

COMMUNIQUE ISSUED BY THE GHANA CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

AT THE END OF ITS ANNUAL PLENARY ASSEMBLY

HELD IN HO IN THE VOLTA REGION OF GHANA

NOVEMBER 6 – 18, 2017

GREETINGS

Grace and Peace of God our Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name, be with you all (cf. Eph. 3:14-15).

PREAMBLE

We, the members of the Ghana Catholic Bishops' Conference, have held our annual Plenary Assembly at the Freedom Hotel in Ho in the Volta Region of Ghana from November 6 to 18, 2017 under the theme: *"Integral Pastoral Care for the Family in the light of Amoris Laetitia"*. Our theme was inspired by Pope Francis' Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on Love in the Family - Amoris Laetitia (AL), which literally means, "the Joy of Love", released on April 8, 2016. We are equally motivated, convinced and therefore affirm that the joy of love experienced by our families in Ghana is also the joy of love experienced by the Catholic Church in Ghana (cf. AL, #1).

In the course of our Plenary Assembly, we had a five-day spiritual retreat facilitated by Archbishop Arthur Roche, Secretary of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments. We paid courtesy calls on the Volta Regional Minister, Hon. Dr. Archibald Letsa, Deputy Volta Regional Minister and some Staff of the Volta Regional Coordinating Council as well as the Agbogbomefia of the Asogli State and President of the National House of Chiefs, Togbe Afede XIV and some of his sub-Chiefs and Queenmothers of the Asogli State. We also invited and interacted with Mr. William Darkwah, the Coordinator of the Free Senior High School (SHS) Programme. Among ourselves, we deliberated on our theme and appraised the socio-political situation of our country Ghana. In the context of our deliberations, we wish to share with you the following reflections.

THE SITUATION OF FAMILY IN GHANA

The Ghanaian family is experiencing emerging trends which are at variance with the ideal family image foreseen by the Church's tradition of faith and morals. Some of these changes began and were noticed decades ago. Such changes include the increase in the proportion of "cohabitation and other sexual unions", which were initially socially unacceptable, but are now gaining greater social tolerance. The phenomenon of teenage and single parenthood, poor or irresponsible parenting, separate household and distant marriages that make couples live apart are all aspects of contemporary trends in the Ghanaian family of today.

Children are influenced by the current social and digital experiences. Social media rule their lives and they must organize their experiences according to its dictates. Some must battle to find their orientation towards integral development amidst a myriad of alternatives with which they are enticed from different philosophies of life.

The urban elite live mostly in nuclear family systems that are by and large non-traditional in structure. Partners in marriage strive for self-development; they must sometimes maintain more than one job to sustain their desired standard of living and make sure that their children have the best of education and opportunity for growth and success in the future. Those that accept additional responsibilities towards extended family members experience more stress. Some families are in many practical regards alienated from their roots. Their children barely have any connections with members of their extended families and communities of origin. A good number of such children and youth may never have visited their places of origin.

SOME CONCERNS FOR FAMILY LIFE IN GHANA

The traditional vision of marriage and family life in Ghana attaches importance to procreation and sexuality. While social pressure is the same across the various models of family in terms of the place of sexuality and procreation in marriage, concepts, decisions, challenges and their solutions vary across the models. A general trend that seems to be affecting some youth across the social divide is their fixation on sexual functionality, particularly among young and middle-aged men.

The desire to be sexually active and effective among married men compels some to abuse popularly advertised alcoholic beverages, and what is worse, untested traditional or orthodox medication, believed to boost libido in men. Such young men come to realize after a few years, to their humiliation and surprise, that they have not succeeded in their adventure.

Most troubling, however, is the long standing traditional stigma associated with inability to give birth. In traditional Ghanaian communities, this inability is erroneously blamed on the woman, though there is increasing awareness to the fact that this challenge equally occurs in men. This challenge raises the additional concern for family pastoral care in Ghana. The many prayer requests from women and young couples seeking the blessing of fruits of the womb at various Church centres is evidence of the importance of childbirth in marriage and family life in Ghana.

Other concerns include the inadequate availability and involvement of parents in the direct upbringing of their children due to professional and busy-weekend engagements, the way couples and their respective families manage and resolve their differences which sometimes only breeds unforgiveness, instability, bitterness, disunity and consequently separation and the fate of young children in the face of such challenges. The increased monetization and exaggeration of customary marriages (erroneously named 'engagement') has become, in some cases, quite burdensome for the average young man in Ghana seeking the hand of a woman in marriage.

