



Ecclesia in Sokoto

Message to the Clergy,
Religious & Laity Faithful



Catholic Diocese of Sokoto, Nigeria

Introduction

Therefore take up the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you will be able to stand your ground, and having done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth fastened around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness arrayed. Stand with your feet fitted with the readiness of the gospel of peace (Eph. 6: 14).

This short document is an exhortation to the people of our Diocese of Sokoto. We hope that the issues or themes raised will serve as a means of developing a more detailed syllabus for the deepening of our faith.

Today, there is a growing concern about the fate of Religion in general. Our country has become a bit more convoluted as so many tongues and prophesies spring up every day. Amidst the difficulties in our society, there is an increasing resort to a religion that solves our problems, our sense of urgency, a kind of a band-aid, a soothing balm that dulls our pain. Against this backdrop, our faith is being threatened as more and more of our people are confused about what it is to be a Catholic today.

It is my hope that this Document will lay the foundation for a more comprehensive teaching of the Catholic Doctrine

among our people. To this end, it will be translated into Hausa so that our Catechists and members can have access to it. We hope to use it as a means of teaching the Catholic Catechism along with some documents of the Church. In this way, we hope that our people can become more confident and grow to love and feel proud of their faith.

I want to thank a few people who read this document and made some useful comments, especially His Eminence, John Cardinal Onaiyekan, Archbishop of Abuja, Matthew Man'so Ndagoso, Metropolitan Archbishop of Kaduna and Bishop Emmanuel Badejo, Bishop of Oyo Diocese. May our Blessed Mother, the Star of Evangelisation accompany us on this journey of faith.

Most Rev. Dr. Matthew Hassan KUKAH

Dated Thursday, September 8th 2016.

Birthday of our Blessed Mother and 5th anniversary of my episcopal ordination.

1

Between September 20-23rd 2014, we held our Diocesan Synod over ten years after the last Synod of the Diocese. This Synod was part of the highlights of the celebration of the Golden Jubilee of the Diocese of Sokoto, (1964-2014). We believed it was a wonderful time and that it offered us an opportunity to sit back and savour the sweet memories of those great men and women, Clergy, Religious and Laity whose bravery and solid commitment to the faith have brought us to where we are today. I imagine that if they were to wake up from the grave, those missionaries who sowed the seeds before us, would be mightily pleased by the look of their legacy. We are confident that they would appreciate that we have not been a disappointment to their visions, sacrifices and dreams.

We also believed that a Synod was not so much a chance for us to beat our chests, as a time to ask some deep and searching reflections. The Synod was more an attempt at looking ahead than looking backwards. It was more a realization and an appreciation of what St Paul meant when he said: *I sowed the seeds in your hearts and Apollos watered, but it was God who made it grow* (1 Cor.3: 6). The Synod was therefore an attempt at looking at ourselves in the mirror and asking how much we have nurtured what has grown. It is our prayer that after we have *fought the good fight* (2 Tim 4:7), our reward will be that those coming behind us will improve on our own efforts too.

2: Key Themes of the Synod:

The Synod covered four broad themes, namely:

- *A Historical and Pastoral Synopsis of the Diocese of Sokoto*
- *Lay Groups in the Church*

- *Welfare and Option for the Poor in the Church*
- *The Family as Pastoral Agents*

The following post Synodal exhortation is meant to distill very briefly and in readable form, some of the fruits of the Synod. This is meant to provide food for those of us who were at the Synod and those whom we represented. We pray that those of us who had the privilege to be at the synod, will become the yeast to transform the members of our communities (Gal. 5:9). It is our hope that each and everyone of us, clergy, religious, ordinary men, women, youth, children, all of us, will, by being true witnesses of Jesus Christ, become missionaries in our own ways spreading God's words by action and deeds.

