

“THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD”

Homily: 4th Sunday of Easter, April 14th 2008

+John ONAIYEKAN, Archbishop of Abuja – Nigeria

Basilica of Sacred Heart, University of Notre Dame, USA.

1. One of the most familiar and favourite passages of the bible is Ps. 23 which we have just recited in the Responsorial Psalm for today’s liturgy. And yet most of us have no first hand experience of the life of a shepherd. We are perhaps more familiar with its synonym, “pastor”. But the pastor or shepherd we know is most likely our parish priest with no real sheep around. This is clearly a case where we are more familiar with the image than with the reality. But it is also a case where the image speaks as deeply if not much deeper than the reality.

2. The world of the bible, unlike our modern city life, is full of the experience of shepherds and sheep. Very early in the book of Genesis, we meet Abel, the good shepherd, whose offering of sheep was acceptable to God, unlike that of his brother Cain the farmer whose offering was not accepted. The jealousy which this provoked led to the first recorded murder in human history. It was the first and certainly not the last. The rivalry for the use of limited land resources between migrant animal rearers and sedentary farmers is until today cause for conflicts in many communities. David was a shepherd taken from following his father’s sheep to become king over Israel. He became a shepherd of the people of God, the Lord’s flock. The true shepherd of Israel is the Lord Himself.

3. It is in this light that the author of the psalms composed the beautiful poem: “The Lord is my shepherd...” The psalm expresses the deep confidence which the author has in God, who provides for all needs.

“There is nothing I shall want!

He has prepared a banquet for me in the sight of my foes”.

He is a dependable guide through the twists and turns of life.

“He guides me along the right path, for his name’s sake.”

He protects from all dangers:

“If I should walk in the valley of darkness,
no evil would I fear.

You are there with your crook and your staff,
With these you give me comfort.”

His goodness is lasting and abundant for all who are faithful to him.

“Surely goodness and kindness shall follow me
all the days of my life.

In the Lord’s own house shall I dwell forever.

4. Thus, when Jesus speaks of himself as the “Good shepherd” in the tenth chapter of John’s Gospel, the connotation for his hearers was very profound. They are reminded of God who is the Shepherd of Israel. Jesus starts with a simple observation which his hearers could easily grasp. During the night, shepherds keep their sheep within a protected fenced area for safety, against wolves and thieves. They come in at daybreak to collect their sheep for pasture. The gate keeper opens for them, each calls his sheep by name, and the sheep follow. It is fascinating that the sheep recognize the voice of their shepherd calling them by name!

Then Jesus goes further to declare: “I am the sheep gate”. All who want to be safe must pass through him. He it is who leads to green pastures. Elsewhere, he declares: “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life”. There is no other way. While others are thieves who come to steal and destroy, he has come “that they may have life, and have it to the full.” Jesus will conclude in the same passage: “I am the Good Shepherd” who lays down his life for the sheep.

5. Jesus kept his promise: he died for us on the cross. But God raised him up. St. Peter bears witness to this in his first homily to the crowds on the day of Pentecost. “Let the whole house of Israel know beyond any doubt that God has made both Lord and Messiah this Jesus whom you crucified”. The people took up the challenge: “What are we to do?” Peter’s answer was quick and definite:

- Repent
- Be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ

- Have your sins forgiven
- and receive the Holy Spirit.

Some three thousand people responded positively to the appeal of Peter, received baptism, and became members of the community of believers.

6. The same challenge is before us, as we now listen to the sacred word of God. It is not enough to chant that “The Lord is my Shepherd”. We must be disposed to follow his guidance in the choices and dilemmas which our daily lives put before us. Out there, there are many wolves and robbers targeting the sheep to destroy and to steal. We need to be vigilant, firm in the faith. If indeed we are Christians, then we must cast our lot with the Lord Jesus. It is St. Peter again who reminds us that that Christ died on the cross “so that all of us, dead to sin, could live in accord with God’s will.” If indeed as St Peter suggests, we were at one time straying like sheep, we should now return to the shepherd, the guardian of our souls. In fact, we are expected to go beyond avoiding sin. We are to be ready to suffer in innocence, following the example of Jesus. “He did no wrong. When he was insulted, he returned no insult. Instead, he delivered himself up to the One who judges justly.”

