

# **“These People Honour Me with Their Lips:” A Study of Isa 29:13 and Its Implications for Faith and Evangelisation in Nigeria**

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## **0. Introduction**

The condemnation of external hypocritical worship or practices is found so often in the prophets (for example, Isa 1:12-17; Amos 5:21-24; Isaiah 58). Jesus, too, was critical of external religiosity without the accompanying inner disposition (Matt 6:16-18). Today, many Churches in Europe are getting empty; Churches in Africa are filling up, and in both continents, crimes are on the increase. The phenomenon of massive and largely voluntary conversion of Africans, and in particular Nigerians, to Christianity in recent centuries deserves a more careful and deeper study than has so far been done. As Europe focuses on why people are leaving the Church, Africa in general, and Nigeria in particular, needs to focus on why the pews are full and yet crimes are on the increase.

If the multiplication of Churches remains on constant increase just as their members increase, and the crime rate remain as high as it is with its accompanying social chaos and disorder, then something is certainly wrong somewhere. It is either these churches are not authentic, and thus, do not inculcate authentic Christian faith into their adherents, or the problem is with their adherents themselves. In this latter case, the churches teach genuine Christianity but their followers (adherents) refuse to imbibe the values and ideals of Christianity. Are Nigerians, and particularly Christians, genuinely religious? Are the outward religious expressions and prayers actually authentic? If the multitude of people, who flock to churches and worship centres, truly approach God with their whole heart and sincerely fear God, would they not have been able to “leaven the yeast” of the corruption, evil and disorder in our society today?

These disturbing questions motivate this presentation. The prophet Isaiah had to battle with the hypocritical and ritualistic worship of the people of his time. This is also true of other prophets even contemporaries of Isaiah like Micah and Hosea (cf. Hos 7:14; 8, 2; 10:1-2 and Mic 3:11; 6:6ff.). Our contemporary world is not free of such a “cosmetic” and “flamboyant religiosity.” In our society today, the worship of God has become perfunctory and superficial.

The presentation is divided into four main sections. The first part provides the background of Isa 29:13 and situates it in its immediate context (Isaiah 28-29). The second section focuses on the exegetical analysis of Isa 29:13. This is followed by a brief reflection on the motif of hypocritical worship in selected passages of the OT, particularly from the prophetic *corpus* and wisdom literature. The last section focuses on the implications of paying lip service to God for faith and evangelization.

## **1. Background and Immediate Context of Isa 29:13**

Chapter 29 of the book of Isaiah falls into the first part of Isaiah, known as Proto-Isaiah. Most chapters in proto-Isaiah find their context in the kingdom of Judah in the Eight Century B.C., during the reign of Uzziah, Jotham, and particularly Ahaz (735-726) and Hezekiah (716-700). This period was characterized by the history of the Assyrian expansion. This became even more aggressive when Tiglath-pileser took over power in 745 B.C. The armies of the king at this period made a lot of conquests and moved deep into the West, to “conquer and reduce to submission entire territories, whose only options are vassalage or annihilation. The practice of systematic deportation of the conquered populations results in the suppression of any attempt to

revolt.”<sup>1</sup> Isaiah urged the kings of his time to lean on God alone, to let go of fear and human alliances. Isaiah strongly rebuked the Jews for their hypocrisy. What comes out of their mouths did not match what God heard from their hearts. They might have looked very good from the outside, but they gave lip-service to all of King Hezekiah's reforms, and participated in all the rules and rituals in the temple worship without inner conviction. Samaria, the Northern Kingdom, was judged because of her idolatry. But Judah's hypocrisy was no better in God's eyes. This spirit of hypocrisy never died out. Jesus points out that the Pharisees were no better, when he quotes this verse in Mark 7:5-13.

