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COMMUNIQUE ISSUED BY THE
GHANA CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE
AT THE END OF ITS ANNUAL PLENARY ASSEMBLY
HELD IN WA IN THE UPPER WEST REGION OF GHANA
NOVEMBER 5 – 13, 2021

1.0 Greetings

1.1 *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and God of all encouragement, who encourages us in our every affliction so that we will be able to encourage those who are in any affliction with the encouragement with which we ourselves are encouraged by God” (2 Corinthians 1:3-4).*

2.0 Preamble

2.1 We, the members of the Ghana Catholic Bishops' Conference, have held our Annual Plenary Assembly at the Catholic Diocesan Guest House (Teegber), Wa, in the Upper West Region of Ghana from November 5 to 13, 2021. It was under the theme: ***Fratelli Tutti and COVID-19: Pastoral Opportunities and Challenges in Ghana***. Our theme was inspired by Pope Francis' latest Encyclical Letter: *Fratelli Tutti* (on Universal Fraternity and Social Friendship and issued on October 3, 2020) and the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.0 Acknowledgement

3.1 In the course of our meeting, we had the opportunity to visit and interact with the Upper West Regional Minister, Hon. Dr. Hafiz Bin Salih, the Paramount Chief of Wa Traditional Area, Naa Fuseini Pelpuo IV, other Chiefs and Queenmothers, the Chief and people of Jirapa, the cradle of Catholicism in the Upper West Region of Ghana and the Regional Chief Imam, Alhaji Osman Mahama Kanihi. We also visited, celebrated Holy Masses and interacted with the People of God in many parishes of the Diocese.

3.2 Our Plenary was also graced by the Apostolic Nuncio to Ghana, His Excellency, Most Rev. Henryk Mieczyslaw Jagodzinski and His Eminence Philippe Cardinal Ouedraogo, Archbishop of Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso and President of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM).

4.0 Cardinal Dery

4.1 As we moved through the diocese on our visits, the fruits of the works of Peter Cardinal Porekuu Dery, one of the first Christians of the Region and the first Bishop of Wa, inspired us.

His life and ministry among the youth, women and the vulnerable of different ethnic backgrounds, truly exemplified the virtues of Pope Francis' Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti* that it is possible to consider and treat each other as children of the same God, Creator and Father, and our brothers and sisters in Christ. Let us continue to pray for his beatification, so that his example might inspire many more people to serve their brothers and sisters.

5.0 Victims of Tidal Waves

5.1 In the course of our Plenary, we received the sad news of the devastation caused by tidal waves in some communities in the Volta Region and the coast of Ada. Reports have shown that several homes have been destroyed, leading to the displacement of many residents of the affected communities. We sympathize with all those affected by the high tides and pray for protection for them in their moment of vulnerability. We also wish to entreat the government to put in place the necessary measures to alleviate the sufferings of the people affected as they look for the necessary resources to construct the second phase of the Keta Sea Defense Wall.

6.0 In the light of our theme, *Fratelli Tutti and COVID-19: Pastoral Opportunities and Challenges in Ghana* and in consideration of the socio-economic situation of our country Ghana, we wish to share with you the following reflections.

7.0 Theme of Plenary

7.1 Humanity needs to be constantly reminded that all human beings, created in the image and likeness of God, are brothers and sisters (cf. Gen 1:26). This is what Pope Francis reminds us of in his Encyclical Letter, *Fratelli Tutti (FT)*. In other words, Pope Francis challenges us, individually and collectively, to aspire to fraternal love which is open to every man, woman or child.

7.2 This message about fraternity of all humanity has become more pertinent in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has affected all humankind, irrespective of race, religion, political or geographical provenance. This is a most eminent sign that the bonds that unite humankind are stronger than those that divide us. The Church in Ghana is herald of this message to our nation and among our people. That is why we find it urgent to speak to every citizen of our land and all people of goodwill, acknowledging not only the challenges that this pandemic has brought upon us but also pointing out the opportunities it presents us and the hope that together we can overcome the adverse impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

8.0 Parable of the Good Samaritan

8.1 Pope Francis presents the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37 as an inspiration for the renewed vision of fraternity and social friendship.

