

MESSAGE FROM THE BISHOPS MEMBERS OF RECOWA-CERAO STANDING COMMITTEE

TO THE PEOPLE OF GOD AND TO ALL PEOPLE OF GOOD WILL

During the first synod on the Church in Africa, assessing the difficulties the continent was facing, the synod Fathers, with regret, made the following observation: "A common situation is, no doubt, the fact that Africa is saturated with problems; in almost all of our nations, there is appalling misery, mismanagement of the scarce resources available, political instability and social disorientation ... "

On the basis of this observation, the Fathers concluded that "present day Africa can be compared to the man who was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho; who fell into the hands of brigands who stripped him, beat him and left, leaving him half dead ... "(EA 40-41)

Like the Amazon, our dear West Africa presents itself to the world in all its splendour, drama and mystery (QA 1). It is for this reason that we Bishops, Presidents of national and inter-territorial episcopal conferences, Presidents of RECOWA-CERAO episcopal commissions, members of the RECOWA-CERAO Standing Committee, meeting from 12 to 17 February 2020 in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, on the occasion of the 8th Meeting of our Standing Committee, took a look of attentive love on the development of the African countries as a whole but with a particular emphasis on West Africa.

Having listened to the various presentations on the theme "Together, let us work for the rights of communities and the environment", and having prayed, we want to fraternally draw your attention to the following points:

1. The presidential elections in several countries of the sub - region

This year 2020 will be marked by the organization of elections in 6 countries in West Africa namely: The Burkina Faso, Ghana, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Niger and Togo. Learning from past experiences, we appeal to the wisdom and the spirit of responsibility of the political actors and of all those who will be involved in these electoral processes. We ask them to organize peaceful, credible and transparent elections. The time has finally come to give the world another face of our experience of democracy: that of maturity through bloodless elections, before, during and after; and the verdict accepted by all. We must understand that politics is a space of service and self-giving for the happiness of fellow citizens.

We raise fervent supplication to God, so that we see the end of the cycle of electoral violence. Also we shall be committed through the Justice and Peace Commission, to accompany the electoral processes. We appeal to the conscience of

all political actors, not to be guided only by the spirit of profit and gain for Christ said: "What shall it profit a man if he gains the universe but loses his soul?" (Mk 8:36)

2. The issue of land grabbing and forced expropriation of land

We the Bishops of West Africa thank God for the gift of creation in general, especially for the blessed and fruitful land in Africa. We are convinced that human beings are established by the Creator as caretakers of the earth and our common home. In the spirit of *Laudato Si'* and, alongside the peoples of Africa, we reaffirm our commitment to protect the rights of these peoples, to respect their values, their traditions, their customs and cultures. We want to work for the preservation of the earth, forests, rivers and all that lives and flourishes in these spaces considered in Africa, not only as resources to be exploited in the single direction of profit, but rather as sacred spaces, source of life, wisdom, balance. Unfortunately, today we are faced with the phenomenon of land grabbing by multinationals with the connivance of certain local actors.

In addition to land grabbing by multinational, we are seeing in some parts of our region, the growth of the forced expropriation of land of farmers by herders for grazing purposes. We are also witnessing the manhunts, villagers who are sent packing from their homes and their farmlands destroyed. This leads to loss of human lives.

With all our strength, we denounce the land grabbing and forced expropriation of land in all its forms. The consequences are incalculable: Loss of cultural and ancestral heritage, displacement, unemployment, famine, exodus, migration, etc. To the states, companies, multinationals, and to all those involved in this disastrous operation of land grabbing and forced expropriation of land in Africa, we address a call to listen to the word of God: *«Do not strip the weak; he is weak! And do not crush the humble man in justice» (Pr 22,22).*

3. Mineral extraction and ecological consequences

Despite what can be said of the economic benefits of mineral extraction in Africa, it should be noted that its harmful effects are incalculable for the African peoples. They are, among others: degradation of the environment, imbalance of the ecosystem, loss of biodiversity, pollution of rivers, seas, water tables, etc. Here we recall from the teaching of the Holy Father, *"In various ways, developing peoples, where the most important biosphere reserves are found, continue to fuel the development of the richest countries at the cost of their present and of their future."* (LS 52).

4. The need for a treaty or convention that protects Africa

We recognize that there exist several international treaties and conventions but these agreements do not do justice to Africa. We therefore call for the establishment of a global, legally binding instrument to regulate the activities of transnational corporations. We ask our respective governments in West Africa to work collectively

with other countries for the realization of such an instrument for peaceful global governance, a factor of social cohesion.

Furthermore, we urge politicians and the customary authorities of our countries to defend the rights of their people and to participate in the project of this treaty and to consent to their implementation. In this way free, informed and prior consent will be guaranteed for their people.

On our part, we instruct the Justice and Peace Commissions of all our dioceses to redouble efforts and innovations in the care, protection and support of the victims of the harmful effects of land grabbing and forced expropriation of land. In addition, we also undertake to do intense advocacy work with all national and international bodies so that strong frameworks and mechanisms can be put in place to correct any injustice and anomaly.

We also turn to the governments of developed countries. They must be aware that they hold in their hands not only the fate of their respective countries but also of the whole of humanity. They are also the guardians of our common house and it is for this reason that we address them by borrowing these words from Pope Francis: *“The destruction of the human environment is very serious, because not only has God entrusted the world to the human being, but still the life of this one is a gift which must be protected from various forms of degradation. Any desire to protect and improve the world requires profound changes in lifestyles, patterns of production and consumption, the established power structures that govern societies today. Genuine human development has a moral character and presupposes full respect for the human person, but it must also pay attention to the natural world and take into account the nature of each being and its mutual links in an orderly system.”* (LS 5)

Let us therefore work together for a new world order which guarantees the different communities of West Africa the right to an environment which promotes sustainable development, which respects nature and natural resources. Following the Holy Father, we invite the governments of West Africa to «correct the growth models that seem incapable of guaranteeing respect for the environment» and the rights of communities.

Given in Abidjan on February 16, 2020

Bishops Members

RECOWA-CERAO 8th Standing Committee