



COMMUNIQUE OF THE PLENARY ASSEMBLY OF THE GHANA CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE HELD AT BOLGATANGA, UPPER EAST REGION, FROM 6TH TO 14TH NOVEMBER, 2015 ON

THE THEME:

“THE LAITY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE NEW EVANGELISATION”

Greetings

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

“May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Cor. 13:13).

Preamble

We, the Ghana Catholic Bishops' Conference, have held our Plenary Assembly **in Bolgatanga in the Upper East Region, also known as the “Sunshine” Region of Ghana, from November 6–14, 2015** under the theme ***“The Laity in the Context of the New Evangelization”*** and we wish to share with you some of our reflections on the theme. But first, let us give thanks to God for His abundant graces and blessings upon our land and our Church. We recall with grateful hearts the recent successful Synod of Bishops in Rome on the *Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and the Contemporary World* and the historic two-day Pro-Life Conference in Accra which highlighted the need to defend and promote the sanctity and dignity of life at all times.

Let us praise God for these blessings on the Church and the fact that our country Ghana, even in the midst of some significant challenges, continues to enjoy peace, stability and good will among nations. We therefore call on all Catholics and citizens of our nation to join us to thank God and beseech His blessings for the Church and our nation especially in these times when we begin preparations for our presidential and parliamentary elections next year.

Vocation and Mission of the Laity in the New Evangelisation

Constituting more than 98% of the Church's population, the Laity are *“All the faithful except those in Holy Orders and those who belong to a religious state sanctioned by the Church” (Lumen Gentium (LG) 31, Christifideles Laici (CL) 9)*. *“The Church is not truly established and does not fully live, nor is it a perfect sign of Christ, unless there is a genuine laity existing and working alongside the hierarchy” (Ad Gentes (AG) 21)*. That is why the Laity should show active enthusiasm and support for the Bishops' teachings, especially on temporal matters which is their proper domain.

The vocation of the Lay Faithful in the New Evangelisation is to give a coherent and authentic Christian testimony in the world. It includes the special role of “... *so illuminating and ordering all temporal things that they grow in accordance with Christ and for the glory of the Creator and Redeemer*” (LG 32). Grounded in their baptism and confirmation and in their charisms, the Laity are the ones who “*make the Church present and active in those places and circumstances where it is only through them that the Church can be the salt of the earth*” (LG 33). Since they live in the midst of the world and its concerns, the Laity engage in temporal and secular affairs to bring the Gospel into the family, work, profession, trade and commerce, politics, government, mass media, science, culture, national and international relations, etc. It was to raise this awareness, among other reasons, that we organised the 2nd National Pastoral Congress in Sunyani in 2014. We urge all Catholics to study the recommendations and Guidelines of the Congress and put them into practice.

One apostolate that is the prerogative of the Lay Faithful is the Family. They are called to witness to the sanctity of family life and to give a living witness to marriage and family life in the contemporary world. This irreplaceable role of parents in the family cannot be overemphasised because the Christian home constitutes the first school of virtue. It is in this respect that the Christian family becomes the domestic Church.

The Laity and the Year of Mercy

Our Holy Father, Pope Francis, has declared December 8, 2015 to November 20, 2016 as the *Year of Mercy*. The Church in Ghana will climax this year on October 16, 2016 during the annual plenary of the Ghana Catholic Bishops’ Conference to be held in Tamale. In this Extraordinary Jubilee *Year*, we invite all our Lay Faithful to reflect on the mercy of God and endeavour to make the Church a credible sign of mercy as “*Mercy is the very foundation of the Church’s life*” (*Misericordiae Vultus (MV) 10*). God reveals His love to the men and women of the world through the Church and so it is the Church’s primary task “*to introduce everyone to the great mystery of God’s mercy.*” It is the task of our Laity as well as the Priests and Religious to use this *Year of Mercy* to forgive all wrongs and injuries at all levels of the Church and society. Societies must collaborate with one another, families and friends must come together in bonds of charity and peace. We strongly urge all Priests to fix days and times during the week to give the Laity an opportunity to avail themselves of the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Challenges and Prospects of Laity Formation Today

As a Church, we do not fail to recognise that many Catholics are today inadequately instructed in the faith. It seems that the parish and our institutions are unable to do enough, generally speaking, to promote the faith, theological formation and the deepening of the spirituality of the Laity. Many of the Laity fail to make themselves available for these instructions in their respective parishes and institutions where these formation programmes are available. And yet, for the Laity to play their proper roles in the New Evangelization, only attending Holy Mass and receiving the other sacraments are not enough. In addition to these necessities, they need a significant spiritual and doctrinal formation and a better understanding of the Church’s Social Teachings. There is the urgent need, therefore, on the part of both

the Laity and the Clergy as well as all teachers of the faith to address themselves to a well-organised formation and education programme to meet the needs, especially, of the Lay Faithful. To fulfil this duty the Clergy, Pastoral and Laity Councils and the Lay Associations need to come together to budget for and to raise the funds for all formation programmes and activities of the Laity in all our communities.