“The parable eloquently presents the basic decision we need to make in order to rebuild our wounded world. In the face of so much pain and suffering, our only course is to imitate the Good Samaritan. Any other decision would make us either one of the robbers or one of those who walked by without showing compassion for the sufferings of the man on the roadside.

8.2 The parable shows us how a community can be rebuilt by men and women who identify with the vulnerability of others, who reject the creation of a society of exclusion, and act instead as neighbours, lifting up and rehabilitating the fallen for the sake of the common good. At the same time, it warns us about the attitude of those who think only of themselves and fail to shoulder the inevitable responsibilities of life as it is” (FT #67).

8.3 In addition, Pope Francis teaches that this parable challenges us to become “neighbours without borders”, for “the Samaritan *became a neighbour* to the wounded Judean. By approaching and making himself present, he crossed all cultural and historical barriers. ...In other words, he challenges us to put aside all differences and, in the face of suffering, to draw near to others with no questions asked. I should no longer say that I have neighbours to help, but that I must myself be a neighbour to others” (FT #81).

8.4 Furthermore, this parable challenges us to eschew racism and its “variants”: “Every brother or sister in need, when abandoned or ignored by the society in which I live, becomes an existential foreigner, even though born in the same country. They may be citizens with full rights, yet they are treated like foreigners in their own country. Racism is a virus that quickly mutates and, instead of disappearing, goes into hiding, and lurks in waiting” (FT #97). The physically challenged and the elderly who are neglected by the society are among the existential foreigners (FT #98).

8.5 Besides these variants of racism, in Ghana various forms of discrimination, ethnocentrism, nepotism and unhealthy political partisanship also challenge us. We need the collective efforts of all citizens, governments, state and private institutions, as well as religious bodies to overcome this persistent social pandemic.

9.0 COVID-19: Challenges to Pastoral Care

9.1 The COVID-19 pandemic has had a direct impact on millions of lives as well as almost every sphere of human endeavour including pastoral work. As a response to government’s measures to limit the spread of the virus, the Ghana Catholic Bishops’ Conference suspended for several months the obligation for the faithful to physically attend Sunday Masses. There are still some persons who have not returned to Church due to fear of infection. Teaching of Catechism and Children’s services are yet to resume in some parishes. Retreats, pilgrimages, home visitations, visit to the sick in hospitals have all been affected.

9.2 Despite these challenges, we wish to call on all the faithful to resume their religious activities within the permitted protocols as we continue to pray for God's protection and for the total eradication of the virus. We also call on all those who have not yet received the COVID-19 vaccine to do so to protect their lives and those of others. We equally appeal to the Government to sustain its efforts to procure more vaccines for the citizens.

10.0 COVID-19: Novel Opportunities for Church Mission

10.1 The several pastoral challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic notwithstanding, new prospects for Church mission have emerged. The experience of COVID-19 calls for a radical appraisal of every pastoral strategy and a rethinking of every missionary engagement.

11.0 a. A New Sense of Fraternity

11.1 According to Pope Francis, "a worldwide tragedy like the COVID-19 pandemic momentarily revived the sense that we are a global community, all in the same boat, where one person's problems are the problems of all. Once more we realized that no one is saved alone; we can only be saved together" (FT #32).

11.2 The pandemic has thus taught us the "blessed awareness that we are part of one another, that we are brothers and sisters of one another" (FT #32). This being the case, the COVID-19 era is the opportune time for the Church in Ghana to bring all her children together as family in a concerted effort to overcome the challenges foisted upon her by this pandemic.