7. During this week, Notre Dame University is hosting a conference of the Catholic Peacebuilding Network. The conference is bringing together different categories of members of Christ’s faithful from all over the world, living in different socio-political circumstances. They all have in common the concern about peace in our world and the role of the Church in building that peace. I believe it is true to say that humanity is at a cross road on the crucial issue of peace. On the one hand, our planet is sitting on a dangerous time bomb of huge stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction sufficient to blow ourselves up many times over. It is no longer enough to be insisting on “non-proliferation” and breathing hot air on the necks of those some decide to consider not responsible enough to keep these weapons. It is necessary, if we are to be consistent and effective, to be serious about total elimination of such weapons. On the other hand, there is the good news that humanity has devised technological ways and means to make our planet a peaceful and prosperous home for all. The possibility for peace in our world is available. A lot is being said at many levels about how to save the planet, resolve conflicts and establish world peace.

The Church, as a significant player on the world scene, has her own particular role to play. This role will have to centre on how to bring the world to understand the basic message of today's liturgy: that the Lord is the Shepherd of humanity, leading, guiding and protecting it. But the Lord shepherds those who freely accept to be led by Him. We live in a world where many claim to have ways to peace conflicting with God's ways. The Lord Jesus declares that there is no other way beside his own. To look elsewhere is to lay ourselves open to the danger of wolves and brigands. We only need to look around us to see the wolves destroying the flock of God, sowing conflicts, violence and death. When shall we ever learn?

The Church will continue to deliver the message of peace which is God's gift to his world: a peace built upon truth, justice and love. Every member of the Church is challenged to be part of this project, not only as a member of the Church, but also in collaboration with other men and women of good will. It is highly encouraging to know that we are not alone in this holy enterprise. There are many out there who also love peace and are working towards it.

May the peace of the Lord be with us all. Amen.

CATHOLIC PEACEBUILDING NETWORK CONFERENCE

NOTRE DAME UNIVERSITY, SOUTH BEND, USA.

Panel Discussion on The Role of Bishops in Peacebuilding:

A contribution from the Nigerian Perspective.

By +John ONAIYEKAN, Archbishop of Abuja – Nigeria

Sunday 13th April, 2008.

1. After hearing the fascinating report from the Archbishop from Columbia, and the dramatic story of my colleague from Burundi and the painful ongoing tragedy in Northern Uganda, what I have to say from the Nigerian perspective will be fortunately rather boring. We did have an experience of a bloody civil war, the famous *Biafra* war, which lasted about thirty months, but ended in January 1970, more than 38 years ago. That war ended after a lot of avoidable human sufferings and loss of life, not with a negotiated peace agreement but with the victory of the Federal army over the Biafran forces. Since then, we have not had any more generalized breakdown of peace and order.
2. But that does not mean that we have been enjoying peace and harmony in the land. We have suffered a series of military coup d'états, one set of soldiers replacing another, generally on the pretext of addressing corruption or improving human rights. All we got was a chronic instability and mounting corruption over a period of over 30 years. The damage to our democratic culture is still a challenge before us even now. Because of weak government and fragile state, not only was corruption unaddressed, but also there were frequent outbursts of social conflicts on presumed religious and ethnic grounds.
3. The background to the above two endemic problems has to do with two factors in our country. We have a population of about 150 million, the largest in Africa. Indeed we say that out of every five Africans, one is a Nigerian. This huge population is divided almost equally between Muslims and Christians. This makes Nigeria “the greatest Islamo-Christian nation in the world” – in the sense that there is no other nation with as many Christians living side by side with as many Muslims. The matter of a harmonious relationship between the two faiths therefore poses a special challenge for us. Even in this

