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THE CHURCH IN NIGERIA: THE FAMILY OF GOD IN COMMUNION DIALOGUE AND MISSION

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Excellencies, Monsignori, Fathers, Sisters, Brothers, distinguished ladies and gentlemen,
my der brothers and sisters in Christ!

1. Our mandate to preach the good news and transform the world:

A new period has started in the history of mankind. Far-reaching changes that have left no people untouched have brought this about. The phenomenon of globalization, the introduction of communications technology through the means of telematics, informatics and space-craft; the near abrogation of physical boundaries of nations by economic, social, political and cultural configurations have changed our perceptions of religion, the State, the family, society, the Church and even somehow, of God himself. Yet, we should like to make it clear that in spite of all these changes, there is very much that does not change, because it has its deepest foundation in Christ, who is the same yesterday, today and for ever (Hebrews 13: 8). Every Christian generation refers to Him, when it is being asked to prove its identity as a missionary community (Matt 28: 18 – 20). Jesus Christ himself refers to the Father's work (John 5: 17). He is deeply conscious of the fact that He is fulfilling a task, in which God's work among men gets its shape and form.

We have gathered here during these days of November 2012 as humble servants of God, responsible leaders of the faithful and as members of the Catholic Church within and beyond our country Nigeria to the Federal Capital Territory of Abuja to respond to the call of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria to this Second National Pastoral and Eucharistic Congress. We are invited to witness and to share our faith and strong hope in

charity, proclaiming with joy what the good Lord has done and continues to do for us as individuals, families and as Church in our continent, country and dioceses. This goodness of the Lord indeed extends to the entire Nigerian people and “*we marvel at what the Lord has done for us*” (The Psalms).

At such periods in our national life when it really seemed that the nation was dancing on the brinks of disaster (and there were many such times in the checkered history of our motherland), the good and most merciful Lord was present, preventing the worst and God has continued to manifest his merciful face, granting divine protection on our Church, people and country which often stood before imminent and apparent disaster. It is our mandate therefore to preach the good news of salvation to our people, for the transformation of society (Math.28: 20). To God who created heaven and earth, the triune One who is ever present in our midst as “*Emmanuel*” be praise and honour and glory and majesty and adoration for ever and ever, Amen.

2. Context and Challenges: With the invitation letter from the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, gratefully received for attendance to this Second National Pastoral Congress and signed by the Chairman of the National Planning Committee, the Archbishop of Onitsha, Most Rev. Valerian Maduka Okeke, one can easily deduce that during these days of prayerful reflection, listening and prayer, there is a call on the agents of evangelization in our dioceses united under the Bishops of our country to give loyal and unequivocal response to the constant inspiration of the Holy Spirit of God to be bearers of joy and the good news to our people. The world needs Good News. There is plenty of bad news already as we experience daily, everywhere and in manifold forms, transmitted through the media and communication instruments. Our world is in dire Need of Joy from boredom, acedia, meaninglessness and apathy.

The eternal trinity of one God in creation brings life and joy to the world. Jesus Christ, the redeemer in his incarnation has become the Good News and the bearer of Joy as recorded in the Gospels. He is the Best news the world has ever heard and will ever hear. By taking upon himself the burdens and sins of each person, making conversion, proclamation and charity possible, he opens the doorway to reconciliation and salvation for many (Luke 22: 14 – 23). In the many works of inspiration under the Holy Spirit of God, these Gifts of Joy are present and transform our lives.

Our immediate challenge therefore as ministers of the Word is to preach Joy and the Good News, like Jesus did, not Doom News. There is urgent and compelling call to be courageous enough to heal the wounds and tackle the problems posed on our country and people by situations that reduce or remove the joy of the people through manipulated divisions; the lack of much needed dialogue at various levels of society; the apparent breakdown of peace in many communities within the Church and the country; horrendous and growing poverty of the larger members of society, especially of the youth, leading to increasing disparity between the rich and poor; the alarming unemployment of over 30 percent of the population remains a grave concern. Joy is killed when mediocrity becomes a way of life and doing things half-hazardly, without the aim for excellence becomes a national culture. At a time when humanity faces fundamental questions of life

and death, of lack of meaning and disorientation of values, of war and peace, abuse of the environment and the scandal of poverty in the midst of plenty, a world that has grown in technical, social, economic and political sophistication, that has become more complex, it is important to acknowledge that humanity faces very difficult challenges.