Apart from these specific realities of marriage and family life in Ghana, we recall some general experiences and challenges, identified in Chapter 2 of *Amoris Laetitia*, that may not necessarily be limited to specific cultures. These are extreme individualism which weakens family bonds and ends up considering each member of the family as an isolated unit, freedom of choice that lacks noble goals or personal discipline; and degenerates into an inability to give oneself generously to others, migration and its effect on populations, the ideological denial of differences between the man and woman, the culture of the provisional anti-birth mentality and the impact of biotechnology in the field of procreation, the canker of pornography and abuse of minors, inattention to persons with disabilities, lack of respect for the elderly, legal dismantling of the family and violence against women.

THE GOSPEL OF THE FAMILY

Despite the above situations, Christian marriages, as willed by God, are between one man and one woman. Such marriages are open to life and to the children that God grants them. The family remains the domestic Church, the vital cell of the society and it is in it that the Good News of God's love is known and lived in our midst. Many Ghanaian families, by their witness to God's will and love, build up the Church and society. We urge all Ghanaian families to remain united in true love and live in mutual understanding. Let us all contribute our best to inspire our society with the timeless values of family life.

INTEGRAL PASTORAL CARE FOR THE FAMILY

1. Pastoral Care

We understand Pastoral Care to mean "any assistance offered by the Church - through her ministers or other trained and designated persons - to couples or families in their growth toward the model of family which God

the Father Himself intended from the beginning (cf. Gen. 2:18-24) and which Jesus Christ renewed with His grace of redemption facilitated under the guidance of the Holy Spirit". In making adequate provision for the pastoral care of families, we are conscious of the fact that *"the Gospel of the family responds to the deepest expectations of the human person: a response to each one's dignity and fulfilment in reciprocity, communion and fruitfulness. This consists not merely in presenting a set of rules, but in proposing values that are clearly needed today, even in the most secularized of countries"* (AL, #201).

As Shepherds of the Family of God, we respectfully acknowledge that there are some difficult, irregular and imperfect situations of family life that need the most attention and care. Some of the difficult situations include families of migrant workers, families of those in prisons and in Psychiatric Homes, families of alcoholics, families with handicapped children and terminally-ill members, and single-parent families. Trial marriages, free unions, separated or divorced persons who have not remarried, customarily or civilly married persons who have divorced and have remarried, and homosexual unions are but some of the imperfect-irregular situations.

Given the importance of the family in the Church and society at large, the pastoral care of the family is a shared responsibility that involves the Clergy and Religious, Marriage Counsellors, the Parish-Church Community, Small Christian Communities (SCCs), Couples and Associations of Families. Special attention need to be given to the formation of special agents to accompany the youth at their various stages of development, to assist their understanding of the vocation of Marriage and Family-Life and the religious life and to prepare adequately for it.

Pastoral Interventions

1. Remote Care: Preparation for marriage begins from childhood; in fact from birth. The experiences of children from their family of origin may be carried along to their own future families. Those best prepared for marriage are probably those who learned what Christian marriage is from their own parents, who chose each other unconditionally and renew daily that decision. Parents and pastoral agents must intervene to effect this mandate in the life of our children.
2. Proximate Care: In preparing prospective couples for marriage, Pastoral agents and Marriage Counsellors should assist them to recognize the "good times" and "bad times" of marriage, encourage them to discuss honestly what each expects from marriage, what they understand by love and commitment and what kind of life they would like to build together. The decision to marry should never be encouraged unless the couple has discerned deeper reasons that will ensure a genuine and stable commitment. In the light of the demands of this stage, we direct that all proximate preparations for marriage shall take normally six months in the Catholic Church in Ghana.
3. Immediate Care: In their preparation for marriage, the couple must be encouraged to see the sacrament not as a single moment that becomes a part of a past and its memories, but a reality that permanently influences the whole married life. They are to be encouraged to make the liturgical celebration a profound personal experience and to appreciate the meaning of each of the signs. We stress that the words of consent (the marriage vow) cannot be reduced to the present; they involve a totality that includes the future: "until death do us part". We encourage less-expensive wedding ceremonies.
4. Post-Marriage Care: As the years of marriage roll on, a couple's experience of love may grow stagnant and may lose the very excitement that should be its propelling force. Those who accompany couples in their marriage are encouraged to teach them that love needs time and space: time to talk things over, to share plans, to listen to and appreciate one another and to build a stronger relationship. Through these, couples learn how to plan and spend free time together, share moments of recreation with the children, celebrate important events together and share opportunities for spiritual growth. In all these, family prayer and spirituality will reap the greatest fruits; *'for the family that prays together, stays together'*.