1: Jesus, the subject and object of our Witnessing:

In those days, the word of the Lord was rare, there were not many visions (1Sam 3:1). These words were uttered to explain why the call of Samuel was so confusing to the little boy himself before the intervention of his master, Eli. The significance of this is that we often require some guidance, someone to help us discern what God is saying to us as individuals or as a Church (Rev. 2:29).

In the book of Hebrews, St Paul makes the astonishing revelations that have set Christianity apart from any other religion before or afterwards. He says: *In the past, God spoke to our ancestors many times and in many different ways through the prophets. But in these days, He has spoken to us through His son* (Heb. 1:1). This revelation laid the foundation for the growth of our Faith. Of this faith, St Paul says; *It is for things hoped for, things not seen. It is the faith by which the men of old won God's approval* (Heb. 11:1).

In the Gospel of St John, the opening words present us with a new vision: *In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God* (Jn. 1:1). The revelation is complete *when the Word becomes flesh in Jesus Christ who now dwells among us* (Jn. 1:14). We are no longer to merely approach God in fear and trembling as someone to be placated. We are no longer to make sacrifices

to appease Him, but now, He is Emmanuel, God-is-with-us (Mt 1:23). Jesus now says that we mere mortals are free to call God our Father (Mt: 6:9). No more are we to merely use the blood of lambs and goats to appease him in sacrifice. No, Jesus Himself is now the eternal sacrifice, the *Lamb of God who takes away our sins* (Jn. 1:29).

His mission is to bring the world back to God, to tell the world that Heaven is not a distant echo to be hoped for, that Heaven actually starts here because the Kingdom of God is before us. The problem though is that the rules of this Kingdom are strange. They fly in the face of everything we know and have stood for regarding Kings and Kingdoms.

In traditional feudal Hausa societies where the Diocese of Sokoto exists, the Emir is still called, *Sarkin Yanka*, that is the Chief slaughterer. This is because when feudalism held sway, he had power over life and death and there were no appeals after him if he passed a sentence. The people permanently lived on their knees in a culture of, *long live the king* and so on. Royalty is about power and this power is exercised in fear and reverence, it is power over life and death. It was not too different at the time of Jesus.

So, when Jesus offered a new, different and distinct Kingdom, the people could not understand. Jesus offered a completely different set of rules of engagement in this new Kingdom. He said that this King would not lord it over his people as the gentiles had often done (Mt. 20:25, Lk. 22:25, Mk 10:42). His preaching has a new ring and distinctiveness. For example, he says:

- *Blessed at the poor in spirit, blessed are those who suffer, mourn etc., (Mt. 5: 3)*
- *He teaches that we must love our enemies and even pray for them (Mt. 5: 44).*
- *He teaches us against vengeance and revenge (Mt. 5:39, Lk. 6:29)*

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- *Seeking the kingdom of God is more important than anything else (Mt. 6:33)*
- *There are no ethnic boundaries, we are all one (Gal 3:38, Col 3:11)*
- *God has no favourites, He only wants us to do his will in faithfulness (Rom Acts 10:34, Rom 2:11)*

The astonishing freshness of this teaching makes it a scandal to the Jews and those who hear it (1 Cor. 1:23). His listeners would later say; *This is intolerable language, how can anyone accept it?* (Jn. 6:60). However, the resurrection of Jesus and this message will remain the cornerstone of the faith of His followers. It created a new sense of urgency and dynamism to those who hear it. Jesus is the centre around which everything else revolves. He says: *I am the way, the truth and the life. No one can come to the father except through me* (Jn. 14:6).

His followers rose from being a group of frightened, poor illiterate men to men of courage, men prepared to suffer and die as witnesses to the risen Christ. Then, God introduced a new dimension to the mission when he literally arrested, chained and detained one of the greatest enemies of the Gospel, Saul, later known as Paul. A newly converted Paul takes up this message with a passion that has never been known before (Acts 9). In the end, he is so overwhelmed by the power of the Gospel that he calls down damnation on himself if he does not preach the Gospel. *Woe to me, if I do not preach the Gospel* (1 Cor. 9:16).

