



NATIONAL CATHOLIC SECRETARIAT

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

CENTENARY HOUSE, NEAR TETTEH QUARSHIE INTERCHANGE

Tel: +233-0302-500491/0302-976222
E-mail: president@cbcgha.org/
secretarygeneral@cbcgha.org

P. O. Box KA 9712
Airport - Accra
Ghana/West Africa

CHRISTMAS AND NEW YEAR PASTORAL LETTER FROM THE GHANA CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE (GCBC)

“For to us a child is given, to us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be ‘Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace’”. (Isaiah 9:6, RSV)

Introduction

Dear Christians and all people of goodwill in Ghana, the celebration of Christmas and the New Year is an opportunity for taking stock, making resolutions and giving thanks to the Almighty and Providential God. Therefore, we, the Catholic Bishops of Ghana, wish to take this opportunity to suggest to you, individually and collectively, some areas of stock-taking and resolution-making, while we urge all to thank God for His grace and mercies which we have enjoyed in 2018 and which we wish to enjoy the more in 2019.

Our reflection on stock-taking and resolution-making is based on the spiritual significance of the celebration of Christmas.

Spiritual Significance of Christmas

Christmas is the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world. Jesus Christ, the Son of God and the Word of God became flesh (*John 1:14*) and was born of the Blessed Virgin Mary (cf. *Matt. 1:22-25*). This is a mystery with deep spiritual significance. In other words, Christmas is a profoundly spiritual or religious celebration.

Unfortunately, however, commercial activities and the over-emphasis on the social dimension of the feast has increasingly overshadowed the spiritual significance of Christmas. We, therefore, reflect on the spiritual significance of Christmas and take practical steps to live by it. We should firmly resolve to avoid or overcome any negative impact of the commercial or lopsided social activities on our lives and those of our families.

Christmas: A time of Sharing

Indeed, Christmas is a time to recall God's ineffable love and to renew our resolve to love as He has loved us (cf. *John 15:12*). In this Season in particular, we express love by sharing our resources.

We, therefore, take this opportunity to urge all to share with others, most especially the needy. The Saviour, who was celebrated by the "poor" shepherds (cf. *Luke 2:16-20*) and the "rich" Magi (cf. *Matt. 2:9-11*) at His birth, wants both the poor and the rich to joyfully celebrate His birth.

Christmas: Peace to All

Christ is truly the Prince of Peace. He uniquely establishes peace between God and humanity and urges all humans to live in peace with one another. Thus, when Christ was born in Bethlehem, a choir of angels sang to the hearing of the shepherds: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased" (*Luke 2:14*). He, whose birth necessitated this angelic melody of peace, urges all of us to be men, women and children of peace.

Peace in Dagbon

We thank the Prince of Peace for blessing our land with peace in the year coming to an end. In a special way, we should be grateful to Him for the state of the peace process in Dagbon. It is also proper to commend all His human instruments for advancing this peace process. Particularly, we commend the two traditional Gates of Abudus and Andanis, the Committee of Eminent Chiefs led by the Asantehene, Otumfuo Osei Tutu II, successive Governments and various Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), Faith-based Organizations (FBOs) and others for their efforts and commitment to ensure that the peace process in Dagbon achieves lasting success.

Furthermore, as the two Gates follow the long-drawn-out roadmap for peace, we pray for sincere observation of the laid down processes that are crucial for peace in Dagbon. We ask that the rightful process in the selection of new chiefs is observed. We also urge the people of Dagbon to ensure always that due and peaceful process is followed in resolving disputes.

Peace on our Roads

A very worrying concern of many Ghanaians is the high spate of road accidents or carnage on our roads. Indeed, peace is disrupted in the family, corporate, community and sometimes in national life when road accidents occur.

Therefore, during this yuletide and beyond, we appeal to all users of our roads to observe the rules and regulations to ensure safety on our roads. Let us avoid the temptation of drink-driving. Every human life is precious and an asset to the person, to the society and to humanity as a whole. We also call upon all the relevant state enforcement agencies to ensure that all road users comply with the road rules and regulations.

