ECUMENICAL CONFERENCE OF THE BISHOPS OF THE CATHOLIC, ANGLICAN, AFRICAN AND METHODIST DIOCESES IN OSOGBO AND PRESIDENT, OSUN BAPTIST CONFERENCE

LENTEN PRESS RELEASE

THEME: THE CONVERSION OF HEART AND THE WELLBEING OF OUR NATION

Introduction

Brothers and sisters and fellow citizens, we bishops, and leaders of the Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, African and Baptist Churches in Osogbo and Osun State, have in our Ecumenical Conference ahead of the Lenten season reflected on the terrifying state of our nation and Osun State in particular, as we search for true hope for our battered people with the light of the Gospel of Christ.

Besides military dictatorships, Nigeria as a democratic state has been ruled by various political parties with all shades of political and economic agenda by which they campaigned to make Nigeria a stable, peaceful, and prosperous nation. All of these despite the difference in their obvious outlook have yielded the same negative results that have today constituted our nation into the poorest nation on earth characterized by corruption, mediocrity in high places, abuse of power and privileges, indiscipline, insecurity, injustice, civil unrest, and human rights abuses.

We discerned in our reflection that we as a nation, are in this tragic situation not for want of the appropriate political or economic ideology, but because our political and public actors regardless of their background and ideological leaning have all been handling the affairs of our nation with the same sinful hearts. Ideologies and individuals changed in our public affairs over the years, but the heart has remained the same. Nigeria today does not need a further change of political or economic ideology as much as it does need a change of heart. Our hearts as a people, especially those of all our leaders, must be converted towards goodness for the course of our history to reverse towards goodness. This year's season of Lent, through its call to conversion of heart thus offers us the opportunity for a new Nigeria through its call for the conversion of the human heart.

Divine Call to Conversion

"But now, now-it is the Lord who speaks-come back to me with all your heart, fasting, weeping, mourning.' Let your hearts be broken, not your garments torn, turn to Yahweh your God…Sound the trumpet in Zion! Order a fast, proclaim a solemn assembly, call the people together, summon the community, assemble the elders, gather the children, even the infants at the breast." **(Joel 2:12-13).**

In those solemn and evocative words God Almighty summons all human beings especially people who made covenant with Him to a period of soberness through fasting; penance, stripping of self of all paraphernalia that make man forget easily that he is dust, even priests are to descend from the sanctuary to join the rest of mankind in penitential humility to cry for mercy and beg the Lord to bring all evils and disasters to an end and give true freedom and peace to his people.

As we open the season of Lent, the Church as the sacred custodian of God's oracle, proclaims this ever-living word pronounced by God summoning all humanity into the sober atmosphere of sincere self-examination for interior and social transformation. This moment of purification is gift from God, a privilege he grants all human beings especially Christians to begin a better life anew. More so because once evil is rooted out of man's interior, all his work will tend towards good. This is why we the bishops and leaders of the Catholic, Anglican, Methodist African and Baptist Churches in Osogbo use the occasion of the beginning of the sacred season to humbly call all citizens of Osun State to reflect deeply and repent of all forms of evil especially those that hurt fellow human beings and the community. Although, Lent is exclusively a Christian spiritual exercise, the benefits of its discipline touch everyone. The Ramadan of Islam will soon arrive summoning yet not only Muslims but all human beings with lively conscience to soberness and to repentance from wrongdoing. In fact, the sober retreat to which we are called are in essence not the exclusive spiritual needs of Christians and Muslims alone but of all human persons and human societies to whom evil is repulsive and who value growth and progress.

