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KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY MOST REV. MATTHEW KWASI GYAMFI, PRESIDENT OF THE GHANA CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE (GCBC) AT THE OPENING CEREMONY OF THE 2023 PLENARY ASSEMBLY HELD IN THE SUNYANI DIOCESE--SUNYANI ON MONDAY, NOVEMBER 13, 2023

THEME: *FOSTERING THE GROWTH OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN GHANA THROUGH COLLABORATIVE MINISTRY*

Greetings and Acknowledgement of Dignitaries

Justice in the Chair, The Apostolic Nuncio, Your Graces, Archbishops, My Lord Bishops, The Regional Minister, MCE and DCEs, The Queen Mother of the Sunyani Traditional area, Nananom, Monsignori, Rev. Fathers and Religious, Christ's Faithful, and all Invited Guests, including the Press, Ladies and Gentlemen!

Introduction of New Bishops

Following the tradition of the Ghana Catholic Bishops' Conference (GCBC), I want to first use the opportunity to introduce to you three of our new members of the Conference who are participating in this Annual Plenary Assembly for the first time as Bishops. They are: Most Rev. John Kobina Louis, Most Rev. Anthony Narh Asare (Auxiliary Bishops of Accra) and Most Rev. Samuel Nkuah-Boateng, Bishop of Wiawso.

Introduction

The Church in Ghana is commissioned to evangelize; that is to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ the Lord to all peoples. *Full authority has been given to me both in heaven and on earth; go therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptize them in the name of the Father and of the son and of the Holy Spirit. Teach them to carry out everything I have commanded you. And know that I am with you always, until the end of the world (Mt. 28:18-20).* This command to evangelize is given to all the baptized of the Church—Bishops, Priests, Religious and Christ's Lay Faithful. We carry out this duty individually and most importantly, we share this duty in the spirit of collaboration amongst the different segments of the Church. According to the Ghana 2021 Population and Housing Census (2021 PHC), though the population of Christians in general is growing, the number of Catholics in the country seem to be dwindling.

Theme of the Plenary Assembly

Justice in the Chair, the results of the 2021 population census suggests that the Catholic population in Ghana as at 2021 was only 10.1%, a decline of almost 3% since the 2010 census. This low figure and the negative growth trend in numbers decided our theme for the 2023 Plenary Assembly of the Ghana Catholic Bishops' Conference, namely: *Fostering the growth of the Catholic Church in Ghana through Collaborative Ministry.*

Justice in Chair, after attaining Independence in 1957, Ghana has conducted six Population and Housing Censuses in 1960, 1970, 1984, 2000, 2010 and 2021. In the first four censuses, the Catholic population in Ghana always recorded increases with the most significant increase occurring between 1970 and 1984. Available records show that the Catholic population increased steadily from 1880 until 2000 when Catholic population was 15.1%. The Catholic population, however, dropped from 15.1% in the 2000 census, to 13.1 % in the 2010 census (that is, 3,230,996 of 24, 658,823). This figure further declined to 10.1% in the 2021 census, down from 3,230,996 to 3,079,261, meaning that statistically, the Church lost approximately, 230,000 of its members within the last ten to eleven years. For us, this is indeed is a disturbing trend for our Church, considering that Our Lord has commissioned us to go to all nations, towns, cities, villages, homes and families to baptize and teach them.

This decline in the Catholic population calls for a very sober reflection on the part of Bishops, Clergy, Religious and the numerous Lay Faithful. Our meeting, this year, is therefore, focused on identifying how to halt the unfavorable trend in numbers. With respect to evangelization, what is the Church in Ghana already doing right? How do we make better what the Church is already doing right to make it more effective? What is the Church doing wrong with respect to evangelization? What are the new realities that need to be considered for effective evangelization? Are there other methods for effective evangelization that we have overlooked? etc. These are some of the points the bishops may discuss at the plenary in order to come out with an effective and well-articulated intensive evangelization agenda.

