HARBINGERS OF HOPE: MAINSTREAMING CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING FOR DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

Being text of keynote address delivered by Fr. Evaristus Bassey on behalf of Most Rev. (Prof.) Christopher Naseri During the AGM of Church and Society Department, Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, Abuja, on the 26th of November 2025.

1.1 Introduction

On behalf of my bishop, Most Rev. (Prof.) Christopher Naseri, I thank you for this invitation to give the keynote address. Bishop Naseri had to be away on pastoral visit to priests of Calabar serving in the United States of America and delegated me to present the address. As the Latin dictum says, *qui facit per alium, facit per se* – he who does it through another, does it by himself.

On a personal note, I am delighted to be here among former colleagues. As some of you may know, I was once Director of Church and Society department and the maiden Executive Secretary/CEO of Caritas Nigeria. I finished my tenure in 2018 and handed over to Fr. Uche Obodoechina. In my time we made few attempts to bring the various actors of the department together. I am happy that my successor Fr. Uche consolidated the attempts and made them consistent, and now Fr. Peter Audu Babangida the current director of the department and the ES/CEO of Caritas Nigeria is doing a good job of sustaining and improving the trajectory.

The theme of this address is Harbingers of Hope; Mainstreaming Catholic Social Teaching for Development in Nigeria. By way of methodology, I will begin by clarifying terms such as harbinger, hope and development. Catholic Social Teaching is wide. I will concern myself mainly with the principles and afterwards give a few suggestions on how they could be mainstreamed. I will conclude that it is essential for the church herself to be thoroughbred about these principles even as attempts are made to propagate them to the world.

1.2 Clarification of Terms: Harbinger, Hope, Development

A simple dictionary meaning of harbinger is someone or something that announces the coming of another. In this sense Catholic Social Teaching (CST) is seen as paving the way for hope in Nigeria’s development. It is quite an ambitious thought, but it is a thought worth having.

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ans 5:5 when he says, “And hope does not disappoint, because God’s love has been poured into

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[1] St. Thomas Aquinas’ Summa Theologiae, Prima Pars (First Part), Question 40, Article 1.

2.0 Development

I am presuming that the development we are referring to in this topic is sustainable development or what the church calls integral development. Just to be clear, I align with the definition of sustainable development as made by the World Commission on Environment and Development. It says that sustainable development is *development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.*[3] Sustainable development stands on three interdependent and integrated pillars. These pillars are economic, social and environmental, along with certain cross-cutting principles. No development is worth its name if it overemphasizes one aspect at the expense of others.

Over time through various dialogues, conferences and colloquiums, such as Rio 1992, Agenda 21, the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), we can pin down the following core principles of sustainable development and use them to interrogate the Nigerian developmental situation.

Intergenerational Equity: Do we see Nigeria factoring in the needs of future generations in the way resources are being used now? Take the debt profile for instance and the insatiable need for loans. Do they reflect this intergenerational equity?

Intragenerational Equity: How are resources distributed with equity at the moment? Do some sections of the country feel shortchanged?

Environmental Protection and Resilience: How faithful are we to our ecosystem integrity? Isn't Nigeria discarding the precautionary principle by welcoming GMOs for instance? How faithful are we to climate change issues? How much of the circular economy is operational in Nigeria, where the waste products of one become the raw material for another thereby emphasizing repair, reuse, and recycling?

Polluter Pays Principle: How intense is the effort to ensure that those who cause pollution because of their production processes are saddled with the obligation of managing the waste, especially toxic waste?

Economic Viability or Integration: How genuine is the effort to ensure that economic growth is balanced with positive impact on the poor and the environment?

Participation and Transparency: Is the democratic space expanding or shrinking? Are the democratic institutions getting stronger or weaker? Is there proper oversight, accountability and rule of law?

Social Inclusion and Wellbeing: How do vulnerable groups and individuals fare? Are their rights defended and protected?

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[3] World Commission on Environment and Development.(1987). *Our Common Future.* Oxford University Press.(Chapter 2, paragraph 1)

Innovation and Adaptive Management: Are we still having human interference where technology could have been deployed efficiently?

Global and Local Relevance: Do our political and other actors take cognizance of the global impact of their actions? Do we care to assess the effect of global actors on local communities and ecosystems?

Measurability and Accountability: How deliberate and intentional is Nigeria's developmental quest? Are there advanced indices the progress is measured against and evaluated?

The answers we give to the posers above will indicate whether Nigeria is on a sustainable development path or not.

3.0 Principles of Catholic Social Teaching

In the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church as published by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace,[4](2010) four fundamental principles are enumerated from which other principles of social teaching are derived from. These are, the principle of Life and dignity of the human person, the principle of the common good, the principle of subsidiarity and the principle of solidarity. Human rights derive from the principle of life and dignity of the human person. The universal destination of goods is a principle derived from the principle of Common Good. The principle of the universal destination of goods itself implies the church's attitude of preferential option for the poor.[5] Similarly, the tenet of participation is derived from the principle of subsidiarity.[6] Our environment is seen as a common good and implies the concern and stewardship of creation.

Apart from the principles, Catholic social doctrine also anticipates and indicates fundamental values that are necessary for proper social interactions and relationships.[7] These values are truth, freedom, justice and love.[8] No society can function without an appreciation of these fundamental values.

