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2024 LENTEN PASTORAL LETTER FROM THE GHANA CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE (GCBC)

Theme:

“We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled with God” (2 Cor 5:20)

Introduction

Lent is here once more and we, the Catholic Bishops of Ghana, welcome you to this year's Lenten season, which begins on Ash Wednesday, February 14, 2024. It is a period of forty days during which we are called upon to be reconciled with God, with one another and with nature. Hence, our theme: **“We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled with God” (2 Cor 5:20).**

Paschal Mystery as the basis of conversion

Lent is a period of preparation for the celebration of Easter which commemorates the Paschal Mystery of Christ's suffering, death and resurrection. Christ, “the Lamb of God” (John 1:29), suffered and died for our sins (cf. Luke 23:34). And on the very evening of His resurrection, He entrusted to the Apostles the ministry of forgiveness: “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them” (John 20:23). Thus, by His Paschal Mystery, we are given God's grace of forgiveness and salvation. In response to this grace, we should turn away from our sins. This requires that we undertake the religious practices which are encouraged during Lent, namely, to confess our sins, pray, fast and give alms.

The Lenten fast from food and drinks is obligatory for Catholics who are 18 years up to 59 years. Moreover, all Catholics are to fast from sin, bad habits and attitudes, as well as unhealthy lifestyles. We are to offload all the baggage that makes our Christian journey burdensome at the invitation of Christ who says: “Take my yoke and learn from me for I am gentle and humble of heart” (Matt 11:28). Lent, thus, calls us to a radical and constant change in our life such that Christ becomes its compass point as well as its controlling steer. **Are we ready to allow God's Spirit to lead us on this journey, even when that might be down the difficult road of reconciliation?**

Lent: A Favourable Time for Reconciliation

The signing with ashes at the beginning of Lent is accompanied by the sobering message: “Remember that you are dust, and unto dust you shall return”. The meaning of this message is loud and clear: before God, we are all guilty (cf. Rom. 3:23) and in need of reconciliation. To sin is to separate ourselves from the loving mercy of God as in the case of the prodigal son who squandered his father's property or the elder son who refused to heed his father's call to enter into his compassion and mercy (cf. Luke 15).

Today, there seems to be a loss of the sense of sin. We often deviate from Christian moral norms, and sadly refer to such acts merely as mistakes. We are, therefore, exhorted to recognize our sins for what they actually are. We should learn to accuse and pass sentence on ourselves whenever we go astray as the prodigal son did: **“I have sinned against heaven and against you, I am not worthy to be called your son”** (Luke 15:21). God does not condemn or jail us when we accuse ourselves as guilty of sin. Rather, God, who is ever merciful, pardons and heals us. We should, therefore, make a conscious effort to seek reconciliation with God through the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation.

Reconciliation with God places on us the obligation of a ministry of reconciliation towards others. Thus, St. Paul writes: “All this is from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ, and **has given us the ministry of reconciliation**; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and **entrusting the message of reconciliation to us**” (2 Cor 5:18-19). **Lent, therefore, affords us an opportunity not only to petition God for forgiveness, but also to reconcile with those who have caused us pain and hurt.** We are to rekindle a reconciling attitude with regard to one another by ending our wrangling, by forgiving one another, by seeking reunion with grace and not with pride. Every Christian is to serve as an emissary who speaks about reconciliation and acts as a reconciler. Let us all strive to become “sacraments of unity” – people with whom others are reconciled and through whom many enjoy God’s grace of reconciliation.

Lent and Civil Duties towards the 2024 General Elections

The fruits or blessings of Lent are not for only Catholics or Christians, but for the whole nation. Therefore, 2024 being a year of general elections, we wish to call upon all Ghanaians to duly undertake their civic duties. The common good of Ghanaians and the development of our nation should guide us in all our actions. We should be united to achieve these goals and related ones. Such unity requires that we seek reconciliation with one another as well as between groups. While the 1992 Constitution allows for multi-party democracy, this does not mean antagonism, violence, hatred, bitterness, quarrels, killings and the like.

It rather means, different perspectives, approaches and processes to achieve the national goals for the good of all citizens and posterity. Whereas we continue to maintain affiliations to different parties, let us be reconciled as persons. In this light, we urge offenders to acknowledge their offences and the offended to forgive. Let us all resolve to make the 2024 campaign, voting exercise, the declaration of results and the aftermath one of a great difference. Let us make Ghana again a true star of Africa.

Firstly, we should exercise our franchise conscientiously during the elections. We should eschew the vote-buying and vote-selling syndromes. In a digital age, where everybody could be a journalist, we urge all Ghanaians to use the social media, internet, mobile phones, etc., in a more positive and better way. These devices are not to be used to fuel hate and violent speeches, but to promote peace, truth and justice in view of a better Ghana.

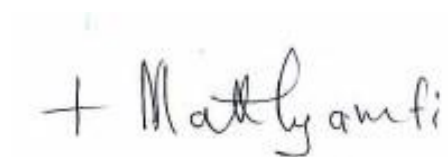
Secondly, the incumbent government and the security agencies should provide the necessary and conducive environment devoid of fear, intimidation and hooliganism. The security agencies should be on top of the situation by being tactful and practical to prevent electoral insecurity.

Thirdly, the Electoral Commission (EC) should remain an unbiased umpire in order to restore confidence in the electoral system. We, therefore, urge the EC to conduct free, fair and transparent elections by paying attention to the concerns raised by citizens and some political parties on some of their reforms regarding the forthcoming elections, particularly, on the use of the indelible ink. All political parties should, in turn, respect the independence of the EC and cooperate with it to achieve free, fair and transparent elections.

Conclusion

While assuring you of prayers, we wish to leave you with this exhortation of St. Paul: “Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves ...” (Rom 12:16-19).

May God bless our dear nation, Ghana!



MOST REV. MATTHEW KWASI GYAMFI
CATHOLIC BISHOP OF SUNYANI & PRESIDENT,
GHANA CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 13, 2024