

## Launching of the RECOWA Justice “Online Pilgrimage”

27th October, 2021, Speech by the President of RECOWA, Archbishop Ignatius A. Kaigama

### 1. Introduction

On behalf of the Cardinals, Archbishops and Bishops of the Reunion of Episcopal Conferences of West Africa (RECOWA), I humbly address a message of good-will to our people of West Africa, especially those who suffer injustice occasioned by the exploitation of their rights and resources, on this occasion of the launching of the RECOWA Justice “Online Pilgrimage”, in continuation of our efforts for the rights of communities and a healthy environment.

A pilgrimage normally has to do with movement and prayer. What then is the idea of this “online pilgrimage”? Our “Online pilgrimage” consists of the Churches showcasing their contributions to the struggle for justice through uploading of video clips and voice messages in the RECOWA Facebook page as we move virtually round the region, from one country to another speaking about justice issues, in the spirit of prayer. By this, we hope to provide a platform for the voices of our people to be amplified and to be heard by government officials and policy makers at different levels in Africa and internationally; as well as to sensitize and inspire the general populace for action in favour of justice.

### 2. Rights of Communities and Environmental Rights

In our Standing Committee meeting of February 2020, on the theme: *“Together, let us work for the Rights of Communities and the Environment”*, the Bishops of RECOWA deliberated on the rights of communities and the environmental problems in our region where social injustice and abuses of community rights are rampant. “We recognize that there are several international treaties and conventions but these conventions do not do justice to Africa. We therefore call for the establishment of a global and legally binding instrument to regulate the activities of transnational corporations. We ask our respective governments in West Africa to work collectively with other countries for the realization of such an instrument with a view to peaceful global governance, a factor of social cohesion.” (Message of the Bishop Members of the 8<sup>th</sup> Standing Committee of RECOWA-CERAO, Abidjan 16<sup>th</sup> February 2021).

### 3. Context of the “Online Pilgrimage”

This “online pilgrimage” is going to draw attention to a number of international events that would impact on the life of our people. These events include among others, the negotiation for the UN Binding Treaty against cooperate impunity which will run from 27<sup>th</sup>-29<sup>th</sup> October, 2021. It will also be an advocacy to the Conference of Parties on Climate Summit (COP 26) which will take place in Glasgow, Scotland, from 1<sup>st</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> November, 2021. It will equally serve to complement the caravan in favour of communities impacted by resource grabbing, organized by the West African Global Convergence of Land, Water and Seeds Struggle Convergence Globale des Luttes pour la Terre et l’Eau-Afrique de l’Ouest (CGLTE-OA), with whom we have been collaborating. This “online pilgrimage” is designed to help our Church in West Africa to listen more to *the cry of the poor* (LS 49) and marginalized communities in their plight and struggles, as we demonstrate our solidarity with them.

The caravan of the civil society struggle will pass through identified West African States from 20<sup>th</sup> November to 11<sup>th</sup> December, 2021. In the same vein, the “online pilgrimage”, which is the Church’s contribution to this endeavour is beginning today, 27<sup>th</sup> of October, and will continue till April 2022, towards the 4th plenary Assembly of RECOWA, scheduled to hold from 2<sup>nd</sup> to

9<sup>th</sup> May, 2022 in Abuja, Nigeria, and will deliver messages of what have been seen and heard to the RECOWA Bishops for deliberation.

Our “online pilgrimage” is a concrete support to the initiative of Convergence Globale des Luttes pour la Terre et l’Eau (CGLTE) which has already provided a common ground for the struggles of local communities for justice through their bi-annual caravan. This year, their caravan will pass from Gambia through Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Senegal and to end in Sierra Leone. We have requested our conferences in these countries to kindly support the caravan.

#### **4. Activities**

In line with the call of the Bishops for justice, RECOWA wants to concretely stand with the poor and the oppressed in their struggle for sustainable livelihood through the protection of their land and water, forests and environment, as well as through transition to agroecology. The “pilgrimage” will hopefully help the people at the grassroots and make their voices heard.

We therefore invite you to kindly upload into the Facebook page of RECOWA:

- Interviews of communities (men, women and young people) impacted negatively by resource grabbing and corporate impunity to which our Bishops have raised concerns in their pastoral statement of 16<sup>th</sup> February 2020.
- Stories of successful local initiatives to promote agroecology and care of the environment, afforestation etc.
- Stories of how your local parishes and communities are welcoming, hosting and supporting the Caravan event as it passes through your local areas.
- Stories of how social injustice and environmental crises have affected the life of youths and children in your society.
- Your *Laudato Si* events in your parishes and dioceses or any other activities that are related to the theme of land justice (securing land rights), agroecology, and awareness of environmental crisis, while at the same time, showing your effort in challenging worsening corporate capture and impunity that have led to resource grabs (land, water and seeds).

The “pilgrimage” requires simple videos recorded with the android phone and uploaded to the RECOWA Facebook page.

#### **5. Message to West African People**

On behalf of the Cardinals, Archbishops and Bishops of the Catholic Church in West Africa, I wish to re-echo here our resolution during our Standing Committee meeting in 2020: “For our part, we are instructing the National and Diocesan Justice and Peace Commissions to redouble their efforts and innovations in the assistance, protection and care of victims of the harmful effects of the land grabbing and expropriation. As for us, we are committed to doing intense advocacy work with all national, regional and international bodies so that strong frameworks and mechanisms can be put in place to correct any injustice and anomalies.” (Abidjan, 2020). By this “online pilgrimage” we wish to concretely demonstrate to our people that we are committed to the cause of justice.

#### **6. Message to the International Community**

In the words of Pope Francis in *Fratelli Tutti*, “by closely observing our contemporary societies, we see numerous contradictions that lead us to wonder whether the equal dignity of all human

beings, solemnly proclaimed seventy years ago, is truly recognized, respected, protected and promoted in every situation. In today's world, many forms of injustice persist, fed by reductive anthropological visions and by a profit-based economic model that does not hesitate to exploit, discard and even kill human beings. While one part of humanity lives in opulence, another part sees its own dignity denied, scorned or trampled upon, and its fundamental rights discarded or violated" (FT 22).

In the light of this clear observation, we, the Bishops of RECOWA, make a passionate appeal to the international communities, starting with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the African Union, to the United Nations. We do so, on behalf of our voiceless people whose rights are being trampled upon, whose lands are grabbed, whose waters are polluted, whose forest and environments are destroyed in the name of development that is not integral and does not advance the human well-being of the population but rather boost the financial profits of the powerful and rich Corporations. We call on you, the international policy makers to hear the cry of the poor and harken to their plea for justice and dignified existence.

## **7. Conclusion**

I wish to end by thanking all who have worked behind the scene to make this project a reality. I must mention Mr Emmanuel Yap from CIDSE (Cooperation International pour le Développement et la Solidarite) and Fr. Chika Onyejiuwa from AEFJN (African Europe Faith and Justice Network) who coordinated this project with RECOWA Secretariat. My gratitude goes equally to all the conferences of our region which have keyed into this project. I cannot forget our Civil Society collaborators and the funders of this event (DKA and CAFOD). Your efforts are not in vain. Together, by doing something no matter how little, we can make the world a better place where justice and peace will be at home.

Thank you for your very kind attention.