

## **FOOD, ETHICS AND POLITICS – THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS AND COMMUNITIES.**

**(A PRESENTATIVE AT A NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON JUST GOVERNANCE: THE NIGERIAN BIOSAFETY ACT AND GMOs IMPLICATIONS FOR NIGERIA AND AFRICA, ABUJA MAY 24- 26, 2016 BY REV. FR. VINCENT O. AJAYI, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, ATAN JUSTICE, DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE CENTRE).**

(Story of my Politician Friend)

Introduction:

I thank God for inspiring this Conference and the opportunity I am given to make this presentation. The task before me is to share my views on what the role of Religious leaders and communities should be in food, ethics and politics within the context of the theme of the Conference: Just Governance: The Nigerian Biosafety Act and GMOs implications for Nigeria and Africa. Nigerians have been described as very religious people and religion plays prominent role in their thinking and way of life. The fact remains that majority of Nigerians belong to one religion or another and they are always ready to defend their religion and more often than not, listen to their religious leaders. I know that this must have been one of the reasons why the organizers of the Conference have created this opportunity. The key concepts or items of our topic are food, ethics and politics. I will speak briefly on each of them relying more on the bible and magisterium of the Church, and then, what our role should be.

**Food:** The Book of Genesis recalls the story of creative action of God. That God created everything in a perfect state and that all

human needs were provided for and that man, woman and God lived together in perfect harmony. The Crown of God's creation is man, who he made in his own image and likeness and appointed as his vice-regent on this earth (fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion ... the ground – Gen 1: 28) This subduing does not mean exploitation of the environment by industry, technology, etc. rather it means that man has to overcome every sign of the chaotic forces in various spheres of life and lead this world towards its God appointed destiny. In Genesis 1: 29 - 30 we read "God said, I give you every seed-bearing plant which is on the face of all the earth, and every tree that bears fruits with seed. They will be your food. To every wild animal, to every bird of the sky, to everything that creeps along the ground, to everything that has the breath of life, I give every green plant for food." The same message as contained in Psalm 104: 14- "You make grass grow for cattle and plants for man to cultivate, that he may bring forth food from the earth." Thus, God made provision for man, he provided him with food as fruits of the earth and works of human hand.

Food as we know is one of the basic needs of man. Man needs food to survive, to work and to live a healthy life, and within the context of religion, food assumes a sacred character. It affords man participation, a sharing in communion with the holy, the divine. As Pierre-Marie Galopin puts it:

Through this symbol, man realizes a community of existence to which he aspires either with God or with the neither world.<sup>i</sup>

No wonder then that among the Yorubas, participation and sharing in communion of life with the divine is concretised with a meal. At various stages of their lives, they offer food to God through the

divinities either as thanksgiving for a favour received or to appease the divinities.

Jesus Christ too, in order to be more united with His followers, left Himself for them as food under the forms of bread and wine. So, that through this sacrament, he can be more intimately united with them and dwell with them thereby, bringing spiritual nourishment into their lives. (Cf. Luke 22: 14-20)

It is important to mention here that Jesus while instituting the Eucharist made no mistake in using bread and wine which were the basic food and drink of the Palestine and this has remained the practice in the Catholic Church till today. The Yorubas too, in preparing the sacred meals make use of the food items from their farms and as a matter of fact, the best of the harvest is offered to God. So, we notice that in both meals, Eucharist and Sacred meals among the Yorubas, what are used are fruits of the earth and the work of human hands, offered to God. Food has a spiritual dimension apart from being a basic necessity of life.

**ETHICS:** The word 'ethics' is etymologically connected with the Greek ethos, meaning custom or conduct. It is a rational discipline that studies the moral aspect of human activity in order to orientate such activity toward what is good for man, that is, his self-actualization. Ethics does not study how human beings behave, but how they ought to have behaved. So, according to Andrew Varga, it is the study of the rightness or wrongness of human conduct.<sup>ii</sup> Thus, human action depends greatly on its rightness or wrongness to God, Community (entire creation- environment and human beings) and himself.