The oracle in Isa 29 is made up of different individual units that have been editorially shaped to form a unified passage. It continues the theme of chapter 28, which is “the strangeness of God’s plan with Israel and the inability of a stupefied and hardened people to comprehend it.”<sup>2</sup> Starting from chapter 28, the prophet announces “the twofold mystery of the hardening of Hearts and God’s plan (Isa 28:1-29:14).” We find reproof to three sorts of sinners namely: Those that were stupid, regardless of the warnings which the prophet gave them (vv. 9-12), those that were formal and hypocritical in their religious performances (vv. 13, 14), those politicians that atheistically and profanely despised God's providence, and set up their own projects in competition with it (vv. 15 & 16). The reproof is followed by precious promises of grace and mercy to a distinguished remnant that God would sanctify, and in whom he would be sanctified, when their enemies and persecutors should be cut off (vv. 17-24). The oracles in Isa 29:1-8 are certainly connected with the events of 701. That pericopé recurs and is used to emphasize again the work of the judgment of Yahweh on Jerusalem. Yahweh condemns her infidelity and abandons her to the enemies that surround her. In this passage, the city is called with a symbolic name, “Ariel,” the popular etymology of which is “Lion of God.”<sup>3</sup> The city was first portrayed in her initial state, pre-Israelite, just as she was when David encamped against her to seize her. Latter in the passage, Yahweh also promised that Ariel’s enemies will be exterminated. The hearts of its inhabitants are hardened and they refused to pay heed to the words of the prophet, Isaiah (29:9-11). The message is sealed without curse. Isa 29:13, which is of interest to us, “brings a complement to the diagnosis of the hypocrisy of the heart,”<sup>4</sup> already hinted at. It holds that the people honor God with words but carefully stops at the threshold of faith. At that point in time, Judah was only going through the motions devoid of any true devotion (cf. Isa 58:2ff) a routine of following religious customs, not in bringing sacrifices of praise.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. Exegetical Analysis

*Wayyomer ‘adonāy ya ‘an ki nāgāsh ha ‘am hazzeh b’piw ub’ēptaw  
Kibduni w’ēlibo rihaq mimmeni wabathi yir’atam oti mitzwat ‘anasim  
m’ēlummadah*

The Lord said: these people draw near with their mouth and with their lips they honoured me. But their heart is far away from me and it happens that their fear of me is human(s) commandment learnt by rote.

<sup>1</sup> Anne-Marie Pelletier, “Isaiah,” in *The International Bible Commentary* (Collegeville 1998) 964.

<sup>2</sup> B.S. Childs, *Isaiah* (London 2001) 214.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. J. Jensen – W.H. Irwin, “Isaiah 1-39,” in *New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 246. See also other possible meanings.

<sup>4</sup> Pelletier, “Isaiah,” 982.

<sup>5</sup> Childs, *Isaiah*, 219, 214.

The verb *nāgāsh* used here is a *niphal* perfect because of the conversive *waw* at the beginning of the narrative sequence. It assumes the meaning of habitual imperfect, because this people draw near with their mouth. When he says, “they draw near with the mouth and the lips,” he describes their hypocrisy. This is the interpretation given to the verb *nāgāsh* and it appears to be the more probable reading, though there are other possible translations. Some translate it, “to be compelled,” and others, “to magnify themselves;” but the word contrasted with it, “to be far away,” which is used afterwards indicates clearly that the true reading is that which is most generally accepted. This verb is common in OT. It occurs 125 times, and it means “to draw near” or “approach” in a variety of contexts. Mundane sense of “approach referring to physical proximity is found predominantly in the Pentateuch and former prophets” (cf. Gen 18:23; Exod 34:30ff. etc.). In the book of Exodus, the verb is used to refer to those who “draw near” to God on Mt. Sinai, where he meets with Moses and conveys to him the details of law covenant intended for all Israelites (Exod 19:22; 20:21; 21:6; 24:2).<sup>6</sup> The reading, “draw near,” is confirmed, not only by the Masora on the text, but by the citation of it in Matt 15:7 and designates the approach of these people to God, in acts of religion and devotion, in praying to him, and praising of him, and expressing great love and affection for him, and zeal for his cause and interest; but were all outwardly, with their lips and mouths only but have removed their heart far from God.

The verb *rahaq* is *nifal* perfect and has the meaning of “to be removed” or “to be far away.” The verb occurs in diverse forms: sixty times with this and related meanings.<sup>7</sup> In Isa 29:13, Yahweh laments through the prophet that the heart of the people are “far from” him; that their worship is vain and superficial.