5. Care for Difficult and Irregular Situations: Special discernment is indispensable for persons in this category. Care givers shall regard such persons as part of the ecclesial community; not as excommunicated. Avoid language or conduct that discriminates, show them respect, make efforts to reconcile and mediate through neutral and impartial interventions. It should be noted that the Christian community's care for such persons is not to be considered a weakening of its faith and testimony to the indissolubility of marriage; rather, such care is a particular expression of its charity.

GENERAL PASTORAL GUIDELINES

1. In cases of civil marriage or even simple cohabitation (in our context, customary marriages), we adopt the recommendation of Pope Francis that *"when such unions attain a particular stability, legally recognized, are characterized by deep affection and responsibility for their offspring, and demonstrate an ability to overcome trials, they can provide occasions for pastoral care with a view to the eventual celebration of the sacrament of marriage"* (AL, 293)
2. In dealing with irregular situations in the case of Marriage and Family Life, *"two ways of thinking have been dominant in the Church's history: casting off and reinstating. The Church's way, from the time of the Council of Jerusalem, has always been the way of Jesus, the way of mercy and reinstatement... The way of the Church is not to condemn anyone forever; it is to pour out the balm of God's mercy on all those who ask for it with a sincere heart... For true charity is always unmerited, unconditional and gratuitous"* (AL, 296).
3. "In considering a pastoral approach towards people who have contracted a civil marriage, who are divorced and remarried, or simply living together, the Church has the responsibility of helping them understand the divine teaching of grace in their lives and offering them assistance so they can reach the fullness of God's plan for them, something which is always possible by the power of the Holy Spirit. (cf. AL, 297). The logic of integration is the key to their pastoral care, a care which would allow them not only to realize that they belong to the Church as the Body of Christ, but also to know that they can have a joyful and fruitful experience in it. (cf. AL, 299)
4. Discernment must help to find possible ways of responding to God and growing in the midst of limits. By thinking that everything is black and white, we sometimes close off the way of grace and of growth, and discourage paths of sanctification which give glory to God. Let us remember that *"a small step, in the midst of great human limitations, can be more pleasing to God than a life which appears outwardly in order, but moves through the day without confronting great difficulties"*. The practical pastoral care of ministers and of communities must not fail to embrace this reality. (cf. AL, 305)

ISSUES OF NATIONAL INTEREST

1. Education and Free SHS

We commend the government for rolling out the Free SHS programme which seeks to make education accessible for many more graduates from the JHS level. We are aware of the teething challenges of this initiative. We urge that, as a matter of necessity, all stakeholders should help to ease the challenges of overcrowding in the

dormitories, classrooms and dining halls of our Schools. A conducive teaching-learning environment is crucial for the effective implementation of the Free SHS programme.

2. Phenomena of Land Guards, Political Vigilante Groups and Nomadic Herdsmen

We cannot ignore the fact that land guards, political vigilante groups and nomadic herdsmen have unleashed violence on Ghanaians for a very long time. These groups are employed by Ghanaians to protect their property but often terrorize fellow Ghanaians who have variant interests in the same property. Vigilante groups are creations of some politicians who use them for their political gain. While we commend Government for calling on the security agencies to stop the violent activities of land guards, vigilante groups and nomadic herdsmen; we state that we need more action than words. Government must walk the talk. We demand that our security agencies shall disengage these groups once and for all.

3. Mob Injustice

The culture of mob lynching of perceived criminals is a sign of an impatient society that has no trust and respect for due process, rule of law and dignity of human life. We recommend a radical education that acknowledges that every human life in Ghana is sacred and ought to be respected from the moment of conception to natural death. We further encourage continuous education of every Ghanaian to respect due process which is a basic tenet of our democratic dispensation.

4. Incidence of Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse in any form is unacceptable but sexual abuse against minors is not only evil, but also criminal and a serious indictment on society. Perpetrators of sexual abuses must face the wrath of the law, while we commend them into God's mercy. We recommend further that the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection should collaborate with the Ghana Education Service to put in place feasible structures for child protection in our Basic Schools. Our children should be informed and formed on how to identify and report sexual predators. We have put in place and are running various interventions on Child Protection in the Catholic Dioceses in Ghana.

