DO NOT BE AFRAID;

AN APPEAL TO NIGERIANS

Statement issued in response to the Christmas Day Bombing at Madalla by His Lordship, Rt. Rev Dr Matthew Hassan KUKAH, Catholic Bishop of the Diocese of Sokoto.

ON Christmas day, a bomb exploded at St. Theresa’s Catholic Church, Madalla, in Niger State, killing over thirty people and wounding a significant number of other innocent citizens who had come to worship their God as the first part of their Christmas celebrations.

Barely two days later, we heard of the tragic and mindless killings within a community in Ebonyi State in which over sixty people lost their lives with property worth millions of naira destroyed and hundreds of families displaced. In the midst of all this, on New Year’s Day, the President announced the withdrawal of fuel subsidy and threw an already angry and frustrated nation into convulsion.

Right now, I feel like the friends of Job (Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar), who came to visit their sick friend and found the burden beyond comprehension. For, as we know, when they came and found Job in his condition, they spent seven days and seven nights, and uttered not a word (Job 2:13). Right now, no one can claim a full understanding of the state we are in. However, even if we cannot understand the issues of the moment, our faith compels us to understand that God’s hand is in all this. The challenge is for us to have the patience to let His will be done.

The tragedy in Madalla was seen as a direct attack on Christians. When Boko Haram claimed responsibility, this line of argument seemed persuasive to those who believed that these merchants of death could be linked to the religion of Islam. Happily, prominent Muslims rose in unison to condemn this evil act and denounced both the perpetrators and their acts as being un-Islamic. All of this should cause us to pause and ponder about the nature of the force of evil that is in our midst and to appreciate the fact that contrary to popular thinking, we are not faced with a crisis or conflict between Christians and Muslims. Rather, like the friends of Job, we need to humbly appreciate the limits of our human understanding.

In the last few years, with the deepening crises in parts of Bauchi, Borno, Kaduna, and Plateau states, thanks to the international and national media, it has become fanciful to argue that we have crises between Christians and Muslims. Sadly, the knee-jerk reaction of some very uninformed religious leaders has lent credence to this false belief. To complicate matters, some of these religious leaders have continued to rally their members to defend themselves in a religious war. This has fed the propaganda of the notorious Boko Haram and hides the fact that this evil has crossed religious barriers. Let us take a few examples which, though still under investigation across the country, should call for restraint on our part.
Some time last year, a Christian woman went to her own parish Church in Bauchi and tried to set it ablaze. Again, recently, a man alleged to be a Christian, dressed as a Muslim, went to burn down a Church in Bayelsa. In Plateau State, a man purported to be a Christian was arrested while trying to bomb a Church. Armed men gunned down a group of Christians meeting in a Church and now it turned out that those who have been arrested and are under interrogation are in fact not Muslims and that the story is more of an internal crisis. In Zamfara State, 19 Muslims were killed. After investigation it was discovered that those who killed them were not Christians. Other similar incidents have occurred across the country.

Clearly, these are very troubled times for our country. But they are also very promising times. I say so because amidst this confusing debris of hate, anger and frustration, we have had some very interesting dimensions. Nigeria is changing because Nigerians are taking back their country from the grip of marauders. These stories, few as they may be, are the beginning of our song of freedom. Christians are now publicly crossing the artificial lines created by falsehood and bigotry. Let us take a few examples of events in the last week alone: In Kano, amidst fears and threats of further attacks on Christians, a group of Muslims gathered round to protect Christians as they worshipped. In Minna and recently, in Lagos, the same thing repeated itself as Christians joined hands to protect Muslims as they prayed. In the last week, Christians and Muslims together in solidarity are protesting against bad governance and corruption beyond the falsehood of religion. Once freed from the grip of these dark forces, religion will be able to play its role as a force for harmony, truth and the common good.