The Church in Ghana and the Biblical Image of God's Vineyard

Turning to the Holy Scriptures for inspiration, we begin this process of soul searching by reflecting on the biblical image of God's vineyard from the fifth chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. In this chapter, Isaiah describes the conditions of Israel at a particular point in their history, a condition that was similar to the present situation in our Church today. The prophet Isaiah adopts the metaphor of the vineyard to express God's solicitude for Israel. He asks:

³ And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge, I pray you, between me and my vineyard. ⁴ What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? (Isa. 5:3-4)

This prophecy is an invitation to self-examination and self-introspection of every Clergy, Religious and Lay Faithful in the face of the unexpected fruitlessness of God's vineyard which is appropriately a metaphor for the Catholic Church in Ghana. (Mt 20:1-16; Lk 13:6-9; 20:9-20). It speaks not only of quantity but also of the quality of the fruits or the people that the Church yields.

It is noteworthy, that the invitation to reflect on the quantity and quality of grapes from God's vineyard is thrown first and foremost to the inhabitants of Jerusalem which is both the administrative and religious nerve Centre of Israel, similar to the Bishop, his Curia and College of Consultants, the Senate and all immediate and close collaborators. But the message is addressed also to the Priests, the Levites and the rulers of Israel, which are equivalent to the Clergy and Religious of the Church in Ghana today whose duty it is to shepherd God's people and to tend His

vineyard. Subsequently, the invitation is also extended to the people of Judah. Note that the responsibility is not left on the shoulders of the leadership. In deed, every one of God's people is called upon to reflect on the reasons for the degeneration of God's vineyard, the Catholic Church in Ghana; on how each person might have contributed, by commission or omission to its decay and what needed to be done to restore it. The nurturing of God's vineyard, the Church, to bear abundant fruit is therefore a collective responsibility that can be achieved only through collaboration. As it was for Jerusalem and Judah, so it is today for the Catholic Church in Ghana. Your Bishops are meeting to consider what they, as bishops, have to do to grow the Church both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Our Lay Faithful are also required to have a plenary, like the Bishops, to discuss the negative growth trends, just as our Priests and Religious are also called upon to have a special plenary meeting to discuss what more has to be done to grow the Church. Evangelization is the only reason why you were ordained or consecrated. If the data shows that evangelization is failing, then we can no longer continue to do business as usual. Rather, we must meet and come up with strategies to foster qualitative and quantitative growth of the Church. We must all ask ourselves what we have done or not done to register a decline in the Catholic population in Ghana because, like the biblical vineyard of Isaiah, the responsibility to grow the Church is given to all. In consequence, it is incumbent on each and every Catholic to play their proper role to restore the Church in Ghana to its initial fruitfulness.

Pope Francis, in the ongoing Synod on synodality and in his Apostolic Exhortation: *Evangelii Gaudium*, addressed the importance of collaborative approach to effective and sustained evangelization for resolving the problem of a dwindling population of the church. In this letter, the Holy Father states:

120. In virtue of their baptism, all the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples (cf. Mt 28:19). All the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization, and it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelization to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients. The new evangelization calls for personal involvement on the part of each of the baptized. Every Christian is challenged, here and now, to be actively engaged in evangelization; indeed, anyone who has truly experienced God's saving love does not need much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim that love (EG#120).

These words of the Roman Pontiff underline both the urgency of the call to evangelize the entire universal Church of which the Church in Ghana is an integral part. The invitation is to all the baptized and the Pope's emphasis is on the need to encourage everyone to participate in this mission in whatever capacity we are— as pastors or catechists, as parents or children, as youth or elderly – everyone has to come on board to foster the growth of the Catholic Church in Ghana. The Second Vatican Council is at pains to remind every Catholic of their responsibility to participate in evangelization when the Bishops taught:

In the organism of a living body, no member plays a purely passive part. Sharing in the life of the body, it shares at the same time in its activity...between members of a body, there exists, further, such a unity and solidarity (cf. Ep. 4:16) that a member who does not work at the growth of the body to the extent of his responsibilities must be considered useless to both the Church and himself (Apostolicam, Actuositataem AA #2).

