



President's meeting with Catholic Bishops 'WE JUST SPOKE THE TRUTH TO POWER'

...Cardinal Onaiyekan

Nigerians charge presidential aides, be strategic, not reactive

The Presidency has berated the Archbishop Emeritus of Catholic Diocese of Abuja, John Onaiyekan, cardinal, for revealing what transpired during a Thursday's closed-door meeting between President Bola Tinubu and the Catholic Bishop Conference of Nigeria CBCN. The CBCN, led by its President, Matthew Ndagoso, met with President Tinubu, during which it outlined areas of concern in the country, which include security, quality tertiary education and limited spaces, sustaining gains of democracy, credible elections, and poverty. In a statement after the visit the Senior Special Assistant to the President on Media and Publicity, Temotope Ajayi, described Mr Onaiyekan's action as an abuse of privilege. "There is something fundamentally inappropriate about Cardinal John Onaiyekan granting a television interview to offer his own account and interpretation of what transpired during the private meeting between the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria and President Bola Tinubu. It is, in my view, an abuse of clerical privilege," According to the full statement, 'There is something fundamentally inappropriate about Cardinal John Onaiyekan granting a television interview to offer his own account and interpretation of what transpired during the private meeting between the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria and President Bola Tinubu. It is, in my view, an abuse of clerical privilege. The bishops requested an audience with the President. He granted the audience graciously.

They presented, as was their right, a catalogue of the country's economic, social, and security challenges as they saw them. Except

for their grudging acknowledgement of the benefits of NELFUND, they were dismissive of the other great things the administration accomplished. The bishops were notably acerbic in their submission, but the President listened to them patiently and responded. That should ordinarily have been where the matter rested. None of the issues raised by the bishops is beyond scrutiny or rebuttal. Their assessment is neither scripture nor an article of faith. It is a perspective, and perspectives can be challenged with facts and evidence. President Tinubu did exactly that, responding point by point to the issues they raised. On the bishops' demand for the return of schools to their owners, the President was surprised that such an issue could be tabled before him, as it is a matter for the states to resolve, in line with our constitution. So, he asked the bishops to take the matter to the governors and reminded them that he returned mission schools in Lagos State when he was governor. The President argued that the bishops' characterization of the country's current condition was incomplete and, in several respects, inaccurate. He pointed to measurable progress on the economic, social, and security fronts. He did not pretend that Nigeria's problems had disappeared. He acknowledged that significant economic and security challenges remain. His point was that the country has emerged from "a dark tunnel", that his administration has laid the foundations for recovery, and that the next phase is to ensure that the greatest number of Nigerians feel the gains. In an interview with Arise TV, Mr Onaiyekan, who was part of the delegation, recounted how the president argued with the delegation on the state of the nation.

The president reportedly told the clerics that everything in the country was working well despite the bishops' concerns about the nation's worsening economic situation. Mr Onaiyekan, during the interview, said the president's reaction suggested that those around him were not giving him an accurate picture of the hardship Nigerians are experiencing. He said President Tinubu's facial expression showed dissatisfaction with the bishops' assessment of the economy and that, instead of accepting their concerns, he argued that the country's economy was improving. "You asked me, how did I see the face of the President in reaction? I was not surprised that he was not looking very happy. Not even his colleagues who were there. We knew that this is different from the kind of statements that our president keeps receiving from all kinds of people. The bishops were notably acerbic in their submission, but the President listened to them patiently and responded. That should ordinarily have been where the matter rested. None of the issues raised by the bishops is beyond scrutiny or rebuttal. Their assessment is neither scripture nor an article of faith. It is a perspective, and perspectives can be challenged with facts and evidence. President Tinubu did exactly that, responding point by point to the issues they raised. On the bishops' demand for the return of schools to their owners, the President was surprised that such an issue could be tabled before him, as it is a matter for the states to resolve, in line with our constitution.

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progress on the economic, social, and security fronts. He did not pretend that Nigeria's problems had disappeared. He acknowledged that significant economic and security challenges remain. His point was that the country has emerged from "a dark tunnel", that his administration has laid the foundations for recovery, and that the next phase is to ensure that the greatest number of Nigerians feel the gains. What the clerics often overlook in these interventions is that governing a country is fundamentally different from shepherding a church. In a democracy, every interest group, including the Catholic Church, has every right to demand more from government. That is part of

democratic engagement. But the President of a nation of more than 200 million people is required to make difficult choices every single day. Those choices involve competing interests, limited resources, and imperfect options.