Christmas: Unity among All

Peace entails unity. Therefore, Christmas which celebrates peace among people calls for unity among them. Each of us has to take stock of the extent of unity in our families, churches, communities, corporate organizations and the nation as a whole.

We need to soberly look at the roles we can play to ensure unity at various levels and be firmly resolved to act accordingly. In the area of national life in particular, we should all endeavour to desist from the form of politics which divides the country and rather foster all that contributes to strengthening the bond of unity among all citizens irrespective of their ethnicity and political affiliation.

Christmas: Justice for All

Peace and unity will be a mirage if we fail to promote justice at all levels of our nation. Justice entails giving to each citizen or person what is their due. That is, ensuring that each person enjoys the rights and benefits due them.

Justice: Hearing the Cry of the Poor

Christ began His “ministry of justice” with the words: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; He has anointed me to proclaim the **good news to the poor**” (*Luke 4:18*). And in His actual ministry, He fed the hungry and poor. If justice means giving to each person what is their due, then it obliges all of us especially those who have the responsibility for the distribution of the resources of the nation to ensure that this is done equitably.

As we mentioned in our recent communiqué issued at Techiman, during our Annual Plenary Assembly, “we are encouraged to know that Ghana is one of the fastest growing economies in the world as indicated by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

However, other studies and our own observations, show that there is still a widening gap between the rich and the poor”. In addition, the general living conditions in our country are getting unbearable for many Ghanaians. We, therefore, entreat our Government as a matter of urgency to pay more attention to this phenomenon.

Christmas: A call for Humility

Another deep spiritual significance of Christmas is the message of humility. If Jesus Christ who is true God became human (cf. *Phil. 2:5-11*), then we cannot but learn that the virtue of humility is necessary to one’s spiritual growth. This is one area that each of us (poor or rich, junior staff or management, church leaders or church members, traditional leaders or subjects, state authorities or ordinary citizens) need to soberly reflect and ascertain the true state of his/her sense of worth in relation to others and most especially in relation to God.

Christmas: Accept God’s Salvation

Primarily, Christ was born to save humanity (cf. *Matt 1:20-21*). The offer of God’s salvation should, therefore, re-echo in our hearts and minds at every Christmas. We should, then, renew our resolve to accept God’s offer.

In other words, Christmas reminds us to seek first the Kingdom of God and its righteousness. (cf. *Matt. 6:33*). The paramountcy of the message of eternal life or salvation needs to be re-emphasized in Ghana. This is because, since the turn of the new millennium, many new religious movements or groups have emerged whose teachings and practices run contrary to the primary tenet of the Gospel of Christ.

In this respect, we, the Catholic Bishops of Ghana, have observed with very grave concern various abuses in some worshipping centres in Ghana.

Such abuses are being perpetuated in the name of spirituality, prophetic revelations and divine interventions. These happenings in the Christian fraternity discredit the Gospel and cause people to despise the positive

influence of the Word of God. These negative trends must stop because they are unchristian.

Hence, as we celebrate the birth of Christ, we need to remind ourselves that no human person or object should take the place of Christ as the object of worship. Christians should put their faith in Jesus Christ alone (cf. *Acts 4:12*). Even in the most difficult times, Christ remains our only Saviour. Therefore, instead of pursuing illusive quick solutions, Christians and all other Ghanaians must keep their faith in God and cherish the values of hard work, patient endurance, moderation and contentment.

Conclusion

As God blesses us with a New Year, we the Catholic Bishops of Ghana entreat you all to join us to pray that in 2019:

- our love, especially for those in need, will be modelled on God's love;
- we will enjoy peace and unity and endeavour to foster same in all spheres of our lives;
- we will enjoy the full benefits of justice and endeavour to promote it among others;
- we will be humble, responsible and disciplined citizens in all spheres of life;
- we will at all times seek first eternal salvation and encourage others to do the same.

Finally, we, the Catholic Bishops of Ghana, wish you all a merry and Spirit-filled Christmas and a prosperous and peaceful New Year 2019!!!



MOST REV. PHILIP NAAMEH
CATHOLIC ARCHBISHOP OF TAMALE &
PRESIDENT, GHANA CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

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