The two verbs *nāgāsh* and *rahaq* clearly contrast each other just as *peh* and *sapah* contrast with *leb*. It is important to note that the words *peh* and *sapah* are in the singular and dual construct respectively. The pronominal suffixes, at the end of the expressions *ub<sup>e</sup>sptaw* and *b<sup>e</sup>piw.*, are all in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person masculine singular, agreeing with the collective usage of the expression *ha‘am hazzeh* in number and gender. There is a sudden shift to the third person common plural in the verb *kabed*, which is used in the *piel* in the passage and means “to honour.” Then comes a contrastive *waw* in *ulibo*, and the pronominal suffix is still 3<sup>rd</sup> person masculine singular. This *waw* highlights the difference between the external attitude of the people towards Yahweh and what they truly believe in, that is, the disposition of their hearts. He makes use of a figure of speech, very frequent in Scripture, by which one part or class denotes the whole. He has selected a class, exceedingly appropriate and suitable to the present subject, for it is chiefly by the tongue and the mouth that the appearance of piety is assumed. Isaiah, therefore, also includes the other parts by which hypocrites counterfeit and deceive, for in every way they are inclined to lies and falsehood. Christ himself spoke about the washing of the hands, which the Pharisees regarded as a manifestation of holiness, and which they blamed the disciples for neglecting, in order to

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<sup>6</sup> S. D. Renn, ed., *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words: Word Studies for Key English Bible Words Based on the Hebrew and Greek Texts* (Peabody 2005) 300. See also other meanings like the promise of the Messiah who will “draw close” Jer 30:21; Priests “draw near to the altar in solemn preparation for their divine service” (Exod 28:43; 30:20; Num 4:19; 8:19). It is also used to refer to drawing near for the purpose of sexual relations (Exod 19:15), approaching the civil court for judgment (Isa 14,1; 50,8), assembling for battle. Moreover, prophets are said to “approach” the intended recipient of God’s revelation in order to convey that divinely received message (cf. 1 Kings 20:13, 22, 28).

<sup>7</sup> Renn, ed., *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words*, 366.

convict them of hypocrisy (cf. Matt 15:7). He reminded them many times that what really matters is the spirit of the law and not just the letter, a motif taken up later by St. Paul.

The prophet employs two organs that are external in the human body (the mouth and lips) in order to depict the external and outward profession, which conveys the message of idle ostentation. While the people do this, they think that they have done all that is required. They think that it is simply enough to open their lips in honour of God. He also uses the imagery of the heart, which is interior in the human body, to portray the idea of authentic worship. True worshippers of God, out of the deepest feeling of the heart, present themselves before God, while they yield their obedience, and confess and acknowledge how far they are from a perfect discharge of their duty and the worship of God.

With the “lips” and “mouth,” therefore, the Prophet contrasts the “heart,” the sincerity of which God enjoins and demands from his followers. If this is wanting, all works, whatever brilliancy they possess, are rejected by him; for “he is a Spirit,” and therefore chooses to be “worshipped” and adored in “the spirit” and the heart. (John 4:24). If we do not begin with this, all that humans profess by outward gestures and attitudes will be empty display. These were not employed in God’s service, which is the main thing he requires and regards, but were engaged elsewhere; while their bodies were presented before him, and their mouths and lips were moving to him, their affections were not set upon him, nor the desires of their souls unto him, nor had they any real hearty concern for his glory. They were tended towards idol.<sup>8</sup>

Again in the expression, *yir’atam oti*, the plural suffix surfaces again. There is a constant shift from the singular to the plural throughout the verse. This could be to accommodate the fact that the word *ha’am* can denote singular or plural. Although grammatically, it is a singular noun, it connotes many people and particularly, the Israelites. Usually in the OT *corpus*, *yir’at Yahweh* or *yir’at Elohim* refers to the reverential fear of God.<sup>9</sup> This is manifested in authentic observance of the laws and commandments of God.

