



Archbishop Ignatius Kaigama of Jos, Nigeria, speaks during a forum addressing international religious freedom issues at the United Nations March 1, 2019. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)



by Peter Feuerherd

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New York — March 18, 2019

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Archbishop Ignatius Kaigama of Jos, Nigeria, spoke to the United Nations March 1 as a representative of the church in a nation where Boko Haram has captured and terrorized hundreds of Christian schoolgirls.

Upon his return to Nigeria, Kaigama was subsequently appointed coadjutor of Abuja, the capital, where he will succeed Cardinal John Olorunfemi. While in New York before his new appointment, Kaigama painted a picture of a country not only confronting strife between Christians and Muslims, but also on the frontlines of climate change and economic inequality, with a church committed to upholding what he described as traditional values in the face of Western encroachment.

"Sanity not sentiment must prevail in matters of religion," he told the United Nations International Religious Freedom panel discussion. The former president of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria, Kaigama was invited to speak by the Vatican's mission to the United Nations, where he urged member governments to appoint ministers of religious freedom to monitor progress in guaranteeing religious liberty.

He said that Boko Haram, founded in 2002, lashed out in regular violence seven years later when its founder, Yusuf Mohammed, was killed while in police custody. It has since kidnapped nearly 400 schoolgirls, many of them Christians, in two widely publicized incidences in 2014 and 2018. It has displaced some 3.8 million people and killed over 28,000, said Kaigama.

Christians in Nigeria have long been under attack. In 2012, 14 people were killed at St. Finbar Church in his archdiocese.

While Boko Haram has generated international notoriety, another group representing Fulani Muslims, mostly herdsman, have instituted a killing spree directed at Christian farmers; last summer, the group killed more than 300 people, said Kaigama.

At the U.N., Kaigama pleaded for help with the immediate concerns posed by religious conflict. In talks around the metropolitan region in conjunction with his trip, he offered a wider perspective.

In a talk at Our Lady Queen of Martyrs Church in Queens, New York, sponsored by Aid to the Church in Need, a Brooklyn-based organization supporting Catholic dioceses in economic and political turmoil, Kaigama noted that Nigeria has nearly 200 million people, the largest population of any country in Africa. It is religiously and ethnically divided, with Christians and Muslims roughly split in numbers, with 20 percent practicing indigenous religions.

Christians dominate the southern part of the country; Muslims are in the north. He described religious tensions often stoked by seemingly minor conflicts.

In 2004, there was a fight over the relationship between a Muslim girl and a Christian boy. The fight ended with the burning of houses by Muslim extremists.

When Muslims protested the insult to the prophet Mohammed in a Danish cartoon in 2005, Christians in Nigeria were targeted. Muslims also violently protested a Miss World competition, said to be contrary to Muslim values, resulting in hundreds of deaths in 2002, said Kaigama.

"Religion is supposed to bring unity," Kaigama said in his Queens talk.

But that has not been the case in Nigeria. Ever since the founder of Boko Haram died "we haven't known any peace," he said.

Boko Haram argues for Islamic controlled government. In its version of Islam, girls should not be educated, and schools should focus exclusively on the Koran and Sharia law.

When St. Finbar was attacked by terrorists in his diocese, Kaigama was urged by an angry crowd to call for a war on Muslims, but he deferred.

"Why should we embark on such a futile exercise?" he asked. Instead, the archbishop has focused on promoting dialogue with Muslims not allied with Boko Haram and other militant groups. The archdiocese sponsors a peace center promoting ongoing dialogue with Muslims and Christians.

"I have been a victim and always a reconciler and promoter of peace," he said, noting, "We cannot go into religious war. There will be no end."

Nigeria is cognizant of hard lessons learned from the country's brutal civil war (also known as the Biafra War) from 1967 to 1970, he said.

"It has taught us a lesson. Millions of people died. At the end we had to get back together," he said.

The archbishop said there are sizeable numbers of Muslims who oppose Boko Haram and other militant groups, particularly since mosques have been targeted for not providing sufficient support for militants.

"All of us are targets. It's not just Christians alone," he said. Whenever there is violence, he said, people flock to the churches seeking protection, including Muslims. "We embrace everyone and don't exclude anyone," he said.

The interreligious conflict is tangled up with other issues, including climate change, Kaigama said. Muslim herders, driven south by the encroaching desert, clash with Christian farmers.

The attacks on education, he said in a March 4 NCR interview, have gained support as graduates find limited opportunities, with much of the country's wealth invested in Europe or the United States by wealthy Nigerians.

Despite the challenge of being under siege in some regions, the church in Nigeria is thriving, said Kaigama. The churches are filled regularly. It is not immune from world issues about Catholicism, however. Nigerian Sr. Veronica Openibo, of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, headlined the recent Vatican summit on sex abuse, calling for zero tolerance and defrocking of clergy who commit sex abuse.

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Kaigama downplayed the problem as an issue in his country. "I don't doubt there are isolated cases" but "I don't think it's a pandemic problem," he said.

He said the Nigerian bishops have been misinterpreted on the issue of LGBT rights.

LGBT culture, he said, "has not been part of our culture. Now we are told it's a right." He opposed imprisoning LGBT people — called for by some African leaders — but argued against same-sex marriage and for what he described as Western indoctrination favorable to LGBT people.

"It is becoming a culture. It is in contradiction to what we have stood for," he said. "This is not our culture. It shouldn't be taught. It shouldn't be learned. It has never

been part of our culture. That is what we are trying to reject."

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