

CONFERENCE ON THE FUTURE OF CATHOLIC PEACEBUILDING

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THE ROLE OF BISHOPS IN PEACE BUILDING

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Introduction:

The role of a Bishop in general is well spelled out in the Vatican document, *Christus Dominus* on the pastoral mission of the bishop. Other documents after that have gone further to spell out in details what this means. The latest of it was the Apostolic Post-Synodal Exhortation following the Synod on the Mission of Bishop in the church under the title of *Pastores Gregis*. From all these, it is clear that the bishop is first and foremost a religious leader of the people and his role is basically spiritual. However, this spiritual role has to be carried out within a definite socio-political context. This comes out most clearly especially in the area of peace building. *Blessed are the peace makers*, said Jesus, *they shall be called children of God*. St Paul saw his mission as being an agent of reconciliation of men with God and of human beings among themselves. Therefore, the bishop certainly has a role to play in peace building. Before then however, let us briefly remember the main role of the bishop as laid down in church doctrine.

The Triple Role of Bishops:

The Lord Jesus has been presented in our theology as having a triple mission of **priest, prophet and king**. This role and mission of the Lord Jesus is shared in different level and in different ways by the entire church and by various individuals within the church. This is true also of the bishops.

The bishop is a **prophet**. In this sense, the prophet is not necessarily some one who predicts the future but rather someone who has the charism and special gift to read accurately the signs of the times under the light of the Holy Spirit. He also has the duty and the privilege of proclaiming God's message to his people, especially God's message of peace and reconciliation. This is not always an easy task as we can see from the example of a prophet like Jeremiah who ended up being thrown into a dungeon because his homilies on a peaceful approach to the

dangers facing the Israel of his days were considered treason by the king and his advisers. Even today to be a messenger of peace and reconciliation can be quite “dangerous”.

The bishop has the role of a **king**, which in terms of his duties is the same as being a shepherd, a leader, indeed a servant leader. The Lord Jesus explained what it means to be a leader in the community founded by him. He reminds us that we are not like the leaders among the pagans who lord it over their subjects. Rather, he says that “the greatest among you shall be the servant of all”. He himself gave the example, as he put his belt around his waist and knelt down to wash the feet of his disciples. Being a servant leader entails that the bishop must not hesitate to courageously involve himself in the things that happen around him. He has to be in this regard a mediator among conflicting parties and a guide toward peace and reconciliation. He will be a leader to the extent that he is consistent and clear in his utterances as well as in his actions.

Finally, the bishop is a **priest**. This is perhaps the most characteristic of his roles. He leads his community in their efforts to relate to God in prayer and especially in the sacrifice of the mass. As a priest, his role is eminently spiritual and he puts before all, the divine dimension of human efforts, especially in the area of peace building. The bishop as priest will have to do all he can to dispose the mind and heart of his people for peace. He will also let them never forget that it is always useful and indeed effective to have recourse to divine intervention in our human efforts at reconciliation and peace. That is why to call for a special prayer for peace, organize special masses for peace, and similar religious programmes are indeed very important projects that we need to promote.

The circumstances of our apostolate.

In all the above, the bishop will be able to play this role depending on a variety of circumstances.

First, there is the **socio-political context** in which the bishop finds himself. In situations of open conflict, he may have as his major priority the task of conflict resolution. This often entails mediation, not excluding even dangerous interventions among belligerent groups.

In other instances, when a conflict has subsided, he could have a great role to play to build up the peace that is often fragile at the beginning. Peace building will entail efforts at rehabilitation and reconciliation of minds, with great emphasis on making available to people the

physical resources to put their life back in order, in areas like food, shelter, health care and education for children.

In any case however, whether there is conflict or not, the bishop will have a role to play in building peace through the promotion of justice and peace. It is a well known adage of our Catholic Social Teaching, popularized by Pope Paul VI, that “*if you want peace, work for justice*”. Very often, it is not immediately evident that our effort at justice in our society is indeed building and promoting peace. But we do know that where injustices are allowed to pile up without recourse, tensions build up and the ground is being prepared for a violent explosion of conflict sooner than later.

We can see, therefore that whatever the socio-political contexts may be, a bishop can find himself busy on many fronts.