Adequate Christian formation of the Ghanaian Laity

Parishes and outstations must have a systematic formation programme for Lay formation. We strongly encourage all parishes to intensify the teaching of the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Parishes should work with our Pastoral-Catechetical centres and Catholic Educational Institutions to continually find new ways and new methods of deepening the *biblical, doctrinal* and *catechetical* knowledge of the Laity. The respective centres of formation should work with the Laity Councils and Parishes to help the Laity develop love for Sacred Scripture, Church doctrine, Catholic Social Teachings and the Catechism of the Church. Dioceses, parishes, lay associations need also to reinvigorate biblical apostolate among the Faithful. Parishes must be made attractive and have recreational facilities for children and youth as well as qualified personnel for faith formation of the youth. Through daily participation in the Eucharist, and parish life, the Laity take on the apostolate of spreading the Gospel which becomes personal, continual and incisive.

Parish Priests and their Assistants have an important role to support and facilitate the formation of the Laity for the New Evangelization and should show special interest in this apostolate. They should help form Laity who have the missionary zeal to introduce innovative ideas for Lay programmes and implementation.

Lay Associations and Laity Formation

The Catholic Church recognises and approves associations of the Lay Faithful. These societies and associations constitute an important element in the life and mission of the Church. They are expected to strive to promote a more perfect life among members, foster public worship, and learn Christian doctrine. They should continue to animate the temporal order with the Christian spirit. We call on all Lay Associations to dedicate a significant amount of time of meetings to biblical, doctrinal and catechetical formation of their members. Further, societies in the Church should note that, we condemn the commercialisation of religion in no uncertain terms. We therefore urge them and all Catholic Faithful to guard against using any society in the Church for personal financial gains or giving in to the “gospel of prosperity” without the cross.

The Laity and Current Socio-Economic Situation in Ghana

In discussing the role of the laity in the Church’s New Evangelisation, we cannot fail to address ourselves to the numerous socio-economic challenges that confront present-day Ghana. These challenges and situations are the context for evangelization by the Laity in the temporal world in the spirit of Christ. It is the unique role of the laity to direct temporal affairs according to God’s will; being

the leaven in the world, manifesting Christ to all in unity with their Priests and Bishops; engaged in their special vocation to make the Church present in the world; transforming the Church to become the “salt of the earth... and light of the world” (Cf. Mt 5:13,14); enjoying a principal role in secular society to spread the spirit of Christ and infuse culture and human works with moral value.

The Laity and Urbanisation

The increasing urbanization of Ghana has brought in its wake the problem of “streetism”. In effect, children who should be in the classrooms are found loitering and/or hawking on the streets of our towns and cities. With increased urbanisation, the practice of prostitution is on the ascendancy while the HIV/AIDS pandemic is still rampant in some parts of the country, particularly, in cities. There are cases of armed robbery attacks in our cities. Even though statistics show that such cases have gone down, we think that there is still more room for improvement in this area. The problems relating to urbanisation also include the fact that urban poverty has increased over the last few years compared with rural poverty. These problems relating to urbanisation may seem daunting but we are guided by faith and hope that united as one people we can surely surmount these formidable challenges. A section Laity is in positions where they can improve the situation. These are called to see such duties as a charge from God.

The Laity and Unemployment

In Ghana today, unemployment constitutes perhaps the biggest social issue confronting our country, a situation which has been worsened by the turning out of many unskilled graduates from our schools. The secondary and tertiary education has not been able to turn out the relevant middle level skilled human resources needed for the industrialization of the country even as large numbers of people, including school drop-outs, continue to throng our cities for non-existing jobs, ending up as head porters or “Kayaye” and “shoe-shine boys and girls”. This army of unemployed youth often engages in undesirable immoral behaviours like prostitution and armed robbery. To stem this tide of affairs, we recommend that the State turn some of the community secondary schools currently under construction into Community Vocational and Technical schools and continue to equip and resource the existing Vocational and Technical Institutes in the country. Parents Guardians should also encourage their wards to enrol in these schools.

While the idea of Technical Universities is good, care must be taken not to rush the proposal through without doing the necessary due diligence to ensure that the aim of the exercise will be achieved. Perhaps, the proposed Long-Term Development plan is a great opportunity to get this policy and programme articulation right. The Laity who are policy makers on education delivery are called upon to work with their co-workers to make Christ’s love felt here.