*w<sup>e</sup>libo rihag mimmeni* translates as “and their hearts are far from me.” The heart is the seat of thoughts and affection. In Jewish thought, *leb* or *lebab* (heart) refers to human intelligence and will power. Moreover, “in Hebrew anthropology the heart was considered the organ of reasoning.”<sup>10</sup> According to the Jewish understanding of the heart, it is the seat of all emotions. This was also the reason why Jeremiah spoke about a law written in the heart (cf. Jer 31:31-34). So when the law is written in the heart, it permeates the entire person and obedience to the law becomes facilitated. Commenting on that passage, von Rad talks about “a new man, a man who is able to obey perfectly because of a miraculous change of his nature.”<sup>11</sup> Thus when the law is written in their hearts, they become embodiments of the will of God contained in the law. Any other part of the body could have been used to represent the whole person. However, Isaiah as well as Jeremiah, preferred to use the heart because of its significance for their audience. The heart is the nucleus of all emotions like love, pity, thought, hate etc. According to this line of thought, it is with the heart that the person can learn to observe or obey the covenant and the law of God. By writing the law in their hearts, God makes it ready and familiar to them, at hand. He

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Pope Francis, *Lumen Fidei* (Vatican City 2013) p.16.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. L. Koehler –W. Baumgartner, *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros* (Leiden 1985) 400.

<sup>10</sup> Couturier, *New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 332. In Isa 40:2, by speaking to Israel’s heart, God is trying to convince her of his concerns about her. The same idea is portrayed in Gen 34:3; 50:21; Hos 2:16. For the Greeks, the seat of reasoning and emotion is the head or the mind.

<sup>11</sup> von Rad., *Old Testament Theology* vol. 2, 212- 213.

makes them to be disposed to obey and conform to his commandments and laws. He will make them enter into a more intimate relationship with him. God is always faithful. Infidelity was necessarily on the people's part.

The Deuteronomists "do not expect a heart to be put in the people, but rather that the old one will be circumcised," and this implies the reality of conversion; that is, conversion becomes a reality (Deut 10:16; 30:6). This hope was also present in Jer 4:4; 9:24-25. But in Jer 31:31-34, he supersedes this belief based on the fact that conversion seems to be impossible. Therefore, one can see continuity in the essentials of the former and the latter covenants, but there is a profound discontinuity in the means given to Israel to fulfil the new one. God's plan revealed in the old covenant remains the same.<sup>12</sup> The new covenant announced by Jeremiah does not imply a change of the law but a new relation with God's law in the sense of interiorization.<sup>13</sup> This is also what Isaiah is advocating.

We all know the importance of the heart to human existence. No one can live without a heart. It is the centre of the activities in the human body. Biologically speaking, when the heart stops to pump, death occurs! When the heart is sick, it affects the whole body metabolism. Therefore, the heart can rightly be called the engine, the power-house of the body. It is the centre of emotions like love, pity, reflections, thoughts etc. Another part of the coin is that sometimes in the bible, a part of the body is used to represent the whole. This is why even in the modern usage of the word "heart," if one is said to "have a bad heart," or that "one's heart is drained of water," it simply means that the person is wicked. On the other hand, if one is said to "have a good heart," it means that the person is good, loving, benevolent etc. Therefore, the heart cannot be either "good" or "bad" in isolation of the owner of the heart. It has to do with the personality of the person bearing the heart.

*mitzwat 'anasim m'elummadah* – Human commandment learnt by rote

According to the Oxford Advanced Learner's dictionary, to learn something by rote is the process of learning something by repeating it until you remember it rather than by understanding the meaning of it. Their religion is not sincere. Sure, they still sing the old songs and repeat the terminology of worshipping God; but their hearts are simply not in it at all. This describes a situation in which some religious leaders have usurped the place of God. Even morality is determined and founded upon human opinions, rather than upon the Word of God. This always results in a condition where people dispute and contradict one another with little or no reference to God's word. A great deal of this very philosophy also dominates the religious thinking of our very day.

### **3. Motif of Hypocritical Worship in Some Other Parts of the OT**

There are a lot of polemics, particularly in the prophetic literature, against external worship or offering of sacrifice in the OT, without the accompanying piety or inner disposition towards God. Some examples are reflected here.<sup>14</sup>

Amos 5:21-22: I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.