A second dimension of Isaiah's prophecy, which needs to guide the reflection of this Plenary Assembly and the Plenary of the Laity, Religious and Clergy, is the very concept of growth. The question of the growth of Isaiah's vineyard is beyond a quantitative affair. The vineyard of Isaiah 5 was bearing fruit alright. The only problem was that it was yielding wild grapes instead of fine grapes. Israel was not returning quality grapes, that is, Israel did not live up to the quality of life which God would expect from his people.

The challenge facing the Catholic Church in Ghana is more than just a crisis in membership. It is essentially a crisis of faith, commitment and fidelity to the application of the teachings of Christ to everyday living. This observation is evidenced by the fact that while Christians make up over 70% of the population in Ghana, their expected positive impact on public life in Ghana is woefully limited. While, we the Bishops and the Catholic Church in Ghana begin to address the sluggish growth in numbers, of its members, we need to address the qualitative aspect—the spiritual and moral character of the Church's members as well. These two dimensions, quantity and quality of members, are inextricably woven together, such that achieving one at the expense of the other defeats the goal of the Church's mission of evangelization.

Declining Catholic Population in Ghana

Justice in the Chair, following the publication of the 2010, and 2021 census results, some Clergy and Religious and concerned Lay Faithful have researched and discussed some of the causes for the dwindling numbers of Ghana's Catholic population. Some of their findings and suggestions that the Bishops may want to consider during their deliberations include the following:

1. Church Research and Data

The Catholic Church in Ghana can begin to compile and monitor all data on the Church including data on the growth of membership on short term basis to allow the Church to address teething challenges that may arise. Reliance on statistics compiled by the State in every ten years does not permit us to rectify any problems that may arise and grow during the period. As a result, the Bishops may want to consider setting up a research department at the National Catholic Secretariat and replicate the same office in all Arch/dioceses to collect and monitor their own data on membership and other variables in the Church. In the Pastoral Guidelines issued at the end of 2014 *National Pastoral Congress*, the bishops recommended that, "In order to take an informed decision to respond to the problem of people leaving the Catholic Church for other churches, we direct that specific research be conducted at the national and local levels by experts to offer proposals for implementation (*Pastoral Congress Guidelines, no. 7, page 17*). This is urgent and must be given the necessary attention it deserves by the Bishops during their meeting.

2. *Catechesis*

The Church in Ghana may embark on an aggressive catechesis to deepen the knowledge of the Lay faithful about the faith. The Church must strengthen and deepen the catechesis offered for the reception of the Sacraments, particularly the *Sacraments of Christian Initiation*, so that the catechesis is not only theoretical but one that leads to true conversion of heart and mind of the catechumens. The Bishops may want to consider for use in all Dioceses, the Catechism of the Catholic Church (YouthCat) as the basic handbook for instructions for the reception of the sacraments and for instruction at the Sunday Liturgy of the Word for the Holy Childhood. Formal post-catechetical instructions may be introduced and encouraged, just as “catechists should be adequately trained; well-resourced and sufficiently remunerated to enable them carry out their ministry” (*Guidelines no. 13*). It is time for the Church to consciously teach the faithful about false security and dangers of the so-called Prosperity Gospel.

3. *Diocesan Pastoral Plans*

The Bishops may want to consider the necessity of all Dioceses and Archdioceses developing and implementing short, medium and long term Diocesan Pastoral Plans for evangelization with set targets. The aim of these plans should be strengthening and promoting primary evangelization in the various jurisdictions. In the absence of carefully plotted out diocesan plans that feed ultimately into a national vision for the Church, any efforts to halt the decline of Church population to grow the Church would be seriously hampered.