The Laity and Poverty

Poverty is a direct consequence of unemployment. Every Ghanaian must be alarmed at the abject poverty that stares at us everywhere in the cities, towns and villages. We regret to say that various poverty-reduction interventions such as the Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP), Youth Enterprise Support (YES) and the like, though commendable, have not yielded the desired results. It is our strong conviction that policies and strategies aimed at reducing poverty must be pragmatic, realistic and home-grown. Over-reliance on donor-driven or directed programmes must be cut to the barest minimum. The resolve of the global community to bring extreme poverty to an end must challenge Ghana to work hard to achieve the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at an earlier timeline before 2030. We urge our Laity to educate themselves and be abreast of the contents of the bail-out package from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). All the Laity who are employers and business men and women are called by Jesus to help the poor and the needy as much as they can.

The Laity and National Health Delivery

We acknowledge that some attempts have been made to improve the health care delivery system in Ghana with the establishment of some Community-Based Health Planning Services (CHP) compounds and the building of more health care infrastructure in some parts of the country. We are, however, concerned about the long delays in the payment of health insurance claims to health care facilities, a situation which is gradually leading to the collapse of many of such facilities. We call for an immediate and urgent review of the National Health Insurance Scheme not only to save it from imminent collapse but to position it to serve its intended purpose because we think that this health policy is far better than the cash and carry system of the past.

We also note with sadness and worry the alarming rate of strike actions and lock-outs by health care givers including doctors, nurses and paramedics, and encourage policy makers to do all they can to resolve these issues once and for all. The key to most of these issues, we believe, is the prompt payment of salaries and the formalisation of the Conditions of Service for Health Workers. “I was sick and you visited me” (Mt 25:36) is Jesus’ invitation to all the Laity to do what is necessary to save the National Health Insurance Scheme.

The Laity and Care of the Environment

Closely linked to the health of the nation is the issue of the care of the environment. Time and again, we have spoken about the need to take good care of the environment on which we depend. We regret to note once again the persistent pollution of our water bodies, the littering of plastic waste everywhere, the careless felling of trees in our forests and savannah area and the rampant illegal mining (*galamsey*) operations in our towns and villages. We call on our Laity and indeed all Ghanaians to rise up against this indiscriminate destruction of our environment and water bodies. The authorities charged with protecting our natural resources should be up and doing.

We welcome the idea of the *National Sanitation Day* on every first Saturday of the month as laudable and commendable and appeal to all Catholics and all Ghanaians to actively participate in this exercise

as a Christian duty and a civic responsibility. We urge all Ghanaians to acquire the habit, not only to clean up our surroundings but most importantly let us all learn how not to make our environment dirty in the first place.

We also strongly recommend the recent encyclical of Pope Francis on the care of creation called “*Laudato Si’*” to our Catholic faithful and all Ghanaians because it provides a good resource for all, but most especially, policy makers on the care of our environment. We can certainly do with more education on the care of the environment. All the Laity who are charged with the protection of the environment should know that the environment is God’s handiwork. To protect it is being faithful to God.

The Laity, Bribery and Corruption

The twin evils of bribery and corruption have now overwhelmed our Ghanaian society and the recent exposure of alleged judicial corruption by Mr. Anas Aremeyaw Anas and his Tiger Eye PI team has left all of us in no doubt that every fabric of our Ghanaian society today is pervasively corrupt. While we commend Anas and his team for this exposure, we reiterate our call for justice to be done in this and all other cases and we do express our confidence in the Chief Justice and the Judicial Council to bring this matter to a fitting conclusion and to reform our judiciary. Once again, we appeal to all Religious Bodies, to our Government, all the people of Ghana and all who dwell in our land to reflect soberly and sincerely on the canker of bribery and corruption and to accept that this is a weakness that is destroying Ghana and repent accordingly.

We appeal to all Catholics, other Christians and all who call on the name of God to bear good witness to their faith by resisting bribery and corruption knowing that there is reward for honesty and integrity. We urge all Ghanaians to join us to pray the *Prayer Against Bribery and Corruption* daily. While we appeal to all Ghanaians to refuse to give or take bribes, we also believe that all those who engage in acts of bribery and corruption must be made to face the consequences of their actions.

The Laity, Politics and Elections in Ghana

We bemoan the sudden surge in election-related violence in our body politic and call on all political leaders, activists and supporters to refrain from such misconduct. Inter-party and intra-party violence, particularly those witnessed in some parties, are threatening Ghana’s peace and democracy. These unfortunate happenings do not reflect the peaceful and non-violent nature of Ghanaians. We urge politicians to beware of their pronouncements and activities. We believe in the ability of the security agencies to deal swiftly with all reported cases without fear or favour. In the run-up to the 2016 Elections, care must be taken not to allow political activities to degenerate into chaos and violence.