regard, I want to stress that we have not done badly at all. Unfortunately, our country has acquired an undeserved reputation as a nation where Muslims and Christians are always at each others throats. But the reality is far from this perception, which is the product of the world mass media with its predilection for bad news. BBC and CNN will never mention Nigeria unless we are fighting, killing each other or burning Churches and Mosques. But such outbursts of “madness” take place only about four days in the year. No one seems interested in what we are doing in the remaining 360 days of the year. The good news is that most of those times, we are living in peace in our communities, struggling together to survive in the midst of the bad effects of bad government which afflict us all irrespective of religion and raising our united voices in fervent prayers to God the Father of us all.

4. The other factor is the great natural resources of Nigeria, not only in terms of oil and gas which is well known to all, but other minerals and favourable agricultural conditions. As the price of crude oil soars, huge sums of money accumulate under the control of those who rule the nation. With little or no accountability, and with the collusion of foreign rogues and brigands, most of these rulers have not been able to resist the temptation to become looters, stealing incredible amounts of money, which they keep safe in foreign banks and investments. The corruption in our land has become “endemic” because it is being perpetrated precisely by those who are supposed to prevent it, and tolerated by the world powers who are supposed to discourage it. In the meantime, God’s blessings to the nation, which should have been used to give a life of dignity to the people, are stolen and squandered, leaving the masses in misery and distress. In Nigeria, we say that “the “oil boom” has become an “**oil doom**”. This unfortunately is the story of almost all African nations who have appreciable natural resources.
5. In this situation, what then is the action of the Church? With regard to religious peace and harmony, the Church has always preached good relations with people of other faiths, in line with the clear principles of our Church in these matters, especially from Vat. II, *Nostrae Aetate*, and the African Synod, *Ecclesia in Africa*. I am glad to say that this catechesis has paid off well. It is rare that Catholics are involved in fomenting or perpetrating violent acts of religious violence. And when we are attacked, which happens often when chaos erupts, we normally seek peaceful and legal ways for redress.

Unfortunately, in such cases, the response of government, especially in the Muslim dominated areas, is often most inadequate, at times even complicit.

6. In the other area of challenge: good governance and struggle against corruption, the Church has a well articulated programme of creating political awareness among the faithful. In the long and tedious years when the military governments claimed to be directing the process of transition to democracy, Catholics were well prepared to be fully involved in the debates and discussions, guided by the Catholic Social Teachings. The Vat. II document on the Laity, the African Synod document, the catechism of the Catholic Church, and more recently the Directory of the Catholic Social Teachings were all rich resources to guide them. In this, our Catholics were at great advantage over others who did not have such body of teaching from their religious families. Of course, when it comes to assessing the concrete results of these processes, the balance is not always positive. Many who entered the political arena with the right spirit of truth and justice were overwhelmed by the sea of corruption which flooded the nation. Some succumbed and betrayed their principles. Some ran away from the battle front because they could not cope. But a few stuck to their guns, and with skill and tenacity, managed to make a difference, “wise as serpents and simple as doves”. The Church considered the pursuit of good governance as a condition for peace in the nation. We were convinced that there is a limit to how much and how long the nation can sustain corruption and bad government. If nothing is done, tension will continue to build up and at some point the whole system will explode and collapse. Therefore, we kept insisting that to promote and work for good government is not just the best way but the necessary condition for building peace in the land. The recent example of apparently unexpected violent happenings in Kenya, a land for so long considered stable and peaceful, is a proof of this point.
7. It is in the above context that we place the role and actions of the bishops, as individual pastors of their dioceses, and in common action as Episcopal conference. Their action has been primarily as religious leaders and teachers. They did a lot, within the evolving political contexts of the nation, to give clear directives and consistent encouragement to the lay faithful, whose role it is to be in the thick of the political battles. They encouraged the Laity Council and other laity organizations to be active in politics and public life in general. The Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, which is the executive office of the Bishops’

Conference, produced and distributed many resource materials on the Catholic Social Teachings. Seminars and conferences were arranged to discuss issues of the moment. The bishops also endeavoured to make sure that Catholic political and other leaders had adequate spiritual direction and guidance, while respecting their due autonomy to make their political choices. In fact, Catholics became very active in all the political parties, where they are expected to be light and leaven.

