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“POLITICS FOR NATION BUILDING AND SOCIAL COHESION IN GHANA”: A PASTORAL LETTER FROM THE GHANA CATHOLIC BISHOPS’ CONFERENCE (GCBC).

May the peace of Christ be with you!

In about four months, we shall be participating in another momentous democratic exercise to elect our president and our 275 legislators to steer the affairs of our country for the next four-year political mandate. As your Shepherds, we deem it appropriate to issue this pastoral letter as a reminder to you, our fellow citizens to embrace politics as an indispensable tool for nation building. We, therefore, urge all Ghanaians to work consciously towards peace building and abhor the acrimonious type of politics now gaining currency in our dear country.

By God’s grace, in Ghana, we have successfully conducted several elections in the Fourth Republic, and, as a country, we should learn from the mistakes and successes of the past in order to make the impending ones in December this year even more successful. All Ghanaians, especially politicians and all political actors, need to be reminded that politics, according to the wisdom of the sages and the saints of all times (see *Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Pope Francis.*) is a noble activity. In fact, it is the noblest vocation of man, because it is, like religion, devoted to service of the common good of all humanity (see *Gaudium et Spes, #76*). Politics should thus promote the integral development of all citizens as one human family.

In our historical and democratic development, therefore, this is an opportune moment to celebrate our success as an emerging democracy, and also to reflect on how best to confront the inevitable socio-cultural and economic challenges that could pose threat to peaceful and credible elections in December and to our democracy in general.

As a nation, let us do everything in our power to maintain the enviable reputation we have so far established as one of Africa’s leading countries whose democratic development is a shining path/beacon for others to follow. For more than a quarter of a century, Ghana has become an island of peace and stability in a sub-region threatened by terrorism, insurgency and armed conflict, and socio-political instability.

We should, however, not be complacent at all. The past experiences of seven relatively peaceful and credible presidential and parliamentary elections were the result of very hard work and commitment to the noble values of politics and democracy. Of late, unfortunately, there are worrying sources of tension that require the entire nation to be on our guard and to grapple with lest we suffer unhappy consequences.

LIVING IN SAFETY, PEACE AND UNITY

Every election year comes with its own challenges to our nation, and in this particular election year, the COVID-19 pandemic has added a special one to our usual election year concerns.

We now have to face the difficulty also of protecting ourselves from this corona virus, the economic downturn in the livelihoods of our fellow citizens triggered by this pandemic, and, at the same time, we all have the grave responsibility of ensuring free, fair and transparent, as well as violence-free elections before and after.

To achieve this, we, hereby, appeal to you our fellow Ghanaians to put an end to all practices that work against peace, and embrace the noble values of politics for the common and greater good of all. We appeal, especially, to fellow Ghanaians to strive against the following:

- I. **Monetization of Electoral Politics:** Namely, the buying and selling of votes. This corrupts the nobility of politics, and distorts people's power and will under influence of money; thus politicians are elected not for their good leadership qualities, their high moral and ethical values, as well as the noble vocation to serve the common good and the country, but for "*mammon*". Let us eschew such political and electoral corruption!
- II. **Vigilantism and Electoral Violence:** These twin evils have again reared their ugly heads at recent elections and shockingly in the course of the voter registration exercise. If not duly exorcised from our body politic, these threaten to plague the 2020 elections, in spite of the enactment of legislations and the endorsement and signing of an inter-party code of conduct and a roadmap to peace.
- III. **Media and Sensationalism, Fake news and Politics of Insult:** We cannot but call upon our media practitioners to uphold the highest journalistic standards, ethics and values in their reportage of the electoral processes and activities. Journalism is also an indispensable component of the noble vocation of politics. Of late, however, the increasing use of virtual space and electronic medium of communication has also heightened the threat of widespread use of fake news, insulting language as well as dirty propaganda in election campaigns and in political discourse. This must stop. It is not civilized.
- IV. **The Politics of Ethnicity:** Ghana, our dear country, is our only heritage. We should avoid the negative and highly divisive politics of ethnocentrism, mud-slinging and attacks on ethnic groups and personalities... Let politics focus on issues that serve the greater good, that will bring unity and peace, development and dignity to all our fellow citizens and even the "stranger" living in our midst (see *Lv. 19:33-34*).
- V. **Disrespect for authority and for the Elderly:** We of the Ghana Catholic Bishops' Conference have consistently denounced the politics of insults, abuse and disrespect in our body politic. This practice is not only un-Ghanaian and uncultured, it also inhibits the free flow of diverse perspectives, rich ideas and opinions that are critically needed for nation-building and solving the complex socio-political problems facing our society today. Civility is nobility in politics! We, therefore, call on all political actors and communicators to remain civil when canvassing for their respective political parties and personalities.