4. *Youth Formation and Children Ministry*

Practically, every conversation and document on the youth in the past 20 years or so has identified youth exodus from the Church as one of the greatest threats to the Church in Ghana. The diagnosis of the problem ranges from insufficient spiritual and material investment in the youth, inadequate formation and catechesis for the youth, and unfulfilled expectations of our so-called Catholic public schools. The majority of our youth are often left unsupported to battle with the challenges in their spiritual and material lives. They therefore seek support elsewhere, which sometimes leads them to abandon the Church.

We have to consider creating a well-structured catechetical and other formation programs for the youth and children, taking into consideration the pastoral and other socio-economic needs of our time. The youth can then be formally invited to collaborate in direct evangelization. Our chaplaincy units in both Catholic and non-Catholic basic schools, Colleges of Education and Universities can be better resourced with trained, competent and hardworking chaplains. Material and financial support for the chaplaincies is of utmost importance.

5. *Liturgical Celebrations and evangelization*

In a recent address to Liturgists, Pope Francis observed that, *a liturgical celebration that does not evangelise is not authentic*. It is required that the Bishops continuously encourage their direct collaborators, the priests, to always plan, prepare and celebrate “lively” liturgies that bring the faithful closer to God and to one another. They are encouraged to give homilies that are relevant to the faith and morals of the members.

Such liturgical celebrations do not only respect the liturgical norms, but also reflect the hopes, joys, aspirations and needs of the people. The penchant to copy Pentecostal and Charismatic styles of worship and prayer is not the solution to our dwindling numbers. Rather, a liturgy well prepared and celebrated is a powerful and effective way of evangelization.

6. The Catholic Population and Urbanization

A dimension of Ghana's demography is rapid urbanization. According to the 2021 population and housing census, 58% of Ghana's population (19 million) now lives in urban centres. A cursory look at all the census figures reveals a trend which seems to suggest that while the Church appears to post decent percentages in rural communities, it is hemorrhaging most rapidly in the urban centres. The Census data suggests that when Catholics move from the rural areas to the urban centers, they fail to sustain their Catholic faith and fall prey to other sects. The reasons for this sad phenomenon need to be studied carefully by the bishops and their major stakeholders in order to find a permanent solution to the problem.

We need to seriously interrogate the Church's pastoral strategies in urban areas and come up with a more dynamic pastoral approach that addresses the spiritual and other needs of Catholics who are domiciled in the urban areas. For instance, we have to urgently discuss how to make the Church and her ministers physically and spiritually closer and present in all communities in the urban centers. In this regard, the concept of Small Christian Communities (SCCs) may be vigorously pursued while the small communities that are ripe may transform into rectorates and parishes.

7. Catholic Population and Media

A necessary tool for evangelization in the modern world is the Media. The relative presence of Catholic content on the media landscape is still woefully inadequate. In the media, Catholics, especially the youth are exposed not only to the homilies and teachings of the Catholic Church, but also to the teachings of other religious sects and tele-evangelists whose message is often at variance with the Catholic Faith. In the process, some Catholics switch allegiance to these new found faiths. The Conference should as a matter of urgency, invest heavily in the traditional and social media to go out into the public space as a more effective way of evangelization in our modern world. Certainly, the Church in Ghana has to re-orient herself to the urgency of this task so the voice of the church is heard and her message is proclaimed through all the earth. To this end, we call on all Catholics to donate generously to support the Lumen Christ TV Project currently underway.

Issues of National Concern

Justice in the Chair, as we deliberate on how to grow the Catholic Church in Ghana, we will also reflect on the growth and development of our beloved country Ghana, especially, as we prepare for political elections in 2024. We repudiated the many years of military rule. Most Ghanaians longed for constitutional democracy and had hoped that this system of government, or so we were made to believe, will give Ghanaians both political and economic development. Yet, after almost 32 years of what is supposed to be a democratic governance, we all know where we are as a country.