8. It should be noted that the guidance of the bishops, especially when they intervened in serious national issues, was highly respected outside the Catholic fold. This is significant considering the fact that Catholics constitute less than 25% of the population. In these matters, the bishops have always intervened in a language that is for the common good of the nation. They have also been known to speak out courageously against abuses of government at times when no other religious group was able to speak. This precious ability to speak with one voice in delicate political situations is largely due to the fact that we share the same perspectives from the common social teachings of the Church, which we all vowed to uphold at our ordination. I have heard some Nigerians who are NOT Catholics say that the Catholic Bishops have saved Nigeria!
9. During the military era, we were in the front line of the fight for democracy. After the military left the scene in 1999, the bishops were no less concerned about the quality of democracy that emerged. In particular we were concerned that there be free and fair elections, and that those elected would serve the common good of the citizens. The two factors are of course connected. In both regards, our experience since 1999 has been almost disastrous. If there has not been a generalized breakdown of law and order in the country, it was not because there have not been more than enough provocation. Rather it has been first of all because of what we in Nigeria call “divine intervention”, or God’s mercy on our nation. Our reputation as the “most religious nation in the world” – according to the BBC – may after all not be undeserved! But beyond this spiritual explanation, we must also add the fact that the still fresh memories of the Biafra war has made Nigerians to abhor whatever would lead to another war. And so they patiently endure all manner of brigandage and rascality from their politicians, who often take undue advantage of this patient disposition. Thus, the bishops have had on various occasions to issue strong communiqués and statements demanding that basic rules of

good governance must be respected. In particular, we watch what happens at elections. With the help of sister churches and the generous free services of many of our people especially the youth, we were able to mobilize more than 30,000 election monitors in April 2007. This put us in a position to make authoritative statements on the conduct of the elections, challenging the blatant lies that the government election commission was dishing out to the world. The report of that exercise was published in a sizeable document, which has become a very important source and reference at the election tribunals. The story is not yet over.

10. The bishops have always tried to act in collaboration with others. On the ecumenical level, we are a major component of the Christian Association of Nigeria, (CAN) which is an umbrella organization of all Christian churches. I am the current president of that body. We are able to speak together in general appeal for peace and good government. CAN has also been very vocal when it comes to denouncing presumed injustice to Christians, either by Muslims or by governments. But we have not been able to do much about joint action for peace building in the nation. It is clear that we have not often been able to agree on political perspectives. But efforts are being made in this direction.

More significant is the emergence of the Nigerian Inter-religious Council, (NIREC). It started about 1990 by the free decision of the leadership of Christians and Muslims in Nigeria, with the enthusiastic support of the Obasanjo government. The mere existence of such a body was a great achievement. I have been with the Council from the very beginning. The Obasanjo regime did well to give it its full support. But I believe the Council would have been more effective with less government tendency to control. Efforts are now under way to restore a much needed balance. The latest outings of the Council have been quite encouraging, especially since the new Sultan, Sa'ad Abubakar III, became the head of the Muslim group. With me as Co-Chair, we have made various high profile joint appearances on the Nigerian Mass media, to appeal for peace and to promote good governance. The Council is plotting paths to move beyond conflict resolution to joint action for the common good of Nigerians.