Closely related to this culture of insults and disrespect towards authority is a growing phenomenon of disregard and disrespect for the elderly in our society. The Ghanaian culture, wisely built on courtesies for the elderly, deferring to them appropriately, loving and offering them assistance, exercising patience with them and concern for their well-being, most especially when they are frail and infirm of mind, is still our time-tested and virtuous foundation.

It is in this regard that we were very saddened and we hereby register and express our absolute disgust at the unthinkable ordeal meted out to the 90-year old woman, Madam Akua Denteh in the Kafaba community, leading to her painful death *in full view of on-lookers*. This gruesome act and similar ones must never more be tolerated in our society and country; it must be met with very severe punitive measures according to the law, so as to serve as deterrent for individuals and communities who may still harbour such inhuman ideas.

SPECIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Dearly beloved fellow citizens, now, ensuring free, fair, peaceful and transparent elections, even in this era of the COVID-19 pandemic, is a collective responsibility of all Ghanaians. However, some institutions of state bear greater responsibility.

- a) The Presidency holds in its hands the people's trust, and must ensure that citizens live in conditions of adequate peace and security, and also ensure a level playing field for all contestants, political parties and candidates in the December 2020 elections.
- b) The Electoral Commission of Ghana is to ensure an electoral process that is free, fair and transparent for all political parties and candidates in order to prevent people who may feel unfairly treated resorting to violence.
- c) The Security Agencies, especially the National Election Security Task Force (NESTF), whose special duty is to ensure that the nation goes to the 2020 elections and comes out of it in peace and tranquility.
- d) The Political Parties should ensure the peaceful comportment of their members and supporters, stop vigilantism, the politics of insults, vote buying and selling, and support their candidates, both women and men, to win parliamentary seats.
- e) The Faith Based Organizations and the Clergy should desist from openly taking part in partisan politics, from preaching predictions of election results, and from pronouncing prophecies of electoral results, the death of public personalities, etc.
- f) Civil Society Organizations should intensify voter and civic education, help monitor the election processes and conduct, call attention to errant behaviours and whatever would undermine the noble values of peace, tranquility and political development of the nation.

- g) Finally, we appeal to all our fellow citizens to uphold the highest and noblest of ethics and good conduct, and, of course, to observe religiously all the COVID-19 hygienic protocols. Please, let us all stay safe to serve God and Country.

CONCLUSION

We Ghanaians pride ourselves on being a peaceful and peace-loving people. We appreciate all efforts that bring us happiness, peace and joy, even if in the process we have to suffer a little or make some sacrifice. It goes without saying that we cannot achieve perfection in one day. We must admit our limitations, fully aware that what matters is that we do not lose hope or give up our struggle to consolidate our political gains and improve upon our democratic credentials.

Surely, a measure of excitement and partisanship is inevitable and permissible during the course of election campaign. We, however, happily join our voices to the exhortation of St. Paul in his Letter to the Philippians and also say: *“Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing what you have learned and received and heard and seen... Then the God of peace will be with you”* (Phil. 4:8-9).

In conclusion, our prayer is that *“...the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in all ways. The Lord be with all of you”* (2 Thess. 3:16). We wish all our fellow citizens a free, fair, peaceful, transparent and COVID-19 free 2020 elections.



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