12.0 b. Rediscovering the *Domus Ecclesia*

12.1 The pandemic offers us an opportunity to revisit the concept of the "domus ecclesia", (the domestic church), which was the feature of the first three centuries of Christianity. Here in Ghana, when parishes could not meet, the family quickly re-emerged as the most resilient unit of the Church. A post- COVID-19 Church will do well to re-engage this model of Church and expend the necessary resources to promote and strengthen the Christian family as the building block of the parish community and society.

13.0 c. Harnessing Technology as a Pastoral Tool

13.1 Churches have had to turn to technology to fill a need that was created by the outbreak of COVID-19 with its attendant restrictions. In Ghana, unfortunately, the Church was caught wrong-footed, not having a national television or radio station of its own.

13.2 The need for this service has thus become more than urgent. For many young people, accessing religious content through on-line internet streaming services has become the preference.

Some parishes have adopted on-line meeting platforms for the study of the Bible, the teaching of catechism, children's services, retreats, prayer meetings and conferences. The advantage has been the opportunity to reach church members, especially the sick and the homebound elderly. Inability to be physically present should no longer be an obstacle to participation in the life of the parish community. The COVID-19 pandemic has presented the Church in Ghana with a good opportunity to harness these modern means of social communication as effective pastoral tools for reaching out to her faithful.

14.0 d. Social Action and Self-Reliance

14.1 An effect of the pandemic on society has been the impact on jobs and consequently on livelihoods. This was brought forcefully to the fore during the first lock-down in Ghana from March to April 2020. The Government, Churches and Civil Society Organizations all came to the aid of vulnerable brothers and sisters with food and other items. Many who lost their jobs have not yet recovered them. As Pope Francis has observed, "the broader objective should always be to allow them a dignified life through work. ... For 'there is no poverty worse than that which takes away work and the dignity of work'" (FT #162).

14.2 This is both a challenge and an opportunity for the Church to make a difference. One way of doing this is for the Government, the Church and Civil Society Organizations in Ghana to turn their attention to youth and women empowerment as well as skills training programmes. We commend the Government for collaborating with the Church to train some of our youth to acquire skills in garment making at Pax Garments in Sunyani and call for many of such collaborations.

15.0 Fratelli Tutti and Good Governance

15.1 According to Pope Francis, "the development of a global community of fraternity based on the practice of social friendship on the part of peoples and nations calls for a better kind of politics, one truly at the service of the common good. Sadly, politics today often takes forms that hinder progress towards a different world" (FT #154). He adds that, "for many people today, politics is a distasteful word, often due to the mistakes, corruption and inefficiency of some politicians" (FT #176).

15.2 To this effect, Pope Francis observes that, "what is needed is a politics which is far-sighted and capable of a new, integral and interdisciplinary approach to handling the different aspects of the crisis. In other words, a 'healthy politics is capable of reforming and coordinating institutions, promoting best practices and overcoming undue pressure and bureaucratic inertia'" (FT #177).

15.3 We appreciate the positive achievements chalked by successive governments of Ghana in the areas of infrastructure development, improved access to quality health, education and essential utilities such as water and electricity.

However, we your Bishops and many other Ghanaians have observed that our numerous challenges persist. These challenges among others include: youth unemployment, bribery, corruption, greed, selfishness, lack of patriotism, poverty, deplorable roads, carnage on our roads, armed robbery, murder and other crimes, galamsey, weak and ineffective institutions of governance, abandoned and unfinished government projects, the culture of impunity, examination malpractices, violence, intimidation, attack on media men and women, human trafficking and abductions.

15.4 This worrying state of our nation calls for some fundamental changes in our governance system with regard to strategic and well-structured development plans by all governments.

16.0 A Structured National Development Plan

16.1 We wish to remind and appeal to the government to revisit the various recommendations made by the Prof. Fiadjoe Constitutional Review Commission, especially, on the need for a National Development Plan.

16.2 According to the Commission's report, during their consultations, *"there was widespread, consistent and a clear call for the formulation of a national development plan or vision for Ghana. There was universal agreement on the need for a long-term, strategic and relatively binding National Development Plan"*.

