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**KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY MOST REV. PHILIP NAAMEH, PRESIDENT OF THE
GHANA CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE (GCBC) AT THE OPENING
CEREMONY OF THE 2022 PLENARY ASSEMBLY HELD IN THE ST. FRANCIS
XAVIER CATHEDRAL HALL, DONKORKROM,
ON MONDAY, NOVEMBER 07, 2022**

***THEME: FOR A SYNODAL CHURCH: COMMUNION, PARTICIPATION AND MISSION
IN THE LIGHT OF THE NEW EVANGELIZATION IN GHANA***

Introduction

1. Mr. Chairman, Your Excellency the Apostolic Nuncio, your Excellencies Archbishops and Bishops, Superiors of Men and Women Religious Congregations, the Clergy and Religious, Hon. Minister, DCEs present, Members of Parliament, Chiefs and people of the Afram Plains, security personnel, the media, distinguished invited guests, ladies and gentlemen. Warm greetings from the Ghana Catholic Bishops' Conference. We, the Catholic Bishops of Ghana, have gathered here in Donkorkrom to deliberate on matters of concern to the Church in Ghana and of general concern to the people of Ghana.

2. Permit me to express the sincere gratitude of the Conference to the Chiefs and people of the Afram Plains who have welcomed us to Donkorkrom. I also want to thank my Brother Bishop John Alphonse Asiedu who, together with his priests, religious men and women and the lay faithful have accepted to host us in his Vicariate for our Plenary Assembly.

The Theme of the Plenary Assembly

3. The theme for the 2022 Plenary Assembly is *"For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission in the Light of the New Evangelization in Ghana"*. The theme is focused on helping all baptised members of the Church in Ghana to walk together, to listen more and to deepen participation in discerning *new paths* and new ways of proclaiming the Gospel of Christ in our context. Evangelization is the collective responsibility of all Christ's faithful.

Pope Benedict XVI at the *General Audience* on Wednesday, 17th October 2012 reminds us that "It is a duty of the Church to transmit the faith, to communicate the Gospel, so that the Christian truths may be a light in the new cultural transformations and that Christians may be able to account for the hope that is in them (cf. 1 Pet 3:15)".

4. In October 2021, Pope Francis started a synodal process to last up till October 2024 in which he seeks to consult widely every member of the Church on how we “journey together” for the mission of the Church in the light of new evangelization in the third millennium. The Pope noted that the crisis and challenges in the Church today invite us to rethink our mission in the world.

5. Therefore, Mr. Chairman, the theme of *synodality and New Evangelization*, which we have chosen for this Plenary Assembly, is very relevant because it seeks to respond to Pope Francis’ call for a synodal Church. The theme is also very appropriate since it points to the link between the situation of our mission in Ghana, call for “New Evangelization” and “Synodal Church”. Indeed, synodality aims at making evangelization a shared responsibility of the entire body of Christ. In the words of Pope Benedict XVI, evangelization is co-responsibility. In synodal Church, every member participates in discerning a particular course of action for the proclamation of the Gospel.

6. Your Excellencies, *The Compendium of the Social Teaching of the Church* tells us that the New Evangelization calls on all of us to proclaim the Gospel of Christ by witnessing to its liberating, transforming and especially its formative power for Christians and for civil governance in our nation (cf. *Compendium* 69-71). This is what we your bishops are here to deliberate on and to propose the new path to improving the lot of our people.

It is important to state that the Church’s governance system draws its inspiration from the Word of God in which she seeks to apply the wisdom of the Gospel in creating a social order for the advancement of the spiritual and the common good of our people.

The Situation of Ghana and Evangelization

7. Mr. Chairman, Ghana is rated as profoundly religious nation. It is interesting to note that the Christian population, in particular, has been experiencing an increase over the years.

Most of the television stations, radio stations and social media are filled with religious activities and church services. Also, prayers are said at every national event in the country. Amidst all this show of religiosity, coupled with the fact that our Sunday and other church services are well patronized, we still witness an increasing attitude of indifference to the message of Christ among our people. The witness to the Gospel message has diminished, even the few who want to show their faith sometimes lack the courage to do so. This situation of Ghana presents a complex challenge, a roadblock to the evangelizing mission of the Church. Our country is experiencing a growing shift away from the Gospel message in the lives of people.

