



A COMMUNIQUÉ ISSUED BY THE GHANA CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE AT THE END OF THEIR ANNUAL PLENARY ASSEMBLY HELD AT SEFWI WIAWSO IN THE WESTERN REGION FROM 29TH OCTOBER TO 5TH NOVEMBER 2010

Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and from Christ Jesus our Lord to you all (cf. 2 Tim. 1:2).

Preamble

We, the Catholic Bishops of Ghana, have held our annual meeting at Sefwi Wiawso in the Western Region under the theme, “*If you want to cultivate peace, protect creation*”, a theme borrowed from the message of the Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, for the World Day of Peace, 2010. During this year’s meeting, we turned our pastoral attention to an issue that we have addressed time and again in previous communiqués, i.e., the management of our God-given environment, the exploitation of our mineral and natural resources as well as the impending oil and gas production, which seems to hold promise for all Ghanaians, if well managed.

Respect for Creation

God is the Creator of all that exists. In creating man and woman in His image, he also charged them to work and cultivate the soil and care for creation (Gen. 2:5-6, 15). Since creation is a gift from God, humankind has an obligation and indeed a duty to use resources judiciously and so preserve and conserve enough resources in our world for the benefit of future generations.

Respect for creation has always been upheld in the culture of all peoples. For example, for all peoples in Ghana, there were and still are certain prohibitions which ensure the preservation and responsible use of natural resources. These include prohibitions against cutting trees from certain forests, farming on certain days of the week and fishing in some water bodies that were considered sacred; for people living along the coast, fishing on certain days was and is still prohibited. Such prohibitions underscore not only the ingenuity of our forebears but also their insight and intelligence, as these were cultural ways of preserving the ecosystem. Currently, the over-exploitation and unbridled use of nature is threatening to disrupt the ecosystem as designed by the Creator and is undermining our survival, security and peace.

Negative Impact of Mining

Mining as an activity has been going on in the country for a long time, but regrettably we cannot affirm that the advantages derived from the mining activities are in any way commensurate with their disastrous impact on the natural environment.

As pastors, we also want to single out for attention the worrying development of mining in forest reserves. It is gradually becoming the trend for the government and some traditional rulers to grant foreign mining companies the concession to mine in forest reserves. The clearing of natural habitats for mining, especially surface mining, oil and gas exploration and exploitation has led to the unprecedented loss of biodiversity in the ecosystem, threatening a sizable number of plant and animal species. Accordingly, we advocate the immediate abolition of surface mining because of its obvious harmful social and environmental consequences. In this connection, we commend those traditional rulers who are making great efforts to protect the environment.

Pollution

Pollution is something that stares us in the face every day. Air, water and noise pollution is increasing at an alarming rate today, so much so that it appears to have been taken for granted. However, its harmful effects are as alarming as they are subtle. Air pollution, for example, occurs with the addition of harmful chemicals to the earth's atmosphere.

We are also very concerned about the recent introduction and widespread use of agro-chemicals and harmful weedicides and pesticides in view of the negative effects on the soil, plants, animals, human beings, lakes, underground water and rivers. For example, it is very sad to note that many of our rivers, for instance, the Ankobra, Birim, the Pra, etc., are no longer potable due to excessive pollution. We also deplore the ever-increasing pollution in the air, the making of excessive noise that can be injurious to our health and the indiscriminate littering with plastics and refuse. In this connection, we commend the efforts of refuse collecting agencies in our cities, towns and villages.

Deforestation

Deforestation in Ghana has taken an enormous toll through the ages in environmental damage, economic deterioration and human misery. For example, the escalation of prices of food items in the country is often due to shortages in agricultural production as a result of poor soil fertility and erratic rainfall patterns. The world market prices of oil and gas continue to rise, thereby forcing people to switch demand to charcoal

and firewood as sources of domestic energy which leads to the depletion of our forests. Indeed, we are alarmed at the rapid rate of deforestation in the Western Region where we have held our conference, as a result of excessive lumbering of timber. It is estimated that when one mature tree is felled and conveyed out of the forest, a good number of non-economic trees die in the process. At present, according to reliable sources, the forest cover of the country is only 1.2 million hectares, down from 8.2 million hectares in 1957. The annual deforestation rate is 65,000 hectares per year and yet there are numerous officially licensed timber companies in addition to the illegal “chain saw” operators still at work in our forests.