Another circumstance that will determine how much a bishop can do in peace building will be **the position of the church within the society**. In my country, people at times accuse us of not doing enough to influence the political fortunes of our nation. They point to the example and the record of Church action in a country like Philippines or Poland. I always remind them that Nigeria is neither the Philippines nor Poland. The Archbishop of Abuja does not have the same political clout as the Archbishop of Manila or of Warsaw. In the countries where the church is a dominant force, by mere fact of her relative numerical strength, the responsibility to be pro-active and indeed to be very much in the front line of peace building activities is clear and evident. In other countries, where the church is just one out of many religious groups, it will be up to the local church to assess and work out how far it can effectively move. In my country Nigeria, Catholics form no more than about 25% of the population. We know that we can only offer our own suggestions to the solutions of the problems of the nation. We have no way to force our position on anyone, not even our Catholic members in public office. I must say however, that because of the coherence and objective merits of what we have to say, our message generally receives very good reception, well beyond the confines of the Catholic faith. Experience has shown that the church can always bear witness to justice and peace even in situations where it may be of very weak numerical strength.

Finally of course there are the circumstances of **the personal charism of each bishop**. Action in peace building takes different forms and people have different gifts and talents. The

important thing is that every bishop must do his best, using the resources available to him to promote peace in his environment.

The Bishop, never alone.

In all cases, the bishop should never work alone. First, he should work with his brother bishops, especially within the context of **the Episcopal Conference**. At times, a bishop may find himself a lone figure trying his best to bring about peace among belligerents, while the Bishops' Conference considers it too risky or perhaps not even advisable to get involved. As far as possible, efforts should be made so that the conference can move as a body. Experience has shown that when this happens and we talk with one voice, it is very difficult for anyone to ignore what we say. The tragic case happens when there is a split down the line of the Episcopal Conference, almost along the lines of the belligerents. In that case, the church becomes very much part of the problem rather than the solution. Our country Nigeria had a painful experience of such split among the bishops during the "Biafra War", and this made it impossible for the Church to play any appreciable mediating role in the conflict. Whenever such situation arises, a deep examination of conscience is called for so that guided by the same Catholic Social Doctrine, we should be able to arrive at a common mind on what needs to be done in the concrete circumstances of the nation.

The Bishop should also work with the rest of Christ faithful; with the clergy, with the religious and the laity. In these matters, the role of the laity is crucial. They are themselves generally actors in the very frontline of battle. The bishop is challenged to demonstrate leadership as he brings around him all the members of Christ's faithful so that together the church can, as far as possible, have a common voice to say to situations around us, whether it be in terms of conflict resolution, peace building or the promotion of peace and justice. Finally the bishop must reach out to others beyond the church, because there are good people everywhere. This starts with fellow Christians of other denominations on ecumenical level. We should also move towards inter-religious cooperation in peace building. Experience has shown that inter-religious cooperation in peace building is very powerful, especially when conflicts are presented in terms of religious differences. A joint delegation of Christians and Moslems appealing for peace in a conflict that is presumed to be between Christians and Moslems makes a lot of impact because it is not easy to ignore such a call. I have had personal experience of this in recent times,

working together with Muslim leaders in our country to diffuse potentially explosive situations of Christian-Muslim conflict.

In these days and age, there are other civil society organizations that are also involved in peace building. As far as possible, the Church should reach out to such groups. To the extent that we agree, we can also work together.

Finally, time may arise when it is necessary to take on political entities head-on, whether it is on the national or international level. We have the experience and example of the Holy See in this matter, as the church gets involved in a discreet but effective way in world efforts at peace making up to the highest level of the United Nations. Each local church will have to determine to what extent, how far and in what way it can get involved in this kind of peace making and peace building efforts.

Conclusion:

Peace is a major concern of our days, especially because of the emerging phenomenon of globalization. Conflict in any part of the world affects the rest of us. The church, precisely as a global organization *par excellence*, is well placed to address the global dimension of peace building. This is all the more urgent as we watch with trepidation hanging over humanity a veritable time bomb: the huge stock piles of weapons of mass destruction in the arsenals of many rich and powerful nations. The church has consistently condemned this situation. The local Church in the nations concerned must not be silent, less still apologetic. No one has a right to keep, let alone use these weapons. Those who have kept their stock piles of weapons of mass destructions have no moral credential to tell anyone else not to have them. The church therefore cannot but be involved. At the universal level, the Holy See is giving us the example. At the local level, bishops as individuals but above all as members of Episcopal Conferences must be seen to be indeed peace builders. We all want to be children of God. ***Blessed are the peace makers, for they shall be called children of God.***