8. Despite the increasing number in the religious population in the country, the changes being experienced in the cultural, political, social, and economic situations in Ghana present a serious challenge to Christians. We also observe that some of our members still patronise the services of witch doctors for solutions to their problems.

Poverty and hardship are on the increase despite the interventions the Church has made to the economic life of the people. Ethnic tensions are still being experienced within some Christian communities.

We are confronted in the news with the uncontrollable appetite for wealth by Christians, particularly the youth who will go any length to ensure that they make money. There is also a widening gap between the rich and the poor. We find children on our streets begging for alms etc.

9. There is also high level of indiscipline and immorality among the youth. Today, the principle of “the end justifies the means” has taken a grip on some Ghanaians who think it does not matter how one gets what he or she wants. This is buttressed by the ritual killings of innocent people in Wa in the Upper West Region, Mankessim and Kasoa in the Central Region and other parts of the country. There are also the scandalous examination leakages that have been reported in recent times involving JHS, SHS, Tertiary and even recently the Law School. The virtue of honesty seems to be forgotten especially by the younger generation.

There is also the issue of corruption in every sector of the economy. There is no doubt that some of the people involved in these corrupt practices may be Catholics or Christians of other denominations. Those who are to check these things are also corrupt, therefore those involved are not prosecuted.

Another concern is the *galamsey* or illegal mining activities and their devastating effect on the environment and the quality of life of our people.

Recently the Ghana Water Company has been complaining of the high cost in water production due to the pollution of our water bodies.

Also, cocoa farmers are experiencing the effects of the pollution of the water. According to some experts, it is well known to environmentalists that it is very difficult to reverse the effects of water pollution (physical and chemical aspects) of our water systems because of improper gold mining activities (small and large scale) in Ghana.

Natural processes that cleanse our water bodies can take up to 10 years or more depending on the level of contamination. In some cases, costly technological interventions would be needed to help remove all of the harmful substances from the water. These interventions require that the source of the pollution of the water bodies must be removed.

Many *galamsey* operators in Ghana are known to use mercury for gold recovery, an environmentally damaging practice which has been largely phased out in many countries of the world. When mercury enters the human body, the vast majority leaves the body in the form of urine and faeces but over a period of up to three months. Whilst in the body it can cross the blood-brain and placental barriers, allowing it to react directly with brain and foetal cells, resulting in important neurological challenges for unborn children.

In fact when mercury gets into our river systems, it changes from its metallic form into organic forms which can stay in the river systems for up to 20 years. Whilst in our river systems, they do bioaccumulate in fishes which eventually reaches our dining tables through the human food chain. Miners' exposure to the toxic mercury also amounts to 240 million US dollars in health costs.

Altogether, water pollution arising from mining, manufacturing activities as well as improper disposal of municipal wastes cause significant damage equivalent to 3% of the GDP of Ghana. This is due to the health effects of inadequate water supply, poor sanitation, and discharge of domestic and industrial wastes into our water systems.

Poor land management leads to land degradation, costing over USD500 million a year and to deforestation costing USD400 million a year to the Ghanaian. Five million hectares of forest was lost in the 15 years between 2001 and 2015 alone.

The widespread destruction of our forests cover not only leads to emissions of greenhouse gases but also reduces the forests' ability to remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, hence contributing to global warming and climate change.

When stones or pebbles are brought to the soil surface as a result of galamsey activities, a fairly permanent destruction occurs to the soil system, because it takes between 500-1000 years before the mined out stones are weathered to form top soils to support vegetation. Hence several generations of Ghanaians will be deprived of their God-given right to till the land and make a living from it by way of agriculture. This is an excellent example of how reckless exploitation of our mineral resources can deprive future generations of the ability to feed themselves.

This is a classic case of unsustainable mining practices, which must be avoided at all costs since joblessness, and poverty is no license for lawlessness and destruction of Ghana's natural resource base. We should all call for responsible mining practices; else, we will have no future to leave for our children and grandchildren in our beloved country. (cf. Dr. George Manful, Senior Climate Change Advisor to the UN)

The call of Pope Francis in *Laudato Si* for all to know how inseparable the bond is between concern for nature, justice for the poor and commitment to society (cf. LS, 10) appears not to be heeded to. There are, unfortunately, these tragic effects of environmental degradation on the lives of the poorest in our country. However, this call appears not to be heard by those involved and whose activities are degrading our environment.