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<sup>12</sup> X. Leon-Dufour., ed., (New York 1967) 77-78.

<sup>13</sup> Document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *Il Popolo ebraico e le sue Sacre Scritture nella Bibbia Cristiana* (Vatican 2001) 95.

<sup>14</sup> All the references are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition, New York 1989.

Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon.

Hos 6:6: For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.

Micah 6:6-8

With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Isa 1:11-12

What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more;

Jer 7:21-22

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Add your burnt offerings to your sacrifices, and eat the flesh. For in the day that I brought your ancestors out of the land of Egypt, I did not speak to them or command them concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices.

Isa 66:3

Whoever slaughters an ox is like one who kills a human being; whoever sacrifices a lamb, like one who breaks a dog's neck; whoever presents a grain offering, like one who offers swine's blood; whoever makes a memorial offering of frankincense, like one who blesses an idol. These have chosen their own ways, and in their abominations they take delight;

Prov 15:8: The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord, but the prayer of the upright is his delight.

Prov 21:3: To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice.

Prov 21:27: The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination; how much more when brought with evil intent.

Psalms 50:7-14

"Hear, O my people, and I will speak, O Israel, I will testify against you. I am God, your God. Not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you; your burnt offerings are continually before me. I will not accept a bull from your house, or goats from your folds. For every wild animal of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the air, and all that moves in the field is mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the

world and all that is in it is mine. Do I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats?  
Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and pay your vows to the Most High.

Far from condemning sacrifice or worship of God, these passages rather call attention of the people to the disparity between their religious life and their moral life. The daily life of the people was inconsistent with the demands of God. They took a lot of care to pray, worship God and perform sacrifices. The main accusation of the prophets was that while offering sacrifices and pretending to be praying to God, they neglect justice utterly and even exploit the poor, the weak, the widows and orphans of their society.

Most of these accusations point to the hypocrisy and external religion without an accompanying internal and honest religion. Animal and cereal sacrifice was a matter of daily routine in the Jerusalem temple. These ceased during the Babylonian exile because there was no temple. The sacrifices resumed after the reconstruction of the Temple in 515 B.C. From the year 70 AD when the temple was destroyed till date, the system of animal and cereal sacrifices have been abandoned. However, some Zionist Jews believe that the expected Messiah will come and will have the Temple reconstructed so as to resume sacrifices in the Temple.

#### **4. Implications for Faith and Evangelisation in Nigeria**

##### **4.1 Year of Faith**

The Pontiff Emeritus, Benedict XVI, declared the Year of faith due to the “crisis of faith” in Europe, the former stronghold of Christian faith, and through globalization, has become a worldwide crisis. This situation, according to the Pontiff, is as a result of the secularization, religious pluralism, migration, economic crisis, science and technological research, civic and political life. We recognize that “to rediscover the content of the faith that is professed, celebrated, lived and prayed, and to reflect on the act of faith, is a task that every believer must make his/her own, especially in the course of this Year.”<sup>15</sup> The faith crisis situation calls for a new evangelization for the transmission of faith. It is a transition from being reactive to being proactive in the sense that the challenges of the world become new opportunities for evangelization rather than new threats in evangelization. The Social media, for example, has become very instrumental in the transmission of faith even with all its challenges. The Pontiff Emeritus describes the year of faith as a “propitious occasion for the faithful to understand more profoundly that the foundation of Christian faith is the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.”<sup>16</sup>

The history of Israel portrays them as having living faith in God. However, it also shows the temptation of unbelief, to which the people yielded many times. If we follow the prophets and other OT passages that condemn hypocritical worship of God, it is clear that they are all pointing at living in authentic manner. This implies abiding by the rules and commandments of God. It manifests in correct and positive attitude towards God and neighbour. It is not by chance that the Decalogue contains laws with these two dimensions.<sup>17</sup> Jesus Christ summarized the whole 613 Jewish laws and precepts into two: love of God and neighbour.

The problem of cosmetic or flamboyant religiosity did not begin today. It is clear from the Isaian passage under study that it was also the problem of the Jews of that time. This was also evident

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<sup>15</sup> *Porta Fidei* 9.

