

OPENING REMARKS BY FR. PETER BABANGIDA AUDU, THE DIRECTOR OF CHURCH AND SOCIETY DEPARTMENT, AT THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE DEPARTMENT

Theme: Harbingers of Hope: Mainstreaming Catholic Social Teaching for Development in Nigeria

1. Introduction

Your Grace, Most Rev. Alfred Adewale Martins, the Archbishop of Lagos and Chairman of our department, My Lord, Most Rev. Luka Sylvester Gopep, the Chairman of the FHLU, Fr. Michael Banjo, the Secretary General of the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, Revd Fathers, Sisters, distinguished Directors from our dioceses, colleagues in the mission of the Church, brothers and sisters in Christ – good morning and welcome.

It is with deep gratitude and renewed conviction that I welcome you to this year's Annual General Meeting of the Church and Society Department of the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria. I sincerely thank our Bishop Chairmen for their steady guidance, and I appreciate all diocesan directors who have journeyed from across the country to be here. Your presence reflects your love for the Church and your commitment to the social mandate entrusted to us by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria for the well-being of God's people.

This AGM gives us the rare gift of gathering as one family – to reflect, evaluate, strengthen our coordination, and chart a clearer path for the year ahead.

2. Gratitude

Before we look ahead, it is important to acknowledge with profound gratitude the remarkable strides recorded across the five units of this department in the past years. Our achievements over the years are signs of God's grace and your committed labour. They remind us that when we work with unity and vision, the Church becomes an undeniable force for social transformation.

3. Harbingers of Hope in a Troubled Nation

Our theme this year – “Harbingers of Hope: Mainstreaming Catholic Social Teaching for Development in Nigeria” – goes to the heart of who we are as Church and what our department stands for. In an era marked by economic hardship, deepening insecurity, mass displacement, political uncertainty, and the erosion of social values, the Church is called not to retreat, but to lead. We are called to be credible witnesses of hope, defenders of human dignity, and agents of integral development.

Today's gathering brings together the richness of our five units: Education, Health, Migrants and Refugees, Family and Human Life, and the Justice, Development and Peace Commission, each contributing uniquely to the Church's social mission. When we bring these strengths together, we become a formidable force for national transformation.

4. Displacement to Development

Our first sub-theme, “Displacement to Development: Solidarity with the Vulnerable in the Year of Hope,” reminds us of the millions of Nigerians displaced by conflict, poverty, natural disasters, and social instability. As a Church, our response cannot end at providing relief. We must accompany people along the entire journey – from

displacement to empowerment, from despair to dignity, from trauma to transformation. This is the heart of Catholic Social Teaching: seeing Christ in the most vulnerable and walking with them until they can walk again on their own feet.

5. Nigeria's Political Future

The second sub-theme, “Charting a New Socio-Political Course: 2027 Elections as Watershed for Development in Nigeria,” calls us to examine our nation’s political horizon with seriousness and responsibility. The coming 2027 elections present a critical moment for our country – a watershed that will shape our development trajectory. As a Church, we must form consciences, promote justice, insist on good governance, strengthen civic participation, and mobilise for peaceful political processes. Our JDPC structures are uniquely positioned to guide this process with integrity and courage.

6. Strengthening Inter-Unit Collaboration

One of our strategic goals in the years ahead is to continue to build stronger inter-unit collaboration. No single unit can address Nigeria’s complex social challenges alone. Education influences peacebuilding; family life affects migration; health supports development; JDPC drives governance and stability. This also comes with challenges.

When our units work in silos, our reach is limited. When they collaborate, our impact becomes transformative. This AGM should therefore strengthen cross-unit planning, shared initiatives, and unified messaging across all dioceses.

7. A Call to Deep Engagement

In the days ahead, we shall listen to one another, share diocesan experiences, review our progress, and deepen our collaboration across units. I invite us to embrace this AGM not merely as an administrative exercise, but as a moment of pastoral reflection, intellectual engagement, and spiritual renewal. Let us listen deeply, question courageously, and think creatively. Above all, let us rediscover our identity as harbingers of hope – a Church that speaks, acts, and serves with the conviction that Nigeria can rise again. Our unity and shared vision will determine how effectively the Church responds to the signs of the times.

8. Conclusion

The challenges facing our nation – insecurity, economic hardship, migration pressures, threats to family life, and the strain on our social institutions – demand from the Church not only charity, but structured, intelligent, coordinated, and prophetic action. Our people look to the Church not just for hope, but for direction, advocacy, and practical support. The work of this department speaks directly to those needs.

So, as we begin, I invite us to approach our conversations with openness, mutual respect, a willingness to learn, and a deep love for the mission entrusted to us. Let us embrace this mission with courage. As Scripture reminds us: “Let us not grow weary in doing good, for in due season we shall reap, if we do not give up.” (Gal. 6:9)

May the Holy Spirit guide our deliberations and strengthen our unity of purpose.

Thank you, and God bless you all.