10. Your Excellencies, looking at all these situations we find ourselves in and the fact that some of the people involved are members of our Church, is enough to get us worried. It appears the love of money has deafened some of our faithful to the message of Christ and blinded them to the needs of the poor who are affected by their activities. Amid all these, our churches are full on Sundays.

11. As Pope Benedict and also Pope Francis have indicated, the Catholic faith is no longer seen in the lives of some of our faithful people of God.

This is due to lack of personal faith and conviction which is a consequence of the lack of encounter with Jesus Christ. Consequently, there is a kind of lack of commitment and a lackadaisical attitude towards the mission of the Church by some members. All these may seem to us that our Catholic faith is not felt in the social, economic, and political life in our country as it should. There is therefore the need for us to work hard with a new passion and fervour toward encouraging personal experience of Christ through a personal encounter with Him in His Word.

12. I bring these issues up to underscore the point that there is serious dichotomy between the life of some members and the Gospel message for which they are not able to witness. The situation in Ghana today presents a clear sign of a society that is gradually becoming indifferent towards the Gospel of Christ. It is a new challenge to us as a Church. What we need in all these is *new strategy* with renewed passion to proclaim Christ to people. We also need to intensify catechesis and formation programmes of the faithful to focus on helping the individual to live their Christian faith through a personal encounter with Christ. Where there is a deep and personal encounter with Christ, the individual will be able to hold firm to his or her faith even in difficult times and be able to propose Christ to others.

13. Mr. Chairman, sad to say that politics in Ghana has also split our members on partisan lines. This is making it difficult for us also to speak with one voice. It is not uncommon to see Catholics taking strong partisan stance on issues that are clearly against their faith. Because of politics, one's commitment to the nation and the Church is mostly sacrificed for partisan interests.

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, we need new evangelization to target those members who have fallen away, with the aim of helping them to make Christ the centre of their lives in order to propose him to others as mandated by Christ himself (cf. Matthew 28.19).

14. I wish to also make this observation concerning the influence of non-Catholic elements in our liturgy, which we must address. Some of our priests have introduced these non-Catholic elements into our Catholic Liturgy, thereby losing its Catholic character. The effects of this practice on the faith of our people are enormous as it leaves some of them confused, and they end up leaving the Church. As Bishops, we must continue to address these challenges but with new approaches which must include listening. The emphasis on synodal process as proposed by Pope Francis has come at the proper time as we think about how to handle these challenges in our effort to evangelize.

Listening for Discernment

15. For the Church to create the path together, listening will be fundamental. “We need to let ourselves be educated by the Spirit to a truly synodal mentality, entering with courage and freedom of heart into a conversion process that is indispensable for the ‘continual reformation of which the Church always has need, in so far as she is a human institution’” (PD, 9). We are invited to take the act of listening further by broadening consultation. On this journey together, listening to hopes and dreams people have for the Church has the power to make us live out our mission.

16. At the level of the Conference, we have collected and created an accurate synthesis of what was truly captured in the responses from our Dioceses. These responses represent the voices of our faithful especially of the poor, the voiceless and the marginalized.

I want to urge all of us not to put the reports on the shelves but to work with them. Our lay faithful have called for more collaboration with the clergy and the bishop, and for more responsibilities. They have also raised concerns about how little their views are sought on issues. The report revealed further their preparedness to put their God-given gifts and talents at the service of communion and for the mission of the Church. Our task is to further deepen this spirit of the synod to discern together the way God wants us to go as Church with all the members playing their parts under the guidance of the Spirit.

The process has revealed that when all the baptised are invited to dig deeply into the baptismal identity and to listen to the Spirit calling us all to a future filled with hope, the mission to evangelise will be boosted.

17. The theme for our Plenary Assembly expresses a specific understanding about the way the Church in Ghana should be understood today. A Church that opens its doors in order to hear the voices of all, not only of those inside, but also those outside. I have already mentioned to you how the situation of Ghana presents a challenge to our mission to evangelize as Church. In the present situation it appears the structures and processes that have been used are not adequately responding to the pastoral and spiritual needs of our people. Therefore, we must reconsider the participation of our members. By listening more to their concerns and they too listening to ours, we may be able to discern the path of the Spirit.