Undermining Our Peace and Security

From the foregoing, it becomes clear that the greatest challenge facing humanity and for that matter Ghanaians, is that of safeguarding our environment. Scripture is emphatic: “*God saw everything that He had made, and indeed, it was very good*” (Gen. 1:31). There was a balance and harmony in the ecosystem. Nature, which was destined to be a home to humans, was peaceful, good and hospitable. It is this peace, harmony and balance that is being undermined and for which reason the planet earth, for example, is becoming very inhospitable. In Ghana, for instance, excessive lumbering is affecting our weather systems in such a way that they are no longer predictable. Rising sea levels result in excessive flooding, which jeopardizes our security and peace. In short, once our use of nature goes unrestrained, we compromise our own peace and security on earth.

Oil and Gas Find and the Common Good

God has blessed Ghana with many resources. Apart from cocoa and timber, our country abounds in minerals like gold, diamonds, bauxite and manganese. Furthermore, our country is now blessed with the discovery of oil and gas in commercial quantities. We would like to commend the government for allowing debate on the oil find and how best Ghana as a country can maximize its share. We further urge the government to factor the real concerns of the people into the contracts with the oil companies and the management of the oil revenues for the benefit of all.

Oil Companies and the Government

To ensure transparency and accountability, oil companies and the government need to develop *the culture of publishing regularly* all information regarding contracts,

exploration and planned production activities as well as annual audited accounts by reputable audit firms of their fiscal activities.

The Church has a special concern in this matter since the proper use of the oil revenue is a basic right of the citizens. In the Post-Synodal Exhortation of Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, governments are urged to “*pursue sound economic policies, adopting the right priorities for the exploration and distribution of often scarce national resources in such a way as to provide for people’s basic needs, and to ensure an honest and equitable sharing of benefits and burdens. In particular, governments have the binding duty to protect the common patrimony against all forms of waste and embezzlement by citizens lacking public spirit or by unscrupulous foreigners*” (*Ecclesia in Africa*, # 113).

Appeal to Faith-Based and Civil Society Organizations

As shepherds, we are calling on and encouraging Faith-Based and Civil Society Organizations and all well-meaning Ghanaians to see it as an obligation to ensure good practices and just operation in this new petroleum industry. Christians and especially Catholics in leadership and responsible positions have a major duty to influence government policies in respect of equitable, transparent and responsible management and utilization of petroleum wealth in Ghana in the interest of the common good.

The International Community and Donor Agencies

It is surprising and painful that sections of the International Community enforce best practices elsewhere but relax or even ignore these requirements when dealing with African countries, and instead connive with unscrupulous elements to defraud unsuspecting countries. We urge the International Community to insist on transparent, fair and accountable processes in the exploration and production of the oil as well as the management of revenues for the creation of wealth to enhance the quality of life of all people in the country. The International Community will do well to deal not only with our government but also with all stakeholders, including the communities in the affected areas.

Preserving the Dignity of the Human Person

We must state that the protection of creation cannot be complete if the human person is not accorded the protection and dignity that he or she deserves. The human person is the centre of creation and indeed the protector of creation. The rights of the human person must therefore be upheld. In this connection, we observe that there can be no

peace in our country if the human person is not respected and if we do not put an end to the culture of insults that is so rampant, especially in the political arena. The Ghanaian's traditional respect for elders and people in authority seems to be no longer upheld.

We indeed pride ourselves of our democratic achievements, and justifiably so, but it would be wrong to perceive democracy as a licence to violate the dignity of others. We therefore urge all our compatriots, in the interest of peaceful coexistence, to desist from the culture of insults, which militates against the growth of democracy in our dear country.

While acknowledging the good work being done by our security agencies to protect us, we are still unhappy about the spate of armed robbery in our country and encourage the security agencies to intensify their efforts.

We once again call attention to the fact of modern day slavery in the form of trafficking in human beings both at home and abroad. The victims of trafficking are women and children, illiterate women and run-away boys and girls; refugees and illegal migrants, etc. They fall victim to false promises of lucrative jobs abroad, better life, marriage offer or opportunity for studies, etc. The traffickers include agents in trafficking syndicates, some tour operators and travel agents, parents, relatives, teachers, corrupt officials, and aid workers from home and abroad. We warn all Ghanaians about this and invite them to join in the fight to eliminate it. We commend the various non-governmental organizations for their efforts to stamp out these practices.

Conclusion

Let us always bear it in mind that God has made us stewards of creation for creation to serve us and our needs. However, if we destroy creation, we destroy ourselves. Let us endeavour, in all that we do, to protect creation and thereby safeguard our own future.

We conclude by asking for God's blessings upon all of you and on all your endeavours and by praying that the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit may be with you all (cf. 2 Cor. 13:14).

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