Conclusion: Hopeful Signs:

We are now at a cross road in our country. We have seen ourselves brought to the lowest depth of bad governance and misrule. We believe that we can only get better. There are hopeful

signs that the recovery process has started. Election tribunals are overturning many election results, offering some remedies, though limited, to the grievous irregularities that attended the April 2008 elections. The present government under Yar’ Adua has proclaimed the priority of the rule of law, and is taking concrete actions in that direction. Government has set up a committee to review the electoral law in the light of our recent sad experience. Although Nigerinas in general have scarce confidence in the committee, its mere existence is an admission that something needs to be done to change the culture of massive election rigging. The national assemblies have started to probe certain financial activities of the previous regime of Obasanjo, and are coming out with mind-boggling revelations of massive frauds. We are still to see where all these moves will end. The Church is ever ready to be part of the process. But we are still waiting to be invited. Meanwhile, we are volunteering our advice and keep praying that we shall eventually emerge “a peaceful, united and prosperous nation under God” as our constitution proclaims.

CATHOLIC PEACEBUILDING NETWORK CONFERENCE

UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME, SOUTH BEND, USA

The Future of the Catholic Peacebuilding Network

Contribution to the Concluding Plenary Session

By +John ONAIYEKAN, Archbishop of Abuja – Nigeria

It is for me a great honour to be asked to share my visions on the future of the Catholic Peacebuilding Network, (CPN) at the end of our very fruitful days of reflection and sharing of ideas and experiences. I am fortunate to have been part of this process from Bujumbura, Burundi in 2006 to Bogota, Colombia in 2007 and now here in Notre Dame. These encounters have given me great opportunities to learn, to sharpen my own focus of ideas, to grow and to mature. I will present my vision under three headings: to consolidate what has been done, to open up new areas

of action, and to intensify mainstreaming of peacebuilding as a normal aspect of the life of the Church.

1. **Consolidation:** The CPN has been doing a wonderful work which it should continue to consolidate. We need to sustain our attention to the areas of continuing conflicts. It is not over until it is over. The victims of conflict should never be abandoned, and made to feel that the world is tired of them. We need to continue to work with patience and tenacity. We should continue to challenge people to action for peace.

It is also necessary to find the time and the room to reflect on peace actions taken. The CPN is rendering this valuable opportunity by bringing people together, not only to reflect on what they have been doing, but also to compare notes and learn from one another. For people on the ground, especially pastors, busy and always on the move all the time, it is a great grace to have an opportunity like we have these days to reflect and discuss what we have been doing, far away from the noise and smoke of the battlefronts.

Beyond this, CPN has been able to bring together academics and activists, thus providing the space to elaborate a theoretical systemization of peacebuilding concepts based firmly on practical experiences. Thus, peacebuilding is developing into an academic discipline in its own right, offering opportunities to learn and share best practices.

Finally, the CPN should continue to deepen and widen the mutually enriching network that it has been establishing with other institutions with similar aims and objectives, both within and outside the Catholic circles. The desire for peace is a widely shared concern and deeply felt conviction for many people, and we must do our best to muster and consolidate our joint efforts.

2. Breaking New Ground: The CPN should also continue to plot new areas of action, which it has already started to do. Permit me to indicate a few.

- Within the limits of its resources, it should be attentive to other areas of conflict that have not been addressed. Some such areas have been festering for decades, and are almost forgotten by the rest of the world. Others are new and may still be amenable to careful management. In this respect, we should not neglect to pay attention to areas where we can clearly notice mounting social tensions and imminent potential conflict. My country Nigeria has been in this state for at least two decades. At some point, we felt abandoned, and left to swim or sink. We asked: "Must we begin to kill ourselves or tear one another to pieces before anyone takes

note of the fact that there is no peace in our land?” Prevention is better than cure, goes the adage. With regard to peace, it is also much cheaper and more effective. Conflict prevention calls for more attention, boring though it may seem to be, compared with the more “glamorous” forms of active peace making.

- Another area that requires attention is for CPN to continue to explore ever more effective ways to strengthen the strategic link with Church structures at all levels; local and global. The structures I am particularly referring to here are dioceses, Episcopal conferences and the Holy See. CPN must be clearly “Catholic”. It can and should do this without losing its due autonomy of action. Talking of Church structures goes beyond the hierarchy. We are thinking of all that gives life to the Church as “family of God”, involving clergy, laity and members of the consecrated life.