Government: The Primary Addressee and Effective Preacher of Penitence and Conversion in the Scriptures

In God's oracles revealed in the Bible in which He calls the entire society to repentance from evil, God's messages sent to His people are first directly addressed to the political leaders of the community before everyone else. To God, political leaders wield the most powerful influence in the formation and outlook of society. This is why God places primarily the responsibility and guilt of the evils ravaging society on the political leaders and on religious leaders who are hypocrites before political leaders. He laments in Jeremiah 50:6 thus: "My people have become a lost sheep because their shepherds have led them astray and abandoned them in the mountains." Because of this, we encounter God through the prophet Amos addressing series of strong words of rebuke primarily to the political leaders and the elites among His people (Cf Amos 2-6 for instance). This is

because it is both the examples and atmosphere that leaders create that promote both evil and good.

The Word of God does not only reveal political leaders as the primary champions of evil by virtue of their powerful influence on society. God also reveals them as protagonists of repentance from evil. When political leaders call the people to repentance through their own visible acts of soberness and repentance, the people will follow their footstep and repent. We have one of such many instances in the scriptures in story of repentance of rulers and people of Nineveh of the days of the Prophet Jonah. Scripture reads:

> The word of Yahweh was addressed a second time to Jonah: Up!' he said, 'Go to Nineveh, the great city, and preach to them as I told you to.' The news reached the king of Nineveh, who rose from his throne, took off his robe, put on sackcloth and sat down in ashes. A proclamation was then promulgated throughout Nineveh, by decree of the king and his ministers. God saw their efforts to renounce their evil behavior. And God relented: he did not inflict on them the disaster which he had threatened. **(Jonah 3:2-10)**.

Thus, in the name of the Lord, we address you leaders of our dear state and of Nigeria to make yourselves protagonists of a journey of conversion in these sacred days of Lent when God offers us the opportunity to root out all forms of evils in us and among us. We appeal to leaders at all levels to listen to the voice of God and read the signs of times. Reflect, and tend your entire course to willing and doing good with purer conscience. In so doing, challenge all citizens to begin to seek after good, shun hypocrisy, deception, window dressing and lead our nation and people to a prosperous future in God. You; majority of our political and traditional leaders openly profess to be either Christians or Muslims. Penance and repentance being fundamental to both religions should characterize your interior dispositions in this tragic situation of our national life. Let contrition for all the wrong doings of the past challenge you to firmer commitment to doing good in the interest all in the face of divine summon to conversion amidst woes and evils that are plunging our nation into anarchy and doom.

Our country and Osun, our dear state, have been battered and dehumanized by consistent assaults of mediocrity in public service, violence and corruption. Our nation and state are nothing near the ideal model of a democratic state in terms of structures, principles, system, management and affairs. For selfishness and desire to perpetrate self and family cronies in power, privileged elites who have wield authority and influence in Osun state and Nigeria at large have been reluctant to prioritize common good by setting up functionable systems, initiate revolutionary developmental plans with principles and ideals that inspire citizens at all levels to work with integrity and patriotism towards lofty dreams that would make our land a prosperous one. The insatiable human ego and appetite are leading many citizens to place their individual interest over common good. Many ignore and sometimes frustrate opportunities that could be beneficial to all. Government alone is not responsible for all the evils that is sinking Nigeria. But the government, is responsible as the pace setter of the life of society. We appeal to the

government of Osun State in particular to make itself an inspiration for the rest of the citizenry to purge themselves of evil and seek after good.

Justice and Common Good

Over the years, there have been perceptions that government has been sectional in the deployment of opportunities for communities, groups and individuals in the state. One must belong to one group or another, be affiliated to certain political ideologies or religious creed, be anointed by certain figures or personalities to have access to public services and opportunities. We denounce very strongly in the name of the Church every form of politically motivated removal or assignment, sacking or employment of persons, awarding of public contracts or allocation of developments in Osun State and we call on this government to correct such acts of the past and act with righteousness and clear conscience before God before whom everyone would stand in judgement as soon as we are withdrawn from this earth. We call on the government to champion in Osun state a society which promotes justice and authentic human progress. The government should improve on carry everyone along in the formulation of its development plan and budgets, and their implementation strategies with evidence of effective monitoring and evaluation. Let the government be fair and act on a level praying ground for all and so be more open and transparent in employments, promotions, appointments, admission, mobilization for empowerment, distribution of relief, review of wages, award of contracts, allotting of development projects etc. These kinds of attitude coming from the government challenge all persons especially the youth to devote their energies to productive activities for the progress of our dear state.