<sup>16</sup> Pope Benedict XVI's *Deus Carita Est*, n.1.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. S. Kizhakkeyil, *The Pentateuch: An Exegetical Commentary* (Mumbai, 2009) 436.

at the time of Christ. This spirit of hypocrisy never died out. Jesus points out that the Pharisees were no better, when he quotes this verse in Mark 7:5-13. Christ himself explains this passage, saying, "In vain do they worship me, teaching doctrines, the commandments of men" (Matt 15:9). Some have chosen to add a conjunction, "teaching doctrines and commandments of men," as if the meaning had not been sufficiently clear. But he evidently means something different, namely, that we act absurdly when we follow "the commandments of men" for our doctrine and rule of life. Their worship of God was not according to the prescription of God and his revealed will; but according to the traditions of the elders, which they preferred to the word of God, and, by observing them, they transgressed it, and made it of no effect (Matt 15:3).

In the debates with some of the Pharisees he rebuked their hypocrisy (cf. Matt 17:9 and parallel texts), using the words of Isa 29:13. One cannot avoid the fear that today there must be some worship of God that falls into the pattern of what is condemned here. "Their religion had become a mere formality." Jesus Christ reiterated the thought here in Matt 15:8, 9; Mark 7:6, 7. Think about today, about how many people think what they say or do is an indication of their relationship with God, when God just wants their hearts, broken before Him! Many people claim to go to church and to pray but the type of life they live is far from being Christian. The religion they profess does not have any effect in their lives. They simply pay lip service to God.

#### **4.2 Faith and Solidarity with Fellow Humans**

The grace of God moves us to union with God and with our fellow human beings. Faith then takes the form of charity, which is, primarily, love of God above all things, and secondarily, love of neighbour.<sup>18</sup> The Church's faith, which takes the form of charity, is the basis of her mission, which is to bear witness to the Good News that God loves every human person and that his love invites every human person to live in communion with God and in unity with all human beings.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, to be true worshippers of the one true God is to be respecters of the dignity of every human person who is made in the image and likeness of God.

#### **4.3 Protection of Human Dignity: Duty of Faith**

As Christians we are obliged by our faith to respect and also recognize and tackle all threats to human dignity.<sup>20</sup> According to the Second Vatican Council,

"...all offenses against life itself, such as murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia and wilful suicide; all violations of the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, physical and mental torture, undue psychological pressures; all offenses against human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children, degrading working conditions where human beings are treated as mere tools for profit rather than responsible persons: all these and the like are criminal: they poison civilization; and they debase the perpetrators more than the victims and militate against the honour of the creator."<sup>21</sup>

There are many challenges and veritable threats to human dignity in our society today: the challenge of good governance and the attendant stifling of the potential of the governed, the

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<sup>18</sup> Pope Francis, *Lumen Fidei*, p. 88. Cf. Communique of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (February 2013) no 9.

<sup>19</sup> *Lumen Gentium* 1.

<sup>20</sup> Pope Francis, *Lumen Fidei*, pp.82-83.

<sup>21</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, 27.



problem of insecurity, the epidemic of corruption, the collapse of moral and technical infrastructure, violation of the rights of the Nigerian citizen on the grounds of ethnic affiliation, religious creed, gender, state or local government of origin. These and other discriminatory practices pose threats to human dignity in our land today.<sup>22</sup>

#### **4.4 Public Responsibility**

To respect the dignity of a person is to grant his rights to him as fully human. There is pervasive lack of responsibility and transparency in governance in Nigeria which has become a serious abuse of human rights. A government that is negligent in this regard assaults the intelligence of the citizen. This is also a gross violation of human dignity. Leaders in every sphere of our society ought to be more accountable and more transparent in the conduct of public affairs. The lack of accountability, especially in the oil industry in Nigeria continues to give the nation a bad name, impoverishes the citizenry, and threatens national security. It is a gross violation of human dignity that Nigerians, citizens of a richly endowed land, live in dehumanizing poverty. That is why the government and the governed must renew sincere efforts to fight corruption and the theft and wastage of public funds in Nigeria. Relevant arms of government should adequately provide for the welfare of the men and women in the police, the army and other security agencies who risk their lives in undertaking responsibilities for security and the fight against corruption.<sup>23</sup>

