aid and abet bribery, cheating, hoarding of scarce commodities, and the arbitrary raising of prices. These evil practices further worsen the plight of the poor. As the Lord says through prophet Hosea: "There is no faithfulness or love in the land, and the people do not acknowledge me as God... Crimes increase, and there is one murder after another. And so, the land will dry up..." (Hosea 4:1-3).

8. Nigerians, Continue The Struggle

We salute our country men and women who, in the face of this dire situation, have been promoting and defending human rights and freedom. Some of them have been subjected to untold hardship, including indefinite detention without trial. May their suffering not be in vain. Nigeria is a nation of free people. We want to remind our beloved country men and women that we are a free people. We may be vulnerable but not helpless under the present circumstances. We must not allow anyone to reduce us to slaves through repressive decrees. We must continue to resist the violation of our fundamental human rights, including the right to free expression, and the right to choose our own leaders. We must continue to resist dictatorship by all peaceful but effective means.

9. The Way Forward

On the way out of the present impasse, we believe that Nigerians are resourceful enough to work out alternative arrangements, including some of those which have been at one time or the other suggested to recent military administrations, but to which they turned deaf ears. As the first step to dialogue, reconciliation and peace, we call for the immediate and unconditional release of all political detainees and the repeal of all oppressive, repressive and retroactive decrees. We call for the immediate opening of all closed Media Houses, and for the entrenchment of the rule of law. The government itself must respect the rule of law. Above all we call for a change of heart on the part of all Nigerians, if we are ever to have peace and prosperity, since righteousness exalts a nation (Proverbs 14:34). Indeed, a nation without integrity has no right to peace.

10. Our Hope

As Christian leaders, we are, however, apostles and ministers of hope. We urge the people of Nigeria, especially the youth, the poor and the lowly who have had to bear the greater burden of the protracted political crisis not to despair. We must persevere in hope. The God we serve is a compassionate, loving and saving Lord. Our help is in Him, the eternal Shepherd, who made heaven and earth (Psalms 23, 124). The Lord has promised to be with us in times of trouble and to answer us when we call upon Him (Psalm 91:15). We believe that He will soon see us out of the dark tunnel.

11. A Call to Prayer and Action

We call for sustained prayers and intercessions on the part of the faithful, to the One who alone can save Nigeria. We direct that the recitation of the PRAYER FOR NIGERIA IN DISTRESS be continued. With intense prayer and fasting, we, the Catholic Bishops of Nigeria reconsecrate our country to Our Lady Queen of Nigeria. We direct that this reconsecration be also done in the month of October, by individuals and

families, culminating with the reconsecration of each parish and diocese on Sunday, October 30, 1994. We also direct that at different levels, the prayers of the people be accompanied by serious reflection with a view to identifying the demands of the Gospel on all of us in the present circumstances. We must all seek divine guidance to know what we must to do, and the grace and courage to act effectively in the promotion of justice and peace in our land.