Subsidy: Money of the Poor and Vulnerable

There has been since June 2023 a massive increment in the monthly Federal Allocation to all states. We must, however, not fail to note that this increment is not the result of any improvement or boom in the economy. It is majorly the money of subsidy which in previous funding arrangements the federal government directly availed the people to relief the cost of transportation, goods, and services. The subsidy on fuel constituted the major direct benefit that the common man especially the extremely poor get directly as relief from the common treasury. It is understandable that to protect this share of the poor from continually being preyed upon by marauding beasts among us, it has been reallocated to states to enable them design other means by which such relief would reach the citizens of their various states either in service delivery, critical infrastructural developments or programmes that would bring the most needed relief to the people in a sustainable manner. As God's messengers, we wish to tap the conscience of our political leaders by reminding them and all their collaborators that the transformation of the subsidy on Premium Motor Spirit (commonly called petrol) and on diesel into Federal Allocation to State and Local Governments simply implies entrusting of the property of the vulnerable and the poor to powerful trustees who are deemed to be more accessible to the poor. State government should keep in mind the strong spiritual implication of this trusteeship.

The government in many states of the federation have been reluctant to disclose the new federal Allocations as well as other relief packages deployed to the state to relief the masses of the ongoing economic woes. It is shameful to note that even material reliefs earmarked by the federal government for the poor are dissolving into the thin air or are being rebranded with no credible information on their whereabouts and the intent for such in many states of the federation. It is totally inappropriate for the government to fail to disclose to the public about such allocation and the mode by which it shall reach the people. This tragic mystery which has shrouded the deployment of the reallocated subsidy and relief packages to various states in the country raises doubt as to whether the government is intent on acting with clear conscience before God in handling of the belongings of the poor in their custody. We therefore remind the leaders and all stakeholder that it is grave offense before God Almighty to ever deploy such funds for any other purpose than the good of the masses. Diversion of such fund is tantamount to stealing from the poor and it is repulsive to God.

Be Attentive to the Sufferings of the Poor

We call on government not to wait for aggression from the people before empathy would move them to do whatever is necessary to alleviate the difficulty citizens go through to survive. The growing validation of financial crimes especially internet fraud is not disconnected from the economic woes that have besieged many families. Many small businesses especially vendors of food items and other household utilities are folding up because many households are unable to pay debts the owe such businesses. The standard of life of our citizens has dropped abruptly by over 50% in the last one year because of the surge in inflation. For the majority who live in multidimensional poverty, it means not being able afford up two decent meals in a day. Many children now skip school for lack of transportation fees or inability of parents to provide fees. Numerous families hardly go for weekly religious exercises because of the inability to afford transportation. It is not strange any longer to see how many houses are left in darkness at night even when there is power supply. The reason is simple, many are no longer able to pay their bill for light not to talk of powering generator. The unaffordability of clean cooking fuel is driving many of our people to the crude means of cooking energy such as excessive use of charcoal and firewood which continue to encourage deforestation and desertification. The government must let the masses know that they are both aware and are disturbed by their situation and are as well working hard and honestly to relief the pains and misery.

We hereby appreciate the commitment of the Governor Ademola Adeleke to the palliative arrangement of the federal government for the relief of civil servants. Even though the federal government that made the arrangement of additional thirty-five-thousand-naira to monthly wages of civil servants as palliative has only paid it once, the state government of Osun State has paid up to January. We also applaud the state government's inclusion of the retirees in this palliative arrangement, including the continuous repayment of the arrears of half salary owed workers by the previous administrations. Government must however bear in mind that civil servants make up only 1% of the population of the state while their dependents are 2%. Catering fairly for 3% of the population of over 4 million

is far below average performance. The remaining 97% of the population of the state must as well be met with effective relief support programme in order to preserve the dignity and welfare of all in the face of the present misery. Government must among other things work hard to reduce the cost of living by providing palliatives on domestic energy and transportation in Osun State. Subsidizing critical food items is more beneficial to all than sharing some indecent quantities of grains to unknown faces as relief.