16.3 Based on their findings and observations, the Commission recommended:

- i. That the Constitution should be amended to include an entrenched provision for the development of a national development plan for Ghana.*
- ii. That the national development plan should be comprehensive, long-term, strategic, multi-year, and binding in nature and enforceable at the instance of any person or institution.*

16.4 We are of the strong conviction that the implementation of these and other recommendations will be in the right direction.

17.0 Local Government and Decentralization

17.1 As we have indicated in our previous Communiques, Decentralization, which seeks to promote effective Local Government System, is the way to bring governance and its benefits to the people and improve the participation of citizens in the governance process. It enhances democracy at the grassroots, inclusiveness and accountability.

17.2 The nominations and confirmations of Metropolitan, Municipal and District Chief Executives (MMDCEs) over the years and in recent cases have brought to the fore how deep rooted the culture of bribery and corruption is in our governance system. This calls for the need to return to the proposal for a Constitutional Amendment to elect the MMDCEs.

18.0 Media Sensationalism and Fake News

18.1 We commend the media for the role they continue to play as the fourth estate by informing and educating the populace as well as deepening democracy in the country. We however call upon the media to uphold the highest journalistic values and ethics in their reportage. Information must be verified and the facts professionally ascertained to ensure objectivity in what is published. The rate at which our media space has been inundated with distorted reports and fake news is cause for grave concern and the relevant authorities must make the effort to change this trend.

19.0 Memorandum of Understanding on Education

19.1 We acknowledge the efforts Government is making to dialogue and collaborate with Religious Bodies on matters of national interest.

As we have indicated time and again, in the spirit of this collaboration, we would like to reiterate our passionate appeal to Government to hasten the process towards signing the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Education between the Government and Religious Bodies as well as other Units on the partnership in education delivery in Ghana.

20.0 Free Senior High School (SHS)

20.1 We commend the Government once more for the introduction and implementation of the Free SHS programme. Admittedly, the Free SHS programme has remarkably increased enrolment and access to secondary and tertiary education.

20.2 Nevertheless, we have to acknowledge that there are some significant challenges that need to be addressed. Some of these include overcrowding in some of our schools, uncertainty about the school calendar, challenges with school feeding (with the buffer stock system of food distribution and from suppliers as well as the Computer School Selection and Placement System (CSSPS).

21.0 Proper Human Sexual Rights and Ghanaian Family Values Bill of 2021

21.1 We have, earlier on this year, expressed our support for the Promotion of the Proper Human Sexual Rights and Ghanaian Family Values Bill of 2021. This Bill seeks to nip in the bud the socio-moral canker of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual Plus (LGBTQIA+).

We wish to reaffirm our unflinching support for this Bill and to appeal to all Ghanaians to support it so that it is passed into law. The position of the Catholic Church on LGBTQIA+ has remained the same; that, such practices are against not only Christian values, but Muslim and Ghanaian Traditional values as well. During our interaction with the people of the Upper West Region, the Muslim position on LGBTQIA+ was reiterated by the Regional Chief Imam. Similarly, the Chiefs of Wa and Jirapa Traditional areas also expressed their support for the Bill.

22.0 The National Cathedral Project

22.1 We wish to commend the President of the Republic, His Excellency Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo for his vision and commitment to build a National Cathedral, which will serve as a symbol of unity for all Christians and a national place of prayer. We therefore urge all Christians and all well-meaning Ghanaians to contribute generously towards the building of the National Cathedral to the glory of God.


23.0 Conclusion

23.1 *“Finally, brothers [and sisters], whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things...then the God of peace will be with you”* (Philippians 4:8-9).

We wish you a fruitful Advent Season and

May St. Andrew the Apostle and Patron Saint of Wa Diocese intercede for us! Amen.

*Issued on Friday, November 12, 2021
in the St. Andrew Cathedral in the Catholic Diocese of Wa.*


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