We are witness to the senseless religious fanaticism, terrorist attacks and the killings, sometimes “*in the name of God*” of many innocent citizens, some of whom are Christians murdered in their places of worship, in their homes and also places of work. Currently, as many of us are aware, despite all the preaching in Churches and other places of worship, our country is challenged by unbridled corruption and manifold theft which has graduated to become in itself an impunity, just as cancer does to the body, and therefore very difficult to eradicate. The faces of corruption are real, its consequences many, the damage to the moral psyche of the young unquantifiable and this injustice cries to heaven for vengeance. We experience often and indeed daily, the manifold forms of deprivation and injustices prevalent in our communities and at all levels, within society and within the Church, within our families and in the Nigerian State. Such deeds create conflicts, hatred, divisions, misunderstanding and apathy.

As a people of faith guided by the Good News of Jesus Christ, we must be appalled by the lack of good governance imposed upon the good people of Nigeria in virtually all the States within the Federation by bad leadership, dictatorships within our democratic dispensation, fraud, impunity, lawlessness, abuse of peoples and human rights, unfair local and international trade and the negative consequences of globalization, economic disparity, environmental degradation, violence and inhumanity. These are some of the challenges which confront the Church’s ministry of Love and the ordinary Nigerian.

In their own concluding message to the world, the Church and to the African peoples whom they shepherd, the Synod Fathers at the Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops in 1994 in a 71 point Nuntius (Message), gave a communiqué that announced with profound significance the event as a “*Synod of Hope*”, “*Synod of the Resurrection*”, saying with full encouragement: “*At this very time when much of fratricidal hate inspired by political interests is tearing us peoples apart, when the burden of the international debt and currency devaluation is crushing them, we, the Bishops of Africa, together with all the participants in this holy Synod, united with the Holy Father and with all the brothers in the Episcopate who elected us, we want to say a word of hope and encouragement to you, Family of God in Africa, to you, the Family of God all over the world: Christ our Hope is alive; we shall live*” (Message of the Synod, no. 2). With the words of Paul VI, they announced that Africa is the “*new fatherland of Christ*” and our whole being cries with joy and thanksgiving to the living God for the great gift of the Synod “(Nuntius, no.3).

3. The Church in Nigeria: Family of God in Communion Dialogue and Mission:

My short reflection at this dignified and important Pastoral Congress is to address the theme of *Dialogue, Communion and Mission for the Church in Nigeria, which is the Family of God*. As preachers of the Word, we are all aware that divine grace accompanies our work, “*for without Him, we can do nothing*” (John 15:5). Yet in our ministry, we

experience a world that refuses to listen; a world that doubts and even refuses to believe; like the “*parable of the sower*” (Luke 8) in the Gospels. Our world has grown in apathy and falsehood and is not eager to receive the Word because it is busy with other important matters, albeit, “**ephemeral pursuits**” presumed to bring happiness.

Like the prophets of old, our hope is a strong belief in the powerful and liberating message of the Gospel, “*that God is love*” to be worshipped in Spirit and in truth” (John 3). This truth is found in the living traditions of the Church which traverses a world full of contradictions by calling people of all nationalities to conscience, compassion and creative action. This social mission is inspired by the passion for Justice (Amos 5: 24); shaped by Catholic Social Thought and lived by the people of God in everyday reality. Pope John XXIII wrote in his Social Encyclical Mater et Magistra that the “*Church owes the world the duty not only of preaching the Gospel and Social Thought, but also of Social Action*” (Nr. 33).

4. Faith: The Church as Family of God on Mission - is the model and theology of the First Africa Synod (1994). The Church in Nigeria: Family of God in Communion, Dialogue and Mission is a statement of vision and faith by the Pilgrim Church, imbued with faith and determination. The adequate armor for the Church in Nigeria to wear at this time, is be girded in faith, defined in the catechism of the catholic Church as “*that gift of God, freely given, which enables us to believe, without doubt to what God has revealed*”. It is faith which calls the Christian to stand up with prophetic courage, armed with ethical, moral and spiritual strength to give hope, serve those in need, pursue peace, defend the life, dignity and rights of all peoples and maintain a fundamental option for the poor and the most vulnerable in society. This is a call that is deeply biblical as found in the life and example of the incarnate Word himself, Jesus Christ, who came “*that all may have life and have it more abundantly*” (John 10:10).

5. Sacrament of Unity: The Church is to be the sacrament of this unity that brings salvation. This idea has been very clearly put before us by the Second Vatican Council in Lumen Gentium Nr. 1 and Nr. 9. This essentially means that the Church has the task to realize the salvation of peoples, which includes the unity of all people, and that the Church herself must be the sign. To be the Family of God in Communion, Dialogue and Mission is to be like and to resemble the MOST HOLY TRINITY of One God - the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Unity is the first principle of the mystery of the Most Holy Trinity. The Church, configured to this mystery has the constant need and challenge to be One and remain United in faith, hope and Charity under the successor of Peter, the Pope, the Church is called to a unity in doctrine (orthodoxy) and a unity in the practice of charity (orthopraxis). This explains why since the time of the Apostles, and at each age and circumstance, the Church seeks for Unity. In every attempt” to respond to the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel” (Gaudium et Spes, Vatican II, No.1), the Church works to unite the family of God through Dialogue and a Mission that promotes the Good News to all within the believing community.