We consider chieftaincy as a noble legacy of our traditions and cultures and expect our chiefs to be fathers to all their subjects, irrespective of the latter’s political affiliations, religious beliefs and economic standing. Chiefs who feel that their vocation lies in active politics can always give up their official traditional position to do partisan politics as the Constitution of Ghana demands. That is why we

condemn in no uncertain terms the involvement of some chiefs in partisan politics and call on them to respect the laws of the land and refrain from such acts.

We also condemn the phenomenon of vote-buying and occultism creeping into our national politics, where voters are induced to swear to vote in a particular way, and call on politicians and the Ghanaian electorate to desist from such acts.

On the Voters' Register and the call for its replacement or revision, we wish to commend the Electoral Commission (EC) for some of the steps it has taken so far to involve all major stakeholders in finding an acceptable solution to the issue. We reiterate our call that all who are involved in this process must be open, honest and truthful in their approach to this exercise. At the same time, the EC must be given the chance and the space to handle the issue dispassionately and objectively in the best interest of the nation.

According to our electoral laws, minors and foreigners should not register for electoral purposes in Ghana. We also propose that in the name of transparency the Electoral Commission display the current voters' register on its website so that all Ghanaians can check the list of voters and know where their names are located.

On the way forward for a credible voters' register for future elections, we are of the view that the National Identification Authority (NIA) must be resourced to deliver on its mandate to register all persons, Ghanaians and non-Ghanaians, living in the country and to compile a reliable database which can be used by the Electoral Commission to compile a credible Voters' Register. At the same time, the National Commission for Civic Education (NCCE) must be adequately resourced with personnel and logistics to educate the citizenry on the rights and requirements of voters. We cannot repeat enough our call for an early release of the programme for the upcoming elections which must be the product of the consultations of all stakeholders including the political parties themselves.

The Laity and Ghana's Education

We reiterate our earlier unchanging position that it is the inalienable right of parents and guardians to choose schools for their wards. We reaffirm our conviction that it is not the right of a computer, programmed by a prone-to-corruption human being, to choose schools for our students. This is why we continue to appeal to Government to abolish the Computerised School Selection and Placement System (CSSPS) and replace it with a more workable and transparent version. We will come out with details of the new proposal soon.

Unit schools have been pivotal in quality education delivery in Ghana. However, successive policies in educational reforms in recent times have systematically sidelined the Educational Units making them ineffective. Because of this the Ghana Catholic Bishops Conference and other Religious Bodies have

for many years engaged the State to come out with clear policies with regard to the Partnership Agreement which has always existed between the Religious Bodies and the State in Education delivery. That is why we call on Government to be transparent in the on-going policy considerations on education reforms. We also urge that action be expedited on the formalization of the Partnership Agreement on Education, submitted by the Religious and other Bodies whose schools are in the public system. We call on the Laity to see the benefits of the Unit Schools and to commit themselves to their effective management as the contribution of Religious Bodies towards quality education delivery in Ghana.

The Laity and Public Financial Management

We are seriously concerned about reports of huge budget over-runs by some sectors, increasing public debt, huge arrears of statutory payments by Government, among many other issues, of poor public financial management. We know that some of these are the result of the absence of a prioritised national development plan which should inform national budget allocations. Others may stem from weaknesses in public sector financial management systems. We hope that the on-going comprehensive public sector reforms will take these into consideration for good financial governance. We pray that national budgets will be instruments for social protection, the elimination of extreme poverty and the promotion of citizens' well-being.

Conclusion

The history of Catholic evangelization is replete with the missionary zeal of lay people especially teacher-catechists who collaborated with the early missionaries in planting the Catholic faith, in most of the dioceses in Ghana. In fact, most parishes in Ghana were originally started by Lay People using their homes as centres of prayers. These Lay Catechists would travel many miles with missionary priests on foot as interpreters and teachers of the faith to surrounding villages to plant churches. The Laity in the era of the New Evangelization need to rekindle this missionary zeal in the Church, in political and economic governance, in the legal and medical professions etc. In this way the Laity permeate all the areas where they have been sent by Christ with the Christian spirit of love, justice and peace. As you Laity take up their proper role in Church and society we wish to encourage you with the words of Cardinal St. Henry Newmann “*We want a laity, not arrogant, not rash in speech, not disputatious, but men and women who know their religion, who enter into it, who know just where they stand, who know what they hold, and what they do not, who know their creed so well, that they can give an account of it, who know so much of history that they can defend it. We want an intelligent, well-instructed laity...*” (Cardinal Newman, 1851).

Further, St Paul reminds us Priests, Religious and the Laity “*You are the people of God; he loved you and chose you for his own. So then you must put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Be helpful to one another, forgive one another ... as God has forgiven you*” (Col. 3:12-13).

God bless our homeland Ghana and make our nation great and strong! Thank you.

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