

Summary report on conference held on the Pope Francis's messages at John Paul II Justice and Peace Centre.

On the 11th December 2015, John Paul II Justice and Peace Centre held a conference that gathered up to 80 participants. These included religious and political leaders, teachers, and representatives from the vulnerable groups of people, youth and catechists. The Conference aimed at discussing some realistic measures to implement the Pope's messages adequately by the Ugandan faithful, following his visit to Uganda from 27th – 29th November 2015.



The director of JPIIJC, Rev. Fr. Richard Nnyombi inspired the preliminaries of the discussions with a statement describing the rationale of the conference indicating that: “The Church will not change because of Pope Francis, but it will change because of us”. He thanked the participants for their presence particularly key speakers namely: Msgr. John Wynand Katende, the director of Kyoto Spiritual Formation Centre Namugongo, Hon. Dr. Miria Matembe and Mr Joseph Natukunda of Heart Sounds, for accepting to lead the discussions of the conference.

Msgr. John Wynand Katende presented Pope Francis's message and its implication to the religious leaders in Uganda, where he highlighted in detail the three central facets, that is: *memory, fidelity, and prayer* that are crucial to the religious and priestly callings, as emphasized by His Holiness.

Hon. Dr. Miria Matembe's presentation focused on the Pope's message to the youth as well as to the political and civic leaders. She pointed out that according to the Pope, young people are the *hope* of this nation and the church. However, she also highlighted that for the youth to carry



this hope forward, the Pope urges them to have this hope rooted in Jesus Christ and His promises. The environment in which young people live, polluted by so much evil and immorality, extravagancy and focus on materialism, modern gadgets that currently seem to rule their lives and destroy their perception on what is right and wrong was noted as one of the biggest obstacles hindering young people from realizing their dreams, despite the energy and rich talents as well as the willingness many young people exhibit to become responsible members of the society.

The Pope, according to Hon. Matembe, in His message to the Political Leaders, reminded them the guiding principles upon which this country was founded. Among these principles she highlighted a sacrificial faith as exemplified by the Uganda Martyrs and expressed through our Motto, "For God and My Country". In principle, according to Hon. Matembe, these guiding norms call upon the leaders to invoke a broad participation in national life to ensure good and transparent governance characterized by integral human development. It challenges them to possess the wisdom to distribute equally the resources which belong to God, as well as to manage and govern them as stewards for the benefit of Uganda and God's people.

Mr Joseph Natukunda presented in detail the Pope's message concerning the vulnerable people, the poor and the marginalized. He brought into context his own experience as a person who has suffered from mental disabilities and how he faced stigma and discrimination at various fronts. According to Mr Natukunda, the Pope calls each one of us to open our hearts to those in need and help the vulnerable to live a life of dignity by stamping out acts of discrimination and stigma against them and to always challenge our conscience to humbly seek dialogue with people who are different rather than discriminate against them.

Mr Natukunda told a very inspiring story of a book he read where he understood the diversity of human nature more deeply. This book, he said, indicates that in every society, there are extra

ordinary people who stand out in a normal social consensus, shatter the norms and challenge the status quo. The categories of these people include: prophets, shamans, mystics, mad people, revolutionaries, etc. These people, according to Mr Natukunda, travel the waters to challenge the majority, bringing new creative energies in society, paying a high price at times. He strongly pointed out that many people including himself were meant to be among the categories of people mentioned above, but there is no one to initiate them. He pointed out that Jesus was initiated by John the Baptist into the ministry and that what our society needs today are “initiators”, people who are willing to help others make the best of themselves by enabling them to tap in that potential they need to become resourceful people in our society.



Action points/way forward

- a) The message of the Pope is a call to all of us to take concrete actions that impact humanity positively. Participants emphasized that forums related to this one should be organized for various target groups because promoting peace and justice concerns everyone.
- b) There was also a suggestion that the program of JPIIIPC concerning the dissemination of these messages could be availed to Hon. Dr. Miria Matembe, as she committed herself to work with JPIIIPC especially on matters concerning the youth and political leaders.

- c) A concern regarding directives coming from the various levels of church structures was raised, in the sense that there are clear messages for instance the Pope's messages that may need to be implemented within the dioceses but there may be complacency in implementation by those that are directly in charge because they may always have to wait for order from above. As a result, some dioceses have been quick to implement certain activities directly related to a message as this (Pope Francis's messages) while others still wait for directives or orders to be given from above, to effect action. Participants suggested that the Centre engages those concerned especially as it works with the Catholic Church to see that the Pope's messages is disseminated in a consistent manner.
- d) Land grabbing was pointed out as disturbing social issue in the country that is currently exposing many people to vulnerability. Since the Centre interacts with various Justice and Peace departments within the government and the Catholic Church, it could engage the authority concerned to dialogue matters concerning land grabbing in the country.
- e) Participants also noted with concern the unjust suspension of one nurse in Abim hospital, after the visit of Col. Dr. Kiiza Besigye, one of the presidential candidates, and requested the Centre to intervene at its advocacy level to have her re-instated.
- f) It was also clearly pointed out that many young people in Uganda today live extravagantly and get into marriages without understanding what it is exactly. The tendency for many young people today is to borrow loans from banks, for instance, in order to make impressions at traditional marriages and wedding ceremonies yet such behaviour has only led them to fall into a vicious cycle that constantly lowers them into debt. Religious leaders and faith based organizations were called upon to devise ways in which young people could be sensitized and helped to clearly understand and embrace the value of marriage, and understand that marriage goes beyond mere material things.
- g) As one of the strategies to take the Pope's message to the youth forward, participants suggested that radio program such as those on radio Maria and Sapientia integrate sessions that touch issues that destroy marriages such as extravagancy and misuse of modern gadgets of communication. Hon Matembe would be invited as one of the key presenters on a program which is normally organized by Holy Cross Family Ministries at Radio Sapientia.

- h) Religious leaders were called to revisit their foundations, i.e., charisms, which originally inspired their call to serve the poor and the needy. This would re-ignite their commitment as shepherds to the most vulnerable and marginalised who need to be nourished not only spiritually but also physically. They were also called upon to use their spaces that is: Mosques, Churches, etc., while facilitating specific programs such as baptism ceremonies, wedding, funerals, to encourage leaders to condemn immoral acts and all forms of injustices in our society and also emulate the simplicity and personality of Pope Francis.



- i) There was a suggestion to form a group, possibly initiated by the participants present, involving some committed Christian professionals. The Centre would work with this group to concretely devise strategies and activities that would help to amplify the Pope's messages in families and communities.
- j) Participants also suggested to the Centre to document the Pope's messages and have these shared with participants who in turn will disseminate these to their respective communities.
- k) Concerning the issue of unemployment among the youth, the Centre was encouraged to find strategies that assist in the formation of associations and groups for young people within the church settings, where they could start projects that enable them to become self-reliant.

In conclusion, the conference ended with remarks from Rev. Fr. Tony Walch, a member of the JPIIIPC BOG, who thanked all participants for being part of JPIIIPC's initiative in ensuring that the faithful in Uganda make the Pope's message



visible in their day to day lives. He indicated that the Pope's message of peace, reconciliation and respect for human dignity was very timely as our country prepares for the 2016 elections. He also appealed to all participants in their own capacity to do something in their families, in their communities and at their workplaces in order to propagate the message of Pope Francis.