As Christians, it is this sense of urgency of preaching the Gospel that we have been called upon to share. It is in pursuit of this that we in the Diocese of Sokoto decided to convoke our own little initiative, our Diocesan synod. So, when we gathered together for this Synod two weeks after the third anniversary of my installation (September 8th, 2011), my intention was that we should explore the best means of equipping ourselves for this new evangelization. Amidst the challenges, there is an urgent need for us to chart a course.

2

Why Evangelisation and where do we fit in?

When Jesus appeared, the first thing He did was to seek out followers. To them, He said, *COME, follow me* (Mt 4:19). He assembled people from all kinds of backgrounds. None of them seems to fit our traditional understanding of the kind of ministry that Jesus had in mind. Most of them were materially poor. For example, along with their father, Peter and Andrew were mending their broken nets when Jesus met and called them and offered to make them fishers of men (Mt. 4:20). Although others like Matthew had some good economic backgrounds as a tax collector, his profession was associated with fraud, corruption, ethnic treachery and betrayal of the Jewish nation (Mt.9:9).

As an aside, I have personally often wondered why Jesus did not choose people like the rich Joseph of Arimathea who would later donate his own tomb for Jesus to be buried in (Jn. 19:39ff) or the rich gentleman who loaned him his upper chamber for this last supper as apostles? (Mt.26: 17ff). Yet, from this complex mix of the poor, Jesus was able to mould Apostles to whom He would entrust the duty of the continuation of His message. He would encourage them to

shun material acquisition and actually ask them to go, unencumbered by material possessions (Lk. 10:4). It is clear from these that for fulfillment of this mission, Jesus was going to overturn all our human assumptions and presumptions about power and security. He would show that He had come to strip the world of all its assumptions regarding literally every facet of life, offering us a totally new world.

At the end of His life, he told His apostles to GO, to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth. A frightened, disillusioned, literally uneducated group of fisher men and very ordinary people are now asked to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth (Mk. 16:15). Why did He not hand this mission to the powerful men with standing armies who could have hastened the coming of the kingdom even by outright conquest, force and subordination? Why did Jesus not hastily convert the Jewish authorities and simply hand this mission to them? If He had done that, the men with the mighty ships, the standing armies, the movers and shakers of the society would have taken the kingdom to the ends of the world by the power of the sword and compel obedience to His mission.

Having been called to participate in this Mission, the challenge now, is, what do we need to become genuine disciples of Jesus and evangelisers? How are we to participate in this mission of evangelization in the four states of Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto and Zamfara that make up the Diocese of Sokoto? To answer this and other questions, we need to look back first at the stories we find in the Gospels and then the lives of those great men and women who brought the word of God to us. For in their lives and sacrifices, we find inspiration and the need to trust not in our wisdom, knowledge or power but in the word of God.

Our intention here is to help, encourage and strengthen the level of understanding and knowledge of our faith by every Catholic in the Diocese of Sokoto. We believe that a deeper understanding of the meaning of our faith, the person of Jesus Christ, what He means to us and a knowledge of what the Church teaches us are very important. Many of us have become rather careless and lax especially believing that receiving the Sacrament of Baptism (and perhaps, Confirmation), and then merely *coming to or going to Mass* as we often say, are enough to set us on our way to eternal life.

Today, our youth especially are growing up with very little in the way of teaching and knowledge about the doctrinal teachings and beliefs of the Catholic Church. If asked about the structure of the Holy Mass, the gifts of the holy spirit, the Sacraments etc, it would seem that many of us would likely be like the people of Ephesus who told Paul; *We have never heard of such a thing as the Holy spirit* (Acts 19:2).

It seems that over the years and with age, rather than our faith becoming stronger, it is becoming weaker and weaker, less visible and convincing. Due to this lack of ongoing formation for Catholics, we now have a generation of Catholics who are not ready to wear their Catholicism with pride. We just tag along and are feeling intimidated, lack confidence and courage to even try to defend what we stand for. St. Peter warned us when he said: *Do not fear their intimidation; do not be shaken. Always be prepared to articulate a defense to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But respond with gentleness and respect* (1 Pet: 3:15). We are in a culture of lethargy and drudgery.