#### **4.5 Right to Life**

The right to life is the first of all fundamental human rights. Every threat to life is a violation of human dignity. Hence, the primary responsibility of government is the protection of life and property. It is very discouraging that Nigeria remains a place where some people wantonly kill in the name of religion, a land where the right to worship is restricted only to certain people. Religion and matters of faith should no longer be allowed to be instruments of division. As Nigeria moves towards its centenary, the time has come to move beyond religious tolerance to recognition and acceptance of the common humanity and respect for religious and ethnic differences. This is an essential step in the march to nationhood.<sup>24</sup>

Respect for human dignity includes respect for the human body. It precludes unwholesome sexual relationship outside the plan of the Creator. It also calls for responsible parenthood. The sad novelty of our government spending public funds on artificial family planning programmes that sacrifice morality on the altar of techniques of population control is terrible. Leaders and government should beware of adopting policies and strategies, which compromise cultural and spiritual values as a solution to challenges, no matter how serious those challenges may be.<sup>25</sup>

#### **4.6 Faith and Evangelization under Persecution**

The unfortunate destruction of life and property in some parts of Northern Nigeria is yet to be brought under complete control. This has caused a great damage to churches and pastoral structures and facilities in the entire area. Catholic Churches as well as other Christian Churches have been affected. Territories within the Diocese of Maiduguri have certainly borne the brunt of the killings and bombings which have occurred in the last few months. Many Christians are withdrawing from those area *en mass*. The Catholic Bishop's Conference declared Maiduguri

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. Communiqué, no 11.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Communiqué, no 12.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Communiqué, no 13.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Communiqué, no 14.

diocese “a Pastoral Emergency Area.”<sup>26</sup> They also made plans and strategies to more directly support and sustain pastoral life in the Diocese of Maiduguri without neglecting to help other affected areas. This situation requires special commitment through prayers, visits, technical assistance and funds by all. There is a strong faith that, as in the past, the Church will emerge stronger and holier from the existing crisis.<sup>27</sup> It is commendable that many individuals, groups, and institutions have graciously given assistance and support to all the affected people and institutions thus affected.

In the quest for dialogue with those who carry out acts of aggression on innocent Nigerians, government should ensure that victims of such aggression are compensated, while aggressors, rather than benefit from their aggression, should be made to account for their crimes.

#### **4.7 Faith, Evangelization and Commitment to Christian Unity**

Faith and evangelization call for a renewed commitment to the cause of Christian unity in Nigeria. The Catholic Church in Nigeria co-founded the Christian Association of Nigeria. She has worked to nourish and sustain it all these years. This commitment is a call to dialogue on fundamental issues regarding the Association. The issues are those areas that have strained unity and can keep Christians further divided if not promptly addressed.

### **5. Conclusion**

Proper religiosity, says Isaiah, is to loosen the bonds of injustice, let the oppressed go free, feed the poor, and clothe the naked. This is just what God announced as the mission of Cyrus and the servant in Second Isaiah (42:6-7), and it will be the commission to the speaker of Isa 61:1-3. Hence, true religion is not simply an external ritual exercise done by an individual for his or her own benefit. By freeing the worshiper from concern for the self, true religion partakes of God's mission of justice and liberation for all people, enhancing their dignity as children of God. Protection and promotion of the dignity of every human person is integral to faith in God. These constitute the only way in which we can build a better world and a better Nigeria.<sup>28</sup>

Those who are engaged in evangelization ought to develop a deep faith and deep union with the person of Christ in order to be effective instruments. Those who proclaim the good news should emphasize the necessity of developing a personal relationship with God through his word, which is ultimately a personal relationship with Jesus, God-Word incarnate. This requires faith. “We believe, therefore, we speak,” proclaiming the good news that we have personally experienced God's word to be a word that transforms our lives and makes us heralds of the word of God.

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. Communiqué, no 15.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Pope Francis, *Lumen Fidei*, pp. 86-89.

<sup>28</sup> Communiqué, no 17.