

## AN ADDRESS TO UNITED NATIONS' SECRETARY GENERAL ON CLIMATE CHANGE

+John Cardinal ONAIYEKAN, Catholic Archbishop of Abuja  
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The issue of Climate Change is a matter of great concern in the world of our days but unfortunately effective action has not been easy to agree upon. While there are those who are sceptical about the reality of climate change, there are others while recognizing that this is causing a great damage to our environment, continue to refuse to change attitude because of selfishness and short sightedness. The Secretary General of the United Nations, His Excellency, Ban Ki Moon, has been in the fore front of the battle to do something tangible and effective on climate change. We thank him that during this visit to Nigeria, he has given us an opportunity to also express our concerns.

I am also happy to be given the opportunity to deal with this matter with the background of the recent Encyclical of Pope Francis on this issue titled: ***Laudato Si***, which has made a great impact all over the world. This is due not only to its content and particularly its clear and forceful language, but also because of the process of its drafting, characterized by very wide consultation.

It has come at a very timely moment in line with the programme of the global rendezvous that are ahead of us. I am thinking of the United Nations forthcoming General Assembly during which the issue of climate change will feature prominently. But above all, there is the forthcoming Conference in Paris at which world national leaders will be expected to take decisive actions.

The Encyclical's message is broad and varied. We can only briefly mention here some points that are of special concerns to our country Nigeria and our region, Africa.

Pope Francis states categorically that climate change is real. ***"the earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth" (LS 20)***. He further insisted that this phenomenon is at ***"mainly as a result of human activity" (23)***, in particular in terms of unsustainable production and consumption habits.

All these statements come from wide consultation with scientists of different disciplines, countries and religions, who had worked with the Holy See in the drafting of our document, under the general supervision of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, the Pontifical Academic for Sciences being in the forefront of the research. The positive reception which the encyclical has received even in areas that are generally not well disposed towards church documents shows the compelling force of its argument from the scientific point of view.

Beyond science, the Pope delves into the area of morality, equity and justice. The present situation of environmental degradation as a result of careless human activities raises an issue of moral justice. This is because those who are messing up our common home are

especially the rich and powerful nations. Unfortunately, greater impacts are being thrown on the poor and weaker nations. In the process we are at the same time mortgaging the future of all nations.

We can therefore no longer continue to go on with business as usual. There is need to change attitude, to reduce and indeed stop polluting our environment and to clean up the mess that we are piling up.

Here the Pope speaks of the ***“need for common and differentiated responsibilities” (LS 170)***, in the sense that while all of us have responsibility for this mess, those who are most responsible for creating it must also assume a greater responsibility in cleaning it up.

In all this, the Pope highlights the important role of religious values in promoting respect for God’s creation. He notes that ***“the majority of the people living on our planet profess to be believers”***, Nigeria being a perfect example. He therefore calls on ***“religions to dialogue among themselves” (LS 201)*** and with other stakeholders like the sciences, politics, business, the arts and media, to protect nature.

Permit me now to highlight some issues that are particularly relevant to us in Nigeria and to Africa in general.

First, we must be aware that this discussion concerns all of us. It is everybody’s business, not only for those abroad or only for the diplomats to discuss.

Furthermore, our government, acting on our behalf, should demand as a matter of justice a reversal of the polluting habits of the rich and powerful nations. The forthcoming conferences of nations and Heads of Governments in New York and Paris mentioned earlier are opportunities that must not be missed in this regard.

As we look around us in Nigeria, we now know that when we experience unusual extreme weather conditions of desertification, floods and draughts, the gods are not to blame, but rather the reckless activities of our greedy fellow earth tenants far away from us.

We must also recognize the deep social consequences of climate change. The Pope speaks of ***“hearing both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor” (LS 49)***. We can see it right before our eyes in our country Nigeria, especially in the Northern Sahel Region of our country. The rampant desertification of the land means less opportunity for life sustaining occupations like farming, grazing and fishing. For example, the Lake Chad is practically all dried up. As the environment becomes progressively uninhabitable, people are forced to migrate southwards, sometimes with their animals. They come in conflict with settled farmers, often resulting in serious bloody clashes and conflicts that are being reported day in day out almost all over our country. These conflicts are often wrongly perceived as religious when the parties involved happen to be Christian farmers and Muslim cattle grazers.

Even the issue of the terrorism and insurgence in the North-East is not unconnected with this phenomenon. As many young people are unable to make a living in their unproductive arid farmlands, biting poverty make them easy prey to terrorist ideologies.

We have heard recently of the tragic case of immigrants struggling desperately to cross the Mediterranean Sea into Europe in flimsy boats and rubber dinghies. While many of them are fleeing the wars in the Middle East, a good number are Africans escaping from poverty imposed by the climate change along the Sahel region, including Nigerians.

There is need however on our part to undertake mitigation measures within our means. For example, more needs to be done in the direction of reforestation, irrigation and improved method of agriculture. Furthermore it is necessary that we encourage renewable energy especially solar energy but not excluding wind and biogas. As regards solar energy, I believe our country should encourage it by making it easier to procure the input necessary for installing a solar energy system. At the same time, the use of fossil fuels like petrol and diesel for gadgets like electricity generators ought to be deliberately discouraged.

Nigeria is well known for its crude oil, and a great portion of our national foreign earnings comes from oil sales. While we are anxious to make money from oil, we must also not be penny wise and pound foolish. We need to look carefully on how we are carrying on with oil exploration and exploitation. We need to soberly reassess our dependence on oil, so that its exploitation can be carried out with some amount of rationality for ourselves and for our future generation.

In particular, we must stop the criminally reckless method of oil operations in our country. The horrific environmental pollution in the Niger Delta where our oils is exploited is well known to everybody. We must act firmly against any multinational oil companies that do in our country what they will not dare to do in their own home country (LS 51). When recently there was a serious oil spill into the Gulf of Mexico, President Obama insisted that those responsible must clean it up and they did, at the cost of billions of US Dollars. Who is asking anybody to clean up all the massive oil spill in the Nigeria Delta?

We thank our guest for coming to our country. Please, Sir, take our concerns through your exalted office to the whole world. To a large extent, the concerns we are expressing are the concerns of Africans and of many poor nations.

We wish you a successful stay in our country and safe journey back to New York.

*Editor's Note: This message was delivered by John Cardinal ONAIYEKAN, Catholic Archbishop of Abuja during the visit of Ban Ki Moon, the Secretary-General of the United Nations to Nigeria on August 24<sup>th</sup>, 2015. It succinctly provides an overview of global trending issues particularly Global Climate Change issues, critical Global decadence, needed re-awakening and Re-ordering to guarantee a better and safer world, with particular emphasis on Nigeria and the African continent.*