6. Mission belongs to the essence of the Church: The Church exists to evangelize as pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II strongly represent in their various encyclicals,

Evangelii Nuntiandi and Dives in Misericordia. Mission belongs to the essence of the Church and it is the task given to the people of God. In regard to the whole of the mission the Church is to fulfill in the world, the task of establishing a Christian community among every nation is one of the most important. The Church would not be able to fulfill this world-encompassing task, if her presence had remained limited to Jerusalem. The function of the People of God in society has often been one compared to that of the yeast in dough. Yeast must not stay in one part of the dough. It does not then serve its purpose in the baking of bread. It must spread throughout the dough in order to be of benefit. The same holds good in the Church. She works throughout the world wide society of people like yeast in dough until it becomes bread, that is, until the Kingdom of God in its fullness comes among us. Therefore the Church wants a place for herself among all nations, getting at home among them. From their midst and in the company of all of them, she seeks a way to be one with each other and with God. The Nigerian and African milieu is known for openness, sharing, “*palaver*” and the art of consensus building and sharing in any dialogue. This inclusion promotes presence, thus the need for the Church to be present in every community in every form known as integral evangelization... by the Word and the sacrament, in the social and economic order, in the world of the aged and the young, in arts and the academia, in the theatre and in culture, music, politics and technology, so that “*through Christ, all may be reconciled in God*”.

Pope John Paul was so optimistic of his vision for Africa and belief in her people and destiny when he added: “*indeed, this continent is today experiencing what we call a sign of the times, an acceptable time, a day of salvation. It seems that the hour of Africa has come, a favorable time which urgently invites Christ’s messengers to launch out into the deep and to cast their nets for a deep catch*” (Luke 5; 4; EIA, no. 6).

7. The people of God include all the baptized: When we talk of involving the people of God in the process, certainly we do not mean to limit ourselves to Bishops, priests and perhaps the religious. The people of God include all the baptized and all men and women in our society. If the family is the domestic Church, and the most basic unit of the Church, it is therefore here that the practice of faith, hope and love starts with all the virtues. Activities and projects of the local Church which are Catholic must develop a process from below move upwards towards the diocesan, national, regional and continental levels. The Catholic Church stands above other institutions as the best in class of organizational structures. The myriads of catechists, academics, scholars, medical professionals and other professionals, women, seminarians, monks, traders, non-Catholics on the ecumenical dimension, youth, various movements and associations, the workers, children, rural farmers, urban poor, refugees, the sick, old people, priests in there manifold organized associations, many indigenous religious congregations, the civil society, the State and its organs to mention but a few are part of Church on Mission and need to be empowered to be present in the work of Mission.

8. We must change from a clerical notion of Church to Church as Communion, a People of God in which every member has both rights and duties, including active Involvement in what goes on in the Church.

9. Ecclesiology of Communion: The active role of the laity in the church can only be enhanced through encouraging participation of each and every baptized person in the identification of issues to be discussed, the decision making itself, the implementation and evaluation. It is one thing always to talk about the need for lay participation in the Church and quite another to give effect to that invitation through concrete processes as the Africa Synod. There is therefore real need to develop an Ecclesiology of communion in the true African sense. We need to strengthen all structures and institutions for democratization, consultation and deliberations within the Church. Everyone matters. The coincidence of the Africa Synod with democratization events in many African countries at the same time is a useful lesson. If the civil organs would receive hundreds of thousands of memoranda for their call to peoples opinion on whatever matters the policy executives wished for the various national constitutions such as in Nigeria, Uganda, South Africa, Zimbabwe, one would expect the same strategy to be used by the Church to receive peoples opinion on pastoral congress or Synod issues, more so, that these Synod issues are crucial, important and concern the lives of people in a very fundamental way.

10. Communion and Participation is key: The wisdom of our ancestors and Common Sense often teach us that people participate better in things they were part of and contributed from the beginning and therefore keep the agenda going for a longer time. They develop a sense of love and concern for them since they feel themselves responsible. It is rather difficult to involve people in the implementation of an agenda they were not part of initiating. It takes much longer time even explaining to them the rationale and the reasons why such actions should be pursued in the first place. One has to begin with convincing explanations on why they had been left out in the preparation itself. Evangelization means concrete plans and strategies to share the Good news of Christ with children, youth, adults, men and women, the old and the sick, physically challenged and disabled people, workers and the unemployed, leaders and their followers, politicians and professionals, the poor, displaced people, prisoners and refugees, rural farmers and urban dwellers, the academia and scholars; Clergy and religious, even prophets and persons of other Christian beliefs extending to traditional worshippers, Muslims, and non believers. In summary, Evangelization is all embracing.