As such, we could end up suffering the fate of the people of Laodicea, of whom the writer of the Book of Revelation says: *I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot*

nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. You say, I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing. But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked (Rev. 3:15-7).

We should pose and ask what has caused this dangerous distraction among our people and what are the implications for the future of our faith? If we do not reverse it, what will the future of our Church be like here and beyond? Everywhere we turn, faith entrepreneurs have occupied the public space and our people are having difficulties in making the right choices amidst the noise and moral chaos.

Nigeria is changing every day and new things are happening by the day. Every generation is experiencing culture shocks. Yet, without the deep and strong roots of our faith, tradition and culture, we soon wither away, returning to the caves of darkness from where we were rescued. Today, the greatest threat to Christianity is not from say, Buddhism, Hinduism, or Islam. The greatest threats come from within Christianity itself, posed by those who now treat Christianity as a relic of the past. We now see the rise of abortion, euthanasia, same sex marriages, trans-gender sexuality, drugs and so on as part of Christian culture. No one wants to make a distinction between the west and Christianity because western civilisation has its roots in the Christian faith.

For us here in Nigeria, we are also witnessing the socialization of our faith with too many people merely coming to Church on Sunday and bearing Christian names. Indeed, more and more of our people are dropping their baptismal names, seeing them as part of the imposition of western civilisation, very often mistakenly calling them, *English names*. Our children are now bearing names based on circumstances of birth and so we have names like; Hope, Blessing, Faith, Joy, Blossom, Happiness, Patience, Good luck, Whiteman and so on.

The rise of Pentecostalism should not be seen as a threat either. We should thank God that more and more of our people are giving their lives to Christ. This is why we in the Catholic Diocese of Sokoto now wish to examine our own roles in deepening our faith and then spreading the gospel and becoming missionaries to ourselves. The fact that we are living in an area that is predominantly Muslim is no reason for us to be afraid of witnessing to Christ. We need to design new strategies but we must not back down nor should our light be under the bushel (Mt. 5:15, Lk. 11:33). Our challenge is to become conscious and proud of our identity.

How do we do this? It will be a great mistake for the Laity to think that this is the work of the Bishop, Priests, Sisters, and Masun Wa'azi or Catechists. This old thinking must quickly give way to a new way of seeing what the late Pope John Paul 11, now St John Paul had in mind when he called for a new evangelization in preparation for the new millennium. In response to this call, successive Popes have continued with the exploration of this theme of new Evangelisation. I am mightily pleased and thankful to the Emeritus Holy Father, Pope Benedict XV1 to have had the rare privilege of participating in two of these Synods. The challenge now is, drawing from our own Diocesan Synod, how should we become evangelisers in keeping with the principles enunciated by the two Synods of Bishops on Africa (1994 and 2005)?

To answer this question, we shall look at different levels of our evangelization in the Diocese to see how each and every one of us can find a place for himself or herself. No one must consider himself to be an outsider on the grounds of social status (I am a poor trader, or unemployed and illiterate), not a specialist (I am not trained), too young (I am only a student, a youth and this is for our parents and senior siblings). No, each

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an every one of us is called and our duty is to respond to this call in our different places. The next challenge now is how to design the building blocks to strengthen our faith. To do this, let us briefly list a few areas of concern in the quest towards consolidating our faith.

3

STRENGTHENING OUR FAITH: PRACTICAL STEPS

3: 1: Why am I a Catholic?

St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622) is a great saint of the Catholic Church. He devoted his time to preaching to Protestants and seeking to bring them back to the Catholic Church. He did this by explaining the beliefs of the Catholic Church, beliefs that had become confused by non-Catholics. In the end, he said to the Protestants; *If you had known what the Catholic Church was, you would not have left.* To prove his case, through his preaching, it is said that he was able to bring back over 70, 000 thousand Calvinists back to the Catholic faith!