Certainly, in this democratic dispensation, we have successfully replaced one political party with the other and we pride ourselves for that. It is common knowledge that none of the two major political parties has fared better than the other. Rather, they replace each other periodically and do almost the same as their predecessor party. The party in opposition waits impatiently for 8 years to come back into power to do the same.

But it is clear to Ghanaians that the beneficiaries of the political system in place, are not the people but the politicians and the political actors and others in high positions. Ghanaians are witnesses to the accumulated wealth which those in power make in record time as soon as they entered politics. Ghanaians look on helplessly because those in authority are protected by the constitution to do what they do and they are never prosecuted because politicians protect their kind.

There have been no significant positive changes in the economy since we became an oil producing country. What happened to the gold and other mineral resources? Why are most of our roads in such deplorable state? Why do we keep going to the IMF? Why do we keep borrowing so much when we are a rich nation. Both governments keep borrowing and we are now in deep financial crisis. Why are we in this economic and financial quagmire?

The massive uncontrolled corruption is suffocating the nation. It appears corruption is legalized. What should Ghanaians do since the existing form of democracy help only a few and leaves the majority behind? What about the impunity and arrogance of some politicians and their defence of corruption? Should the constitution not be changed or bettered for it to work for all Ghanaians instead of for a few. Should the legal system not be re-equipped to uproot corruption? What about our Parliament where the interest of the people is sacrificed for personal and party interests? Why have we not implemented the findings of the Constitutional Review Committee? Can the governments explain to us why we are in this economic mess? What explanations can the two political parties give to Ghanaians for the unfavorable agreements we sign on our oil, minerals, power generation etc.? Countries who have these resources in abundance are rich. Why do we remain poor? Ghanaians no longer accept the old explanations that Governments of Ghana have been giving.

The Political changes around us on the continent should be a wakeup call for politicians to amend our constitution and legal systems in a peaceful democratic way, in a manner that make the government work for the good of all the people of Ghana.

Justice in the chair, we shall pray and deliberate on these observations and other challenges that we currently face as a country and share our recommendations with all Ghanaians and the world at large.

Conclusion

In summary, the Church needs to adopt a multi-pronged, all-hands-on deck approach in her efforts to reverse the downward trend of her numbers. In this regard, we must use both the “Shepherd’s Approach” and the “Fisherman’s Approach” of evangelization.

Additionally, we must adopt what Professor Kofi Awusabo-Asare calls the “3D Approach” for the catechetical instructions of our faithful, namely, *Doctrine, Discipleship and Devotion*. The greatest challenge of the Church in Ghana is the lack of implementation of policies and programs. Steps must be taken to implement decisions taken and policies adopted especially decisions taken to reverse the downward trend in membership. The Church exists not for its own sake but for the sake of the world to which it is sent. We need to adopt an attitude of humility, gentleness and listening.

These various factors coupled with greater commitment and dedication to ministry by all would go a long way to foster collaborate ministry and enhance the growth of the Catholic population in Ghana. It is not a task for only the bishops or the clergy. All the faithful must carry out diligently this mission in the hope of winning more souls for Christ. How to effectively do this is the main topic for discussion by the Bishops and Archbishops during this Plenary Assembly. I have said all the above to highlight some of the challenges and prospects in evangelization in our country. It is also to serve as starting point for discussion by the bishops and the entire Catholic Church in Ghana, on current trends of evangelization in Ghana. It is my hope that this year’s plenary will among other things come out with a well-articulated strategy for a collaborative ministry to fulfil the great commission: *...go therefore, and make disciples of all nations. Baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit... And know that I am with you always, until the end the end of the world* (Mt. 28:19-20). I trust that together with the entire Lay Faithful, in a collaborative way and guided by the Holy Spirit, especially during this plenary, we can rejuvenate our evangelizing mission in Ghana.

On this note, I hereby declare the 2023 Plenary Assembly of the Ghana Catholic Bishops’ Conference here in the Catholic Diocese of Sunyani duly opened in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Thank you.