11. The Methodology used for Mission is critical: In today's socio-economic and ecclesial reality, the methodology for any major endeavor is as important as the content and event itself. This is so because the methodology used in an enterprise affects the outcome and results. Paulo Freire's methodology and pedagogy of education was effective in Latin America towards people oriented mobilization and education. Methodologies can be developed which assist even children through drama and illiterates to be involved and contribute to such an important process as the Synod. A theme such as reconciliation, conflict, justice and peace is not something reserved for experts. It could be approached with an encompassing methodology so that all are involved and are eager to see that the implementation and reception is positively concluded.

12. Evangelization, Mission and dialogue is integral: The Bishops of Nigeria at the First Eucharistic congress in 2002 at Ibadan, brought up the model of Church as Family of God on Mission with a book to the effect published for the faithful. That document

has remained of excellent quality with content and vision still mandatory. That exercise of the First congress bears respectful repetition in this second Congress because the truth it contains remains to be exhausted. Evangelization includes: proclamation (kerygma); service (Diakonia); witness (martiria); worship (leiturgia); building community and solidarity (koinonia). It concerns all human endeavour and permeates all facets of life, be they religious and therefore spiritual, moral and therefore ethical; cultural and thus educational; political and hence involving the economic; physical which is then linked and extends into the environmental, just to mention but a few. Everything is evangelization properly understood because the incarnate Word desires to reconcile all things unto himself for the glory of God and the salvation of entire creation. To consider the theme of evangelization, one sways into the arena of family, community, clan, the ethnic group, village and the nation and extending to the entire human family of nations. Evangelization includes the message, the pastoral methods and needs, the animating theologies, the interaction, the special situations and the vision for the future.

African cultural values are indeed open and all inclusive and any person or group who has a positive contribution to make for the success of a dialogue or enterprise was often welcome. Cola nut was never denied anybody just because he or she did not belong. Once present during the breaking, the person participated as is found in Igbo culture. This corresponds to the theology of Church as family which the Synod desired to develop deeper. How could a group of experts and theologians for that matter be considered unwelcome for an event where they had spent their lives urging and pushing for its implementation and practice.

The example of the Vatican II is best understood if one knows that the theologians were the key actors who assisted the bishops in the intensification of the required debate and sharpness surrounding the topics of that great kairoitic event. As we implement the phase of the Synod, it is necessary to develop attitudes which appreciate pluralism and the unique contribution of every group. That is in fact a valid way, but also the best way to allow the Spirit space to lead the people of God on Mission and the Church as the place for the realization of this Mission of preaching Jesus Christ to a world that is in dire need of the Gospel

13. Conclusion and rediscovering the many faces of Mission in our country:

The Second Vatican council invited all members and sections of the Church to foster in themselves a truly catholic spirit, and to spend their energies in the work of evangelization (Decree Ad Gentes, 36). . Mission therefore is witness but it involves also service. In the same way, Mission is service but it involves also witness. The theme of *Church as Family of God* – in Communion, Dialogue and Mission is relevant for the local Churches within Nigeria and indeed for Africa. It is an excellent and good model for the world of today. This is so because it links itself up to the theme of Evangelization which is of essence. – Everything has to be imbued with the light of the Gospel. United in Christ faith is made easy and love follows. The real challenge is to foster a spirituality of communion in solidarity and prayer. These can be accomplished through Mutual assistance; exchange of talents; responsibility for one another; men and means; learning

from each other; diocesan, parish and group twinning and partnerships on interdiocesan, diocesan and local levels within the **nation**;

Proclamation-Jesus Christ remains the complete and true man for all peoples and for all ages. We must make him relevant as a man for this time and for all times

Inculturation - A faith that is not inculturated is a faith that is not received (Paul VI). .Inculturation is an agenda and this is the beginning of Africa's cultural rebirth

Dialogue and communion in solidarity; Building bridges with entire humanity through dialogue is the sure way to peace in the world. This is realized through dialogue between hierarchy and laity; between bishop and priests; between religious and clergy; between Church and Society; between faith and life; between believers and non-believers; between faith and reason; amongst gender and political, economic and social realities that there may be peace, unity and development.

Justice and Peace - If there is no justice, there shall be no peace. Linking Globalization to African self determination. Empowerment programmes for women youth and men. Placing the poor at the centre of our ministry. Good governance in Africa, promoting development leadership as a key to progress of nations; involvement in public affairs as an essential dimension of the Gospel; promotion of Catholic Social Teaching (CST) in schools and seminaries: setting up centers of CST in Africa; inter African networking. African Peer Mechanism (APRM); Europe, Asia and the USA to allow Africa stand on its own identify

Means of Communication-The Church must go into the mass media and evangelize it.