The big challenge now is that most of us have come to assume that all we have to do as Catholics is merely come to Mass. The Bishop, the Priests and the Sisters are the Specialists, our only obligation is to listen to them. Sadly, more and more of us are not doing enough to educate ourselves on what the Catholic Church teaches, what we believe and so on. Most of us cannot discuss with Protestants or answer their questions when they speak or ask about the Holy Mass, The Eucharist itself, Confession, Baptism (why we baptize infants), who is our Blessed Mother, do we worship her? We cannot explain the Eucharist, why Jesus is

alive or what personal and communal prayers are and so on. Our ignorance makes us lazy, unconcerned and casual about our faith.

Passion is driven by knowledge. So, as part of our post Synodal exhortation, I, your Bishop, your Head Catechist, pledge that together with our Priests and Religious, we shall now rededicate ourselves to Teaching, Teaching and Teaching about the Catholic faith so as to equip ourselves to be part of the new evangelisation. This programme of Catechesis will be launched in the first Week of Advent this year. We hope to adopt it across the Diocese covering different groups within the Parishes. I appeal to my brother Priests, Religious and the Lay people no matter your status to come forward and let us take up this challenge. Come forward and offer yourself for service. You and I will be the first beneficiaries of this exercise but in the end, our Church will be stronger. We owe ourselves the duty of brining back those who have left us.

3: 2: Be a Proud Member of your Parish: Get involved:

Many of us often want to imagine that no one knows us and as such, no one will notice even when we come for Mass or any major events. What difference does it make if I attend the ordination or not? What difference will it make if I do not turn up for the Eucharistic Procession, Choir or Legion of Mary? Please remember that Prophet Isaiah said that the Lord has written the name of each and every one of us on the palm of His hand (Is. 49:16). Dignity, integrity, respect, self worth all arise from the belief by each of us saying proudly: *I am Somebody!*

Each building, no matter its size, is made up of one block plus thousands of other blocks. Even if we are a million people, the counting of the members of the Diocese starts with 1 and then thousands of others follow. Ensure that you make

contributions when you are called upon to support projects of the Diocese. It is these projects that are the symbol of our unity as a Diocese. The Cathedral, the Secretariat, the Bishop's House, the Pastoral Centre, the Catechetical Centre, our Schools, all these belong as much to me as they belong to you and your family. They are a symbol of our unity as a family. Make your family have a sense of belonging by participating in all activities, meetings of fund raising. Our children will then have a sense of solidarity and community.

Without you, I would not be here. Without me, there will always be a Diocese and another Bishop, but without you, there will be no Bishop for Sokoto Diocese. I am here because of you. You were here before me and you will be here after I am gone. I recall the words of St. Augustine who said: *For you I am a bishop, with you, after all, I am a Christian. The first is the name of an office undertaken, the second a name of grace; that one means danger, this one salvation.* We must therefore stand together and work together because we all need to support one another. Let us be united in prayer for one another. We priests pray for you always, but please always remember to pray for us too.

Please, remember that we shall stand before God and render accounts as individuals. The Lord has assured us that He has each of us in the palm of His hands (Is.49: 16). Support our Diocese whether you are called upon directly or not. We need you as much as you also need us. This should be our first post Synodal pledge as individuals or families.

3: 3: Support your Parish: Stand up to be counted:

Often, we tend to sit down in one place and grumble about our Priests or fellow Parishioners. We complain that this or that Priest does not preach well, that this or that parishioner is too aggressive, likes to show off, always wanting to be noticed by every priest etc. We accuse those who are active of being busy bodies and looking for honour or favour for themselves.

We accuse well-dressed women of making *yanga* and showing off their new headgears. We are quick to slap a motive on the intentions of other people and we call them hypocrites. Yet, those of us who sit down, do nothing but find excuses are the real danger. We, not they, are the real hypocrites that Jesus warned against (Mt. 23:25).