We are aware that the Osun State 2024 Appropriation law tagged "Budget of Reconstruction and Recovery, 2024" signed into law by the governor on the 29th of December 2023 witnessed 98% increment when compared to 2023 budget. This might be taken as confirmation by government implicitly that there is increment in the revenue of the state from the monthly FAAC and that the same has been factored into 2024 budget of the state. We implore our governor to implement the planned budget primarily for the betterment of the citizenry. Osun citizens are watching with eagle's vigilance.

Liberation of the Third Arm and the Third Tier of Government in Osun State

Every power whose source is in God functions principally to give freedom to all human persons, institutions and structures to fulfil their own purposes and attain their destinies. We are compelled by the conditions of key democratic institution of government to call to sincere self-examination at this sacred season all our political leaders. It is very sad to note that 3 organs are set up to ensure true democratic culture in Nigeria, however, the only nonpolitical of these being the judiciary is denied financial independence and is muscled politically by the executive, thus denying it its core feature of neutrality which alone enables it to function as the conscience of the nation. Unlawful financial control by the executive is just an instance of suffocation of the judiciary in Nigeria. The situation in Osun State is particularly one of great concern and requires conscientious intervention. To seem that the Chief Justice of the state is subjected to humiliating unclear bullish administrative process from the executive under various disguises is totally strange to the principle of constitutional democracy. We do not in any way seek here to justify the wrongdoing of anyone as no one is above the law. The governor should sincerely retract any of the decision of government that gives such strong negative impression that the executive is arrogating to itself the prerogative of discipline of judges which exclusively belong to the National Judicial Commission. A new government which rode to victory on the faith of the people should not at this stage accommodate whatever makes it seem like it engaged in acts of abuse of power. This government should make itself a model of penitence on politics to change the impression made by previous ones in the state and in the federation that the intent of our political leaders is to keep all nonpolitical citizens and institutions of the nation in servitude in a kingdom which exists to serve their inordinate ego and appetite and those of their cronies.

In the same regard, it would be hypocrisy on our part as servants of Christ among His people not to mention the continuous servitude of the Local Government as the third tier of democratic government in Nigeria. Even though the civil servants employed in the LGAs receive their due welfare and renumeration from the government, it is sad that the

new government has sustained for over a year since ascension to power the over a decade old dictatorial rule over the Local Governments in Osun State. Records are showing that the state government still denies the Local Government of its financial autonomy granted by the constitution. Federal Allocation to LGAs is directly managed by the state government. It is sad to note that the unlawful control of the finances of the third tier of democratic government which is closest to the people by past administrations in Osun state has continued with the present administration that promised numerous positive changes that would liberate the people from oppression. Also, there has been disregard for the provision of the law which requires that the LGA leaders be elected by the people through transparent elections. The unfortunate use of prerogative of office by various governments in Osun state to appoint caretakers instead of elected officials makes us suspect that the new government may also usurp and unjustly retain to itself the power of the people to choose their leaders at the LGAs. To correct this unwholesome impression, we do hope that this government would attend with every sense of urgency to the need to organize a transparent and credible Local Government election in Osun State.

Transparency and Accessibility of the People to Government in Osun State

It is very disturbing to note sadly that Osun is one of the 16 states that are still yet to domesticate the Freedom of Information Act since about 13 years of its existence. It is saddening that representatives of the people in the legislature are never known to have presented or worked on a bill to domesticate such an important law that enables the people to access information about how they are governed. Such an act in democracy is tantamount to an employee shielding his employer from accessing information about his own business.

