



SPEECH ON THE OCCASION OF AWARDING THE 2012 PAX CHRISTI INTERNATIONAL PEACE PRIZE

It is for me a sincere honour and pleasure to present the Pax Christi International Peace Award for the year 2012. This award is presented each year in recognition of a person or group that embodies the ideals of the Pax Christi movement and has made an exceptional contribution toward building a more peaceful world.

The notion of reconciliation lies at the heart of our peace work. Re-conciliare means “restoring,” “renewing the social relationships in a spirit of justice and peace.” Reconciliation is sorely needed in many parts of our world today. We live in an era of strained relations – sometimes bitterly so – between adherents of the great religious traditions of the world. At the heart of all major religions is the message of peace, right relationship and just dealings with one’s neighbour. Tragically, there are those in every age that have distorted this message through hatred and violence in the name of their religion.

This year the Executive Committee of Pax Christi International and the Cardinal Bernardus Alfrink Peace Fund are honoured to present this award to His Grace **John Olorunfemi Onaiyekan**, the Catholic Archbishop of Abuja.

Archbishop Onaiyekan has distinguished himself as a determined advocate for Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria, where in recent years sectarian violence has been severe. In the face of Islamist violence, he has consistently called for peace,



forgiveness and reconciliation. He has urged Christians to exercise restraint and to not take revenge against their Muslim neighbours. He tells them that Boko Haram, the Islamist militants trying to ‘purge’ the region of so-called Western influence, does not represent Islam in Nigeria and that Muslims are to be treated with respect and dignity.

Historically, Christians and Muslims in Nigeria have lived peacefully together. In more recent years, the media has often misrepresented Nigeria as a country that is divided between the Christian south and the Muslim north; however, the Muslim population in the north is only slightly higher than the Christian population. It is certainly in the interest of all Nigerians to remain united in their resolve to rid their country of all extremist violence that threatens to divide them.

Archbishop Onaiyekan has insisted that the violent actions of Boko Haram must not be met with yet more violence. Even after bombs killed dozens of Christians at Christmas last year, he urged their survivors to resist the ‘natural instincts’ of anger and revenge and to instead follow the teachings of Jesus to ‘love your enemies, do good to those who hate you and pray for those who treat you badly.’

At the same time, Archbishop Onaiyekan has not been naïve to the wider context of these violent acts. Yes, many Christians have been killed. Many Muslims have also been killed in Boko Haram attacks. It is not primarily along religious lines that this militant group has struck. And it is not through heavy-handed security measures alone that this violence will end.



Archbishop John has been clear that the underlying social, economic and political struggles of the people themselves must also be addressed, if Nigeria is to know peace. The extreme poverty of countless Nigerians – and the injustices and corruption that perpetuate it – are also forms of violence. And these too call for the highest attention to be given by government, civil society and the international community.

Your Grace, we are grateful for your strong leadership on behalf of peace, not only in your own country but also throughout Africa and indeed in many countries throughout the world. Your commitment to the gospel of peace and non-violence has been costly to you personally. It has drawn harsh criticism from many quarters and from Christians and Muslims alike. We thank you for your resolve that violence will not have the final word. And tonight we join our hearts and prayers with those of many who long to see a just peace in Nigeria.

It is my honour to present to you the 2012 Pax Christi International Prize for Peace.

Mechelen, Belgium, 31 October 2012

+ Kevin Dowling, C.S.S.R.

Co-president of Pax Christi International

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