Step forward to help in the Parish. When you hear that the Parish is trying to embark on a project, are you one of those who resort to standing outside even if you come early? Are you one of those who grumble and grumble about the church looking for money all the time? Do you complain that your priest is always looking for money or that he is squandering our money? Just give to God if you can. Let God be the judge and do not condemn others.

No matter who you are, from today, Jesus wants your heart not your status. So, get involved, sign up to one Association or the other. You will learn a lot. You will grow in your spiritual life by associating with others, not simply coming to Church and going back home. Another name for Church is Communion or Community. Please promise God that you will not remain a spectator in your Parish. It is your stepping-stone to holiness and heaven.

3: 4: The Church is our Family:

Thank God, our Cathedral is named after the Holy Family. We must therefore take our family life seriously. Ideally, we often think of the family as being made up of the father, mother and children. In reality, there are some families that are not necessarily so perhaps because the children have not yet come, or death may have claimed some members of the family. But family is family and what is most important is the fact that it gives a sense of community and solidarity. Each one has a role to play, no matter how seemingly insignificant. Even the baby who cries is fulfilling a role by reminding the

other members of the family that he or she is around too and needs to be heard.

However, today, the family is in very serious crisis. The family is facing severe stress. Unemployment, hard working conditions, low salaries, violence are all contributing to making family life a school of trials. Husbands face the stress of having to feed their families, pay their rents, schools fees and medical bills amidst serious economic difficulties. The extended family has its own pressures on us. So, yes, things are not easy. But should we give up? No, Never.

We must remember that poverty is not an excuse for violence or sorrow in the family. The circumstances of the birth of Jesus amidst so much poverty and squalor in the manger (Lk. 2: 1ff), the nature of the temple offering made at his initiation by his parents should be a source of inspiration to us (Lk. 2: 24). However, what families need most is Love, not money. This love derives from prayer and trust in Jesus as the head of our families, the one who has taught us to call God Our Father (Lk. 11:1).

A family that prays together does not only stay together, but share joys and pains together. As believers, Hope is one of the greatest gifts of God to us. It enables us to overcome all fear and anxiety. Often, when troubles come, we forget what God has done for us as individuals and families. As a reminder, I will like to reproduce the words of the great song composed in 1897 by Johnson Oatman titled, **Count your Blessings**:

*When upon life's billows you are tempest-tossed,
When you are discouraged, thinking all is lost, Count
your many blessings, name them one by one, And it
will surprise you what the Lord has done.
Refrain: Count your blessings, name them one by one,
Count your blessings, see what God has done! Count
your blessings, name them one by one, Count your*

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*many blessings, see what God has done. And it will
surprise you what the Lord has done.*

*Are you ever burdened with a load of care? Does the
cross seem heavy you are called to bear? Count your
many blessings, every doubt will fly, And you will keep
singing as the days go by.*

*When you look at others with their lands and gold,
Think that Christ has promised you His wealth
untold; Count your many blessings—money cannot
buy [wealth can never buy] Your reward in heaven,
nor your home on high.*

*So, amid the conflict whether great or small, Do not be
discouraged, God is over all; Count your many
blessings, angels will attend, Help and comfort give you
to your journey's end.*

A family that prays together should pray for the father of the family so he can feed the family. Every father must draw inspiration from St. Joseph. Prayers should be said for the mother too, so, she, with our Mother as her model, will remain the focus and the source of stability for the family. There should be prayers for the children in their various stages, those who might be sick, those having troubles and problems in school, and those far away.

Teach your children to pray and let them each take turns to lead in the family prayers. This will build up their confidence and also help them to learn to be leaders. Imagine the joy and confidence that a child gets when the family prayer is committed to his or her examinations, getting well or for a safe journey. Imagine the joy that a child will feel when he or she has to pray for Dad or Mom. All these will give our children confidence when they grow up.