In the context of our discussion, I find the book of Prophet Micah very instructive in terms of what should guide our behaviour/ conduct, what God expects from us human beings. Micah 6: 8 reads “You have been told, O man, what is good and what the Lord requires of you: Only to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.” (See also Deut. 26:16). In the Biblical terms, the ethical demand will be faithfulness (fidelity) to covenantal relationship on three levels- God, Man and the environment. The prophet Micah condemns the rich and ruling elites, and land-grabbers who squeeze the poor for finance their luxurious living which some have claimed that that is what GMOs is all about.

The seventh commandment of the Decalogue enjoins respect for the integrity of creation. The use of mineral, vegetable and animal resources of the universe cannot be divorced from respect for moral imperatives. The dominion over inanimate and other living beings granted by the Creator to Man is not absolute; it is limited by concern for the quality of life of his neighbour, including generations to come; it requires a religious respect for the integrity of creation. As we have been told in the opening remarks, it is morally wrong and unethical for any government to ignore the common good and welfare of the people and literally sell out the basis of livelihood of the community and giving a foreign corporation monopoly over people’s basic right to life.

**POLITICS:** The word politics can be used in different senses. The shorter Oxford English Dictionary defines politics as “the science and art of government”. The same dictionary also gives what it calls the sinister meaning of Politics as meaning scheming, craftiness, cunning, artfully contriving, and so on. This kind of politics to my mind is what

some of our past and present Nigerian Politicians have deliberately adopted and that is why we say that Politics is a dirty game. The third sense we use the word politics is as a business of resolving conflicts between opposing groups or securing agreement between factions divided along ideological lines.

I will like however to point out the sense that I find relevant to our discussion and that is the one given by St. John Paul II in *Laborem Exercens* 98 as the “prudent concern for common good”<sup>iii</sup> Brief as this definition is, it is wide and rich in meaning as it spells out the very reason for the existence of government itself.

The Church teaches that all government comes from God as we read in Romans 13; 1-4 and the nature and goal of politics is the realisation of the common good. Pope John XXIII defines common good as “all those social conditions which favour the full development of the human personality”<sup>iv</sup> In Concrete term, it embraces these social guarantees; Security (physical, moral and spiritual), equality of rights to social amenities, protection of citizens’ religious freedom in theory and practice, equal recognition and safeguard of individual rights and duties, creation of suitable climate for responsible exercise of rights and discharge of duties.

The Nigerian catholic Bishops have therefore at various times call on lay faithful to engage in politics notwithstanding of the difficulties involved in it, as a sacred task of the Christian in providing food for the hungry, water for the thirsty, shelter for the homeless, schools and hospitals for all in large scale through democratic structures.

Role of Religious Leaders:

1. The role of the religious Leader is to be the voice of the voiceless just like the prophets of Yahweh. Religious leaders

need to be prophetic in their witnessing, naming the social and moral evils of our society and calling for conversion of hearts and minds. Especially when it comes to the protection of human life and dignity, justice and peace and integrity of creation.

2. The Religious Leader has the role to ensure that development of economic activity and growth in production are meant to provide for the needs of human beings. Economic life is not meant solely to multiply good produced and increase profit or power, it is ordered first of all to the service of persons, of the whole man, and of the entire human community.
3. They are to remind those responsible for business enterprises that they are responsible to society for the economic and ecological effects of their operations. They have an obligation to consider the good of persons and not only the increase of profits.
4. While it is not their role to intervene directly in the political structuring and organisation of social life, they are to encourage and empower their lay faithful to be involved in order to animate temporal realities with Christian commitment, by which they show they are witnesses and agents of peace and justice.

---

<sup>i</sup> Pierre – Marie Galopin, meal in X. Leon –Dufour(ed.) Dictionary of Biblical Theology, ( Geoffrey Chapman Ltd., 1967,)P.301.

<sup>ii</sup> Andrew C. Varga, The main Issues in Bioethics.( New York: Paulist Press, 1994)P.1

<sup>iii</sup> John Paul II labore exercens Encyclical on Human work on the anniversary of Rerum Novarum (No 98) Sept 14, 1981 in the Papal Encyclicals (1958-1981) ed. Claudia Carlen P. 319.

<sup>iv</sup> John XXIII: mater et Magistra Encyclical letter on Christianity and social progress- may 15, 1961 No 65, in The Papal encyclicals ( 1958-1981).ed. Claudia Carlen P. 60.