The victory of the governor and all the elected members of the House of Assembly in Osun State stemmed primarily from their tireless encounter and engagement with the people in various campaign rallies, use of media and the social media as points of encounter with the people. Our leaders are thus not in want of knowledge of the importance of engaging with and carrying the people along. It therefore not in good taste that in the past 14 months of ascension to power, Governor Ademola Adeleke has only had one townhall meeting with citizens which is the "Ipade Imole" held on 5th October, 2023. This is so despite being aware that we are in the most trying and difficult times when government and leaders should demonstrate their closeness with people by direct engagement rather than lead through third party exchange of information with the people through aides. Were the governor's campaigns ahead of the elections built around his aides' engagement with the people in a transparent election, he might have been far from being victorious. We call also on the aides of the governor to be professional in handling the governor's itinerary especially the handling of stakeholders' correspondences to the governor especially requests for audience with the governor by key nonpolitical leaders of the people.

Tragic Exodus of Young Citizens of Osun State.

We are faced in Osun state with a disturbing pattern of migration that is evident among the young citizens. It is one in which children at the completion of secondary schools leave home and never return. This is so partly because there are no sufficient higher institutions of learning to absorb the population of young people produced by our private and public schools. Unless government begins to create enabling environment for the private sector to invest in tertiary education as it does with elementary and secondary education, the situation may escalate into serious manpower crises in Osun and Nigeria such that we witness population surge in which majority are neither lettered nor skillful.

The second cause of this unfortunate tide of premature exodus of young people from Osun from our findings, is that many youths of Osun on completion of tertiary education mostly outside the state find no reason to return to Osun because of the lack of employment opportunities or competitive environment to build a career. It is incumbent on government to prioritize the attraction of large-scale investments across the state to absorb our youths. We appeal to the incumbent administration to deploy the meagre resources of the state to tackle very sensitive issues as this so as to lead Osun towards a more socially and economically stable future. We encourage the government to shun the agelong political attitude of expending lean resources on projects which market them and make them cheaply acceptable to the people. We rather appeal to the government to be very courageous to embark only on initiatives that though very exerting, would lay foundation for a prosperous future. What is necessary is for government to do all that it takes to sell such laudable plans to the citizens through dialogue and evidence of transparency and accountability.

The Citizenry and Rising Inordinate Search for Wealth

While we continue to call on government to create the required atmosphere of prosperity and actualization of lawful aspirations of citizens, we appeal to families to ensure solid foundational value orientation for children and youths. The tragic developments in our society in which parents are said to celebrate children who show up with properties that are incompatible with their status are signals to the depth of decadence in society that enjoys the support and reinforcement from the family. There are even indications that certain parents handover their children or wards to individuals or gangs to be trained to become online fraudsters.

Generally, there is complaints that young people no longer make themselves available for training as apprentices for skill acquisition on account of gro6wing interest in unlawful quick money-making ventures. Many young people who are even students have become addicted to gambling of different forms which today has been packaged to appeal to the sensibility of modern youths.

The challenging times calls everyone to simplicity and prudence. We call on all to be simpler in ceremonies for which we are known in Yoruba land. We must cut down wastefulness in undue cravings for material things and show-offs we do not truly need.

Leaders of tomorrow must be trained to desire simplicity of life. Alcohol, use of drug and high social life incompatible with the financial status of many are some of the primary causes of the crises that is sinking our society from which we call for a change of attitude from all.

Closing Remark

We pray that the Spirit of the Lord would move every citizen of the state to respond to the messages of Lent with the right disposition. We have strong faith that if we all turn inwardly to listen to God and the dictates of sound consciences, we are already setting the ground ready for the emergence of a new Osun State upon which the Lord would be pleased to rain in abundance his heavenly blessings. As we assure government and people of our humble prayers, we hereby express our deep hope and confidence in the openness and willingness of our political leaders and the rest of the citizenry to the word of God and the transformation he brings to man and his society.

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