Clearly, drawing from our experiences as Christians, we must note that God has a message for us in all this. To elicit what I consider to be the message, I will make reference to three lessons and I know there are far more. First, these times call for prayer. At the height of our confusion during the Abacha years, the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria composed two sets of prayers; one, Against Bribery and Corruption and second, for Nigeria in Distress. Millions of Catholics have continued to recite these prayers and we must remain relentless in the belief that God hears our prayers and that God’s ways are not our ways. We know that our Muslim brethren and millions of other non-Christians feel the same and are also praying in a similar way for our country.

Two, these times call for solidarity of all people of faith. We are a nation of very strong believers and despite what anyone else may say, millions of our Christians and Muslims do take their religion very seriously. However, you might ask, if that is true, why do we have so many killings in the name of God and of religion?

We live in a state of ineffective law enforcement and tragic social conditions. Corruption has destroyed the fabric of our society. Its corrosive effect can be seen in the ruination of our lives and the decay in our society. The inability of the state to punish criminals as criminals has created the illusion that there is a conflict between Christians and Muslims. In fact, it would seem that many elements today are going to great extremes to pitch Christians against Muslims, and vice versa, so that our attention is taken away from the true source of our woes: corruption. As Nigerians, Christians and Muslims, we must
stand together to ensure that our resources are well utilized for the common good. This is why, despite the hardships we must endure as a result of the strike, the Fuel Subsidy debate must be seen as the real dividend of democracy.

Three, religious leaders across the faiths must indeed stand up together and face the challenge of the times by offering a leadership that focuses on our common humanity and common good rather than the insignificant issues that divide us. We therefore condemn in very strong terms the tendency by some religious leaders to play politics with the issues of our collective survival.

Rather than rallying our people, some of our religious leaders have resorted to divisive utterances, wild allegations and insinuations against fellow adherents of other religions. In the last five or so days, text messages have been circulating across the country appealing to some of our worst demons We are told that many senior clerics either believed or encouraged the circulation of these divisive and false text messages. We must condemn this for what it is.

For those Christians who have reacted in fear, they require conversion. If we wait for these evil men or women to decide when we shall stand for Christ, then we have surrendered our soul to the devil. If we fear to stand up for Christ now, let us remember that He has already said: \textit{Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will acknowledge before my father in Heaven, Whoever denies me before others, I will deny him before my father in Heaven} (Mt 10: 32).

Again, Jesus warns that rather than fear at times of uncertainty, adversity or upheavals, we should be confident. He said: \textit{When these things begin to take place, stand erect; hold your heads high, because your liberation is near at hand} (Lk. 21: 28). Furthermore, St Paul has assured us that; \textit{If we die with Him, we shall live with Him. If we endure with Him, we shall reign with him} (2 Tim 2: 11-12). Surely, those who are asking us to go under our beds, to flee in the face of persecution must be reading a different Bible.

These are difficult times but they are also times of promise. Our country has turned its back on all forms of dictatorships. Our hands are on the plough and we are resolutely committed to democracy. Like a Catholic marriage, we may not be happy but we cannot contemplate a divorce. God does not make mistakes.

Although the freedom and growth promised by democracy are not here yet, we must remind ourselves that a better tomorrow is possible, a more united and peaceful Nigeria is possible. The challenges of the last few days have shown the resilience of our people and their commitment to democracy and a better life. We believe this is possible. The government must strive to earn the trust of our people. All sides must take lessons from the demonstrations and resolve to build a better and stronger nation.

Let us hold on to the words of the Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI when he told the President, religious, traditional rulers and people of the Republic of Benin in the
Presidential Palace on November 19: *Do not cut off your peoples from their future by mutilating their present...*There are too many scandals and injustices, too much corruption and greed, too many errors and lies, too much violence. All peoples desire to understand the political and economic choices which are made in their name; they wish to participate in good governance. No economic regime is ideal and no economic choice is neutral. But these must always serve the common good.

*Kukah is the Catholic Bishop of Sokoto Diocese*