-The ecumenical and inter-religious dimensions of peacebuilding can no longer be neglected in our present day global conditions. This is obvious where conflicts are seen with or given a religious colouring. In such cases, the power and effectiveness of inter-religious interventions cannot be overestimated. But even when conflicts cut across religious lines, the role of religious leaders is becoming increasingly appreciated. CPN may do well to explore more deeply power and effectiveness of specifically religious interventions in peace work. For too long, actions and utterances of religious fanatics have given religion an undeserved bad name. It is about time religion liberates itself from such abuses so that it can be what it has always claimed to be: an instrument of peace, not only among people, but between them and God.

Whether in fomenting conflicts or in peace building, the role of public authorities is crucial. A lot depends on those who take major decisions for the people, for better or for worse. CPN will have to continue to foster meaningful links with political circles in order to assist them to better serve the common good. War and peace has today become a global phenomenon. This puts a heavy burden on the existing fragile international institutions meant to promote global peace and harmony. But there can be no world peace without a reasonable level of global justice. This pushes the discourse into wider and deeper grounds. The direct link between unjust exploitation of natural resources and endemic conflicts in many parts of Africa has been tragically demonstrated in some sessions of our conference.

- CPN has already done an impressive work on how to reconcile the demands of justice with the imperative of peace in situations that are considered characterized by grave human

rights violations. The anguish and agony of Archbishop John Odama of Gulu and his Acholi Religious Leaders Group about the intransigent position of the International Criminal Court (ICC) for the arrest of the leaders of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) is a practical case of life and death. Pope John Paul II insists that we have to find a place for forgiveness in our peacebuilding equation. Can we aim beyond peace as cessation of hostility to full reconciliation of former enemies? How do we create the conditions for the humble admission of guilt and the generous offer of forgiveness? What about reparation? What reparation can anyone offer for the killing of a loved one? Often we are faced with a choice between revenge and forgiveness. Surely the choice is clear for the Christian. In concrete cases when we claim to be pursuing accountability, we are generally dealing with the justice of the victor over the vanquished, of the winner over the loser. The hurts and injuries are rarely only on one side. It is often therefore a matter of mutual forgiveness. Is this not the privileged domain of religion? How do we bring its healing expertise to bear on dramatic and tragic human situations?

3. The Church is for Peace: My last observation is that we should continue to stress that peace building is a normal project of the Church, not just an option for the few who like to busy themselves with such things. I agree with our brother from the Philippines who told us that peacebuilding should be “mainstreamed” into the life and actions of the Church. One of the beatitudes is for peacemakers. They will be called children of God. Jesus gave his peace to the Church before his ascension. The Church constantly invokes peace on the community at worship; “Peace be with you!” The Church must therefore have a “preferential option” for peace. This is in no way a matter of cheap pacifism, closing our eyes to the realities around us. It means that we pursue a programme of that peace which is not only a fruit of truth and justice, but above all a gift of God Himself. “If you want peace, prepare for war” is an old lie which has been plunging humanity into many tragic conflicts and bloody wars. The Church has been calling on humanity to follow the principle of building a just harmonious society: “If you want peace, work for justice”. This calls for a patient and consistent programme of working for a just peace in the world. This has to be on the top of the agenda and concerns of the Church under every circumstance.

The psalmist said long ago that unless the Lord builds, they labour in vain that build, and that the watchmen are keeping awake in futility if the Lord does not guard the city. That does not mean that the city will be built without labour or that the city will be safe without guards. What it

does mean is that we must our project for justice and peace must be anchored in prayer. This is an area where the Church has clear competence. It is also a task that all can and must be involved in. This is particularly important in our days when those who move and shake the world affairs rarely consider the relevance of prayer. Domine, da nobis pacem!