It is important to understand that any process that excludes or denigrates the contributions of other members of the people of God will “quench the Spirit” and cause damage to the mission. In this regard, our doors must remain open and never shut to anyone. In this new task, no one sits on the fence.

18. I wish to remind you, dear people of God that the goal of the Synodal journey is nothing less than to provide the entire Church with an opportunity to rethink her identity in the light of her mission.

Synodality is “intended to inspire people to dream about the Church we are called to be, to make people’s hopes flourish, to stimulate trust, to bind up wounds, to weave new and deeper relationships, to learn from one another, to build bridges, to enlighten minds, warm hearts, and restore strength to our hands for our common mission” (Vademecum 13, PD 32]. According to the preparatory documents, it is to make people conscious of their identity as missionary disciples.

Ensuring Participation in Civil Governance

19. Mr. Chairman, involving people from the various regions or cultures and listening to them will ensure that the policies we make will address their concerns. Our diversity is a gift from God. He has endowed every tribe and region with resources and with competent people. Therefore, every group has something to offer the country and something to learn from others. By listening to the cries and concerns of the people especially those at the bottom of the ladder, successive governments can formulate appropriate policies that will ensure the development of our people.

20. I also wish to call on the government to as a matter of necessity engage the Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) to improve the economic and social situation of the country. The CSOs, because of the nature of their work, have knowledgeable and competent persons on every sector of the economy who will be more than willing to offer their expertise in the service of the nation.

Some of these CSOs can be part of negotiations or the signing of (economic) agreements between the government and other agencies. For instance, the government could involve some of them in the IMF negotiations or programme.

Also, other political parties should be consulted on national policies. The voices of religious organizations including the Catholic Church need to be heard. All of us have the interest of the state at heart and are ready to offer good advice on every issue of national and economic interest.

21. On this note, I wish to call on the government to reconsider and engage others on decisions that have divided the opinion of our people. When a large section of the people is against a particular policy, it is possible that its implementation may suffer if it is rushed or pushed through. More consultation should be done in order to address the concerns especially of those who may not be in support of the policy for genuine reasons.

Conclusion

22. Mr. Chairman, the synodal process which seeks to involve all in evangelization has proposed participation as an important tool. Pope Francis wants us to understand that evangelization is not a programme for some kind of professionals while the rest of the faithful just remain passive recipients. He reminds us that we are all missionary disciples because the sanctifying power of the Spirit is at work in all of us impelling us to evangelization (cf. EG 119).

Therefore, we call on all the faithful, not to leave the task of evangelization only for bishops, priests and the consecrated men and women. Everyone forms the “holy faithful of God” because all made their entrance into the Church through baptism as lay people. All must understand that the Church is first and foremost a people advancing on its pilgrim way towards God (EG, 111).

23. As we meet here to deliberate on our identity and mission as Church, let us do what we can to ensure communion of all members, by listening to all, ensuring active participation of all for the proclamation of the Gospel of Christ. As bishops, we should do well to extend the process of consultation. The practice where bishops limit their consultation to one or two priests is not helping matters and should be inclusive.

A synodal Church reminds us that as believers we are not meant to remain only believers, but also evangelizers. Each one is called to become a disciple and share the Good News with others.

24. As we discuss these matters, we call on all our faithful to join us in prayer so that this Plenary Assembly, with the knowledge of the reports we have gathered from all levels of the Church, we may, under the guidance of the Spirit propose new ways of carrying out our mission of proclaiming the message of Christ.

25. I thank all of you my brother bishops, priests, religious men and women, the Hon. Minister, DCEs, Members of Parliament, Chiefs and people of the Afram Plains, and all who have made it to the opening ceremony of the Plenary Assembly. I thank also the security personnel, the media, our distinguished invited guests and all who are behind the scenes making sure that we are properly taken care of; I register our deepest sentiments of gratitude to you all.

26. On this note, I declare the 2022 Plenary Assembly of the Ghana Catholic Bishops' Conference formally open in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit!

God bless you all!