5. Religious Leadership

We acknowledge with admiration the expansion of the Christian family in Ghana through the ministry of very renowned men and women of God of the new Religious Movements. We congratulate their genuine efforts of evangelization. However, we express complete disapproval for persons whose conduct and ministry only seek to worsen the dignity and capacity of the human person and exploit the resources of unsuspecting Ghanaians.

6. Bribery and Corruption

Our previous directives on this issue seem to yield no positive result. We reiterate that corruption in every facet of Ghanaian life is not only perceived but very rife. This is unacceptable and must be dealt with at all times and at all levels of human endeavour. Since corruption is cancerous to the life and vitality of our nation, we call on every Ghanaian - individuals, Government agencies, service providers, public and civil servants - to stand up and to defend the cause of justice, probity and accountability. Ghana must lead and live the crusade against corruption.

7. Galamsey menace

We commend Government, the Media, Civil Society and Faith-based Organizations for their tireless efforts in fighting the menace of illegal mining that has plagued our nation. Let us sustain our efforts to reverse the harsh consequences of this self-inflicted destruction. We remind Ghanaians that our natural resources belong to those gone before us, those of us living and those who will come after us. We must therefore refrain from selfish

exploitation of our natural resources to the extent that generations after us will be deprived of their fair share of these resources.

8. Sanitation and Waste Management

A recent UNICEF report ([Progress on Drinking Water, Sanitation and Hygiene: July 2017 – Updates and SDG Baselines](#)) perceived Ghana as one of the dirtiest countries in the world. This is a shameful record. Let us rally in support of the campaign to roll back our country's unsavoury sanitation challenges. As a Church, we recently launched an E-waste Management Project to manage electronic waste through aggressive education in order to preserve a safe environment for future generations.

9. Traditional Rulers, Values and Customs

Our culture defines and shapes our destiny. We have observed how some religious leaders and their followers show complete disregard for some of our cultural values and customs through the use of demeaning words on radio, television and in their churches. We caution all who engage in such conduct and urge them to show due respect and positive regard to our traditional rulers, values and customs. We, however, reject traditional customs that dehumanize the dignity and wellbeing of the human person.

10. Eastern Corridor Road

We appeal to the Government to speed up the construction of the Eastern Corridor Road which is in a deplorable state. The poor state of the road is not only affecting economic activities of the areas concerned but has enormous health and development implications. The road poses great danger to the lives of motorists, traders and tourists.

11. On-going Conflicts

We have expressed in previous Communiqués our displeasure about the Nkonya-Alavanyo conflict. Various steps towards a peaceful resolution seem not to bear fruit. People continue to die on both sides of the divide; people continue to live in fear; farming and employment avenues are on the decline.

We reiterate our call on all parties, to the on-going conflicts in Nkonya-Alavanyo and Bimbilla, to smoke the peace pipe and work for reconciliation and peace. We entreat the government to open up employment avenues in these areas to engage the youth on both sides. This, we believe, will dissuade them from engaging in activities detrimental to peace efforts.

12. Crisis in the Republic of Togo

We have observed with grave concern the destruction of life and property in our neighbouring country, the Republic of Togo; a situation that affects Ghanaian families directly and indirectly. We appeal to the President of Ghana, through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Regional Integration, to intervene urgently to ensure the safety of Ghanaians along the Ghana-Togo borders. We encourage all to treat refugees from Togo with love and warmth.

WORLD DAY OF THE POOR

We entreat all Catholic Parishes and Church-communities in Ghana to join the Catholic Church worldwide to celebrate the first annual World Day of the Poor scheduled for the Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time – Sunday, November 19, 2017 – on the theme: *“Let us love, not with words but with deeds”* (1 Jn. 3:18).

CONCLUSION

May the Holy Family of Nazareth - Jesus, Mary and Joseph - grant that the families of all Ghanaians may be places of communion and prayer, authentic schools of the Gospel and may all who have been hurt or wounded find ready comfort and healing through the balm of the Holy Spirit. Amen!

Issued on Friday, November 17, 2017

in the St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church, Kpevele

in the Catholic Diocese of Ho.

MOST REV. PHILIP NAAMEH

ARCHBISHOP OF TAMALE &

PRESIDENT, GHANA CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

<http://cbcgha.org/cbc/16-news/383-communicue-issued-by-the-ghana-catholic-bishops-conference-2>