I will proceed now to state briefly what each of these principles stands for. What is worthy of note is that in the mind of the church, these principles "must be appreciated in their unity, interrelatedness and articulation."[9]

3.1 The Principle of Life and the Dignity of the Human Person: One may be right to say that this is the most fundamental principle because life is the basis of every other thing. The idea is that man is made in the image and likeness of God- *Imago Dei*. Man is given life by God himself and cannot take this life for granted. When man falls short of the glory that is given him at creation, he is still redeemed by no less a personage than the Son of God, Jesus

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[4] Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Vatican City: Liberia Editrice Vaticana,2004*)*

[5] CSDC, no.182

[6] CSDC, no.189

[7] CSDC, no.197

[8] Cf. SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Pastoral Constitution Gaudium et Spes, 26:AAS 58(1966), 1046-1047

[9] CSDC, no.162

Christ, Second Person of the Holy Trinity. The high value placed on the human being by God becomes the basis for his intrinsic dignity. While man is linked to the material world through the body, he is open to transcendence through his soul.[10] On this basis, development must factor in the unitive nature of man, making sure to address his overall wellbeing. Nothing in society is seen as more valuable than the human person. In fact, society exists because of man. A just society is one that respects the transcendent dignity of man.[11] Worthy of note is the recognition that all human beings are equal.[12] The church's social doctrine sees male and female human beings as equal. However, it is not a static equality "because the specificity of the female is different from the specificity of the male, and this difference in equality is enriching and indispensable for the harmony of life in society."[13] The same intrinsic dignity applies to persons with disabilities.

We will all agree that at this stage in our national life, where we are not at war and yet have lost over 80,000 lives to terrorism and banditry between November 2015 to November 2025, there is an urgent need to revitalize the concept of the value of human life.

3.1.2 Human Rights: The church sees **human rights** as derived from the fundamental life and dignity of the human person. All work that promotes human rights is seen as a response to the "inescapable demands of human dignity."[14] In *Centesimus Annus*, John Paul II drew up a number of human rights which complement or explain the generally known human rights. This list includes, *the right to life, an integral part of which is the right of the child to develop in its mother's womb from the moment of conception…In a certain sense, the source and synthesis of these rights is religious freedom, understood as the right to live in the truth of one's faith and in conformity with one's transcendent dignity as a person.*[15] The rampant arrests and detention of citizens is a great offensive against the rights of people. And it is unfortunate that the very agencies that should protect human rights are the very ones engaging in most of the abuses. Church actors need to see that there is a state of emergency with regard to human rights abuses and should invest time in educating our people.

The generally known definition of common good is "the sum total of social conditions which

seen as a common good. "The responsibility for the environment, the common heritage of

th and wanted the human races without exception to be sustained by it. Therefore, everyone

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[10] CSDC, no,129

[11] CSDC, no.132

[12] CSDC, no.144

[13] CSDC, no.146.

[14] CSDC,no.152

[15] JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus*, 47: AAS 83 (1991), 851-852

[16] Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1905-1912; JOHN XXIII, Encyclical Letter Pacem in Terria: AAS 55 (1963),272-273.

[17] CSDC, no.170

[18] Francis Fukuyama. (2014). Political Order and Political Decay: From Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Democracy. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Pp437-445

[19] CSDC, 467

has a right to use the resources of the earth, and this right is based on the universal destination of the goods of the earth. "The universal destination of goods requires common effort to obtain for every person and for all peoples the conditions necessary for integral development,

become vulnerable because of their poverty or powerlessness. The church "since her origin

The church's deepest nature is expressed in her three-fold responsibility: of proclaiming the word of God (Kerygma-martyria), celebrating the sacraments (leiturgia), and exercising the ministry of charity(diakonia). These duties presuppose each other and are inseparable.[24]

I must add that flowing from the principle of the universal destination of goods, the Council fathers see support given to the poor as an act of justice. The link between charity and justice is because a priori the destination of the goods of the earth are meant to benefit everyone and no one should have been in dire need in the first place. Based on data provided by government, both the Buhari and Tinubu governments have been strong on social protection programs that benefit the poor. Even the new tax law is favourable to the poor. But now with the current inflation, everyone seems to be poor because even those who earn more than a million a month find it hard to cope. The removal of fuel subsidy, the floating of the naira, really impoverished everyone and now added to these is the new tax regime. They are not content with what they used to steal, now they want to squeeze the little we have and steal it.

Talking of the Church's mission, I find Benedict XVI's explanation ad rem. He says in his Motu Proprio on Charity (2012) that,

3.6 The Principle of Subsidiarity: Subsidiarity is one of the oldest social principles. Concretely the principle "protects people from abuses by higher-level social authority and calls on these same authorities to help individuals and intermediate groups to fulfil their duties."[25]

Unfortunately, state governors are too strong and constitute a real stumbling block to Nigeria's development. The clamour for state police is a subsidiarity issue. But would

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[21] CSDC, no. 175

[22] CSDC, no. 176

[23] Catechism of the Catholic Church, no.2444

[24] Bendict XVI. (2012). *Intima Ecclessiae Natura: Apostolic Letter issued "Motu Proprio" on the Service of Charity.* Vatican City: Liberia Editrice Vaticana. See introduction.

[25] CSDC, no. 187

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. The Education Secretary could work with the department's director to publish one. It

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annual diocesan priests' retreats.

If we do a problem analysis of the current Nigerian situation, I will say that the gatekeepers

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[27] Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1913-1917
[28] JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter Sollicitudo Rei Socialis, 36,37: AAS 80(1988), 561-564.
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[30] JOHN PAUL II, Message for 2004 World Day of Peavce, 10: AAS 96 (2—4),121
Caritas Nigeria 15th Anniversary Report p.21