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PASTORAL LETTER FOR THE SEASON OF ADVENT ISSUED BY THE GHANA CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

“We are the clay, and thou art our potter” (Isa. 64:8 RSV)

Introduction

We the Catholic Bishops of Ghana send you this Pastoral Letter for the season of Advent. Advent is the pre-Christmas season in which we spiritually prepare for the celebration of the birth of Christ, while readying ourselves for his second coming.

The theme of this Letter is taken from the first reading (see Isa 63:16-17; 64:1,3-8) of the First Sunday of Advent: “*We are the clay, and thou art our potter*” (Isa. 64:8 RSV). It is hoped that as we prepare for and celebrate Christmas and throughout the New Year, we will each remain clay in the hands of our Creator, so that *He* will continue to mould us according to His divine purpose.

As this Letter comes only a few days after the Communique we issued on “Integral Pastoral Care for the Family in the light of Amoris Laetitia”, we take the opportunity to pray that every family in our nation will be shaped by the Divine Potter according to the purposes for which He established these families.

Isaiah 63:16-17; 64:1,3-8

The first reading of the First Sunday of Advent from Isa 63:16-17; 64:1,3-8 takes up the imagery of the “*Potter and the clay*”, which appears several times both in the Old and the New Testament. This image, used consistently in the Bible, sums up the various dimensions of God’s relationship with man, especially with the people of God.

God as the Creator and our Potter

The background to this image can be traced to the account of the creation of man in Gen 2:7: “*Then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being*”. The Hebrew term **yṣr** (to form), used in this passage to describe the forming of man, is the same which is used to describe the work of the potter in Isa 64:7. The value of pottery in the ancient world is well attested to in texts like Lam 4:2, in which the poet compares pottery with gold.

Thus, *“the precious sons of Zion, worth their weight in fine gold, how they are reckoned as earthen pots, the work of a potter's hands!”* By invoking this imagery, the Holy Bible invites us at the beginning of the liturgical year to return to the rapport which God intended to have with man. Every human person represents the highest point of God's creation (see Gen 1:26-28; Ps 8:5) and is precious in the eyes of the Maker. We are God's handiwork, fashioned to reveal the glory of the One who created us in His image and likeness.

Vessels of Honour

Not only did God create us. The Sacred Scriptures emphasize the fact that God is the one who shapes us into whatever He so desires. The Prophet Isaiah considers it abominable to question the purposes of God for us. He says, *“Woe to him who strives with his Maker, an earthen vessel with the potter! Does the clay say to him who fashions it, ‘What are you making’? or ‘Your work has no handles’?”* (Isa. 45:9). Similarly, St. Paul in his letter to the Romans observes: *“Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for beauty and another for menial use?”* (Rom. 9:21). Thus, God does not only create us, but he shapes us into those vessels for his use.

In the season of Advent, we meditate on how God used the prophets of old as well as St. John the Baptist, St. Joseph and the Blessed Virgin Mary to prepare for the coming of the Messiah. These figures teach us how to be receptive vessels. Of these figures, the Blessed Virgin Mary is the foremost. Acclaimed in the Litany of Loretto as *“Vessel of Honour”*, her womb became the tabernacle, and receptacle of the Word made Flesh. Furthermore, what God said to Ananias concerning St. Paul should apply to each one of us as we prepare to receive the Lord: *“Go, for he is a chosen vessel of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel”* (Acts 9:15).

Treasure in earthen vessels

Another dimension of the imagery of “Potter and clay” is that of human frailty. While God created us in his image and likeness to reflect the glory of the Creator, man remains as frail as the Potter's vessel. As the author of the Book of Sirach writes *“How can the clay pot associate with the iron kettle? The pot will strike against it, and will itself be broken”* (Sir. 13:2). St Paul also illustrates this human frailty by comparing himself with an earthen vessel; *“But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us”* (2 Cor. 4:7). Thus, in spite of the

frail nature of our being, God has placed in man his own spirit and entrusted to us the ministry of making known his Beloved Son. Indeed, the mystery of the incarnation which we celebrate in the season of Christmas is the story of how God descended to take on the same frailty of humankind (see Phil 2:6-11). It is in this human nature that Christ submitted himself to be “crushed” for our iniquities (see Isa 53:5), and it is by His suffering that we are saved.

“You shall shatter them like earthenware” (Ps 2:9)

A third characteristic of the imagery of “Potter and clay” finds expression in the symbolism of the breaking of the Potter’s vessel. This comes to light for instance in Isa 30:14, where the prophet warned concerning the imminent chastisement of Israel: *“like that of a potter's vessel which is smashed so ruthlessly that among its fragments not a sherd is found with which to take fire from the hearth, or to dip up water out of the cistern.”* This symbolic description of the destruction of Israel through the breaking of the potter’s vessel reveals the consequences of evil and sin. Thus, in the book of Leviticus, any earthenware vessel which became unclean was to be broken (see Lev 11:33). In what comes across as a very strong image, the prophet argues that God himself has the power to destroy what he has created. So also, the prophet Jeremiah prophesies: *“Thus says the LORD of hosts, ‘Just so shall I break this people and this city, even as one breaks a potter's vessel, which cannot again be repaired’”* (see Jer. 19:11). One of the traits of the Messiah as portrayed in the Psalms is: *“You shall break them with a rod of iron, and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel”* (Ps. 2:9).

This message also resonates with the spirit of Advent, which re-echoes the warnings of John the Baptist and his call to immediate repentance in the face of the imminent coming of Christ. The second coming of Christ will see him come as judge of the universe and he who created the vessel does have the power to break it if it no longer serves the purpose for which it was made. Advent is precisely the opportune time to avail ourselves to the working hands of the Potter so that He might re-mould us to ever remain His vessels of honour.

Conclusion

Beloved in Christ, as we prepare for Christmas, we your Bishops have shared with you some thoughts on the theme, *“We are the clay, and thou art our potter”*. In our preparation for and celebration of Christmas, let us all be guided by the fact that God is

our Creator and our Potter, and that we are His chosen vessels. We are expected to serve His purposes. Since, as earthen vessels, we are liable to break, so we should constantly avail ourselves to His graces, so as to avoid been shattered like useless earthen vessels on the day of reckoning.

Finally, we wish you all a fruitful preparation for Christmas and a happy celebration of the birth of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Issued on Thursday, November 30, 2017 at the National Catholic Secretariat, Accra.

for Philip Naameh
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