They will inevitably disappoint some constituencies. There is no president, whether Tinubu or whoever succeeds him, who can wave a magic wand and make Nigeria's accumulated problems disappear overnight. It is easy to compile a list of national problems. It is far more difficult to acknowledge the disasters that have been averted. Whatever anyone thinks of President Tinubu's policies, it is impossible to ignore the fiscal crisis he inherited and the measures taken to pull the country away from the edge of a financial cliff. Even the bishops themselves should recognize that one tangible consequence has been the restoration of greater fiscal stability across many states. Countless civil servants and pensioners who, for years, endured unpaid salaries and pensions are now receiving them more regularly. That was certainly not the reality in many states from around 2014. Even about four years ago, 27 state governments struggled to meet even their most basic obligations. Many of those civil servants and pensioners are themselves parishioners in Catholic churches. They know, from lived experience rather than official pronouncements, that there has been real relief in the regular payment of salaries and pensions. While this does not erase the discomfort many Nigerians still face, it is wrong to casually dismiss or ignore those improvements. So when President Tinubu reminded the bishops of these facts during the meeting, he was not, as Cardinal Onaiyekan later suggested, being aloof or dismissive. He was presenting evidence to support his argument that the country is not standing still. A disagreement over facts should not be interpreted as arrogance. The same applies to security.

The bishop casually opted that Nigeria is bleeding. The President thinks otherwise. President Tinubu did not deny the seriousness of the security situation. Rather, he acknowledged the challenge while outlining the gains recorded by the Armed Forces and intelligence agencies across different theatres of operation. As Commander-in-Chief, he receives operational briefings, intelligence assessments, and battlefield reports unavailable to the general public. The bishops, like other Nigerians, rely largely on media reports and public information. That does not make the President infallible, but it does mean he possesses information unavailable to the generality of the people. It is, therefore, legitimate for him to argue that the overall picture is more nuanced than newspaper headlines sometimes suggest. Cardinal Onaiyekan's Arise News interview also reflected



a familiar error that many ideological and professional critics make. They often assume that only critics speak truth to power, while everyone around a leader is either unwilling or incapable of doing so. It is an attractive narrative, but it is rarely true. What truth does anyone really need to tell President Tinubu that he does not already know? As President, he has multiple channels for feeling the pulse of the country. He reads an average of 10 newspapers every day. He watches television, including discussion programmes, to gauge public opinion. He receives daily security, social, and economic intelligence reports from various arms of government, reports that are prepared for decision-making and are not sugar-coated. In a meeting earlier in the week, he still cited a very harsh and largely uninformed opinion piece by Dr Chidi Amuta in his last Sunday Thisday Newspaper column. Beyond that, he has friends and associates embedded in the country's social fabric, drawn from different regions, professions, and political persuasions, who serve as informal sounding boards.

Against that background, the suggestion that President Tinubu somehow needs only the Catholic Bishops to acquaint him with the truth is an overreach. They are an important constituency, but they are by no means the exclusive custodians of the national mood or the nation's conscience. To assume that criticism delivered publicly is the only form of truth-telling is to misunderstand how government works. Presidents are exposed daily to competing advice, conflicting intelligence, uncomfortable assessments, and hard realities. Presidents are constantly confronted with information, much of it unpleasant. The real question is not whether they know the truth but what choices they make in response to it. The Catholic Bishops discharged what they considered their moral obligation by

not by converting privileged access into a platform for post-meeting commentary'.

While reacting to the issue Archbishop John Cardinal Onaiyekan says President Tinubu rejected the bishops' concerns during the Catholic Bishops' Conference meeting at the State House the Archbishop Emeritus, Catholic Diocese of Abuja, John Cardinal Onaiyekan, said that President Bola Tinubu made it "quite clearly" known that he disagreed with the concerns raised by members of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) during their meeting with him at the State House, Abuja. Recall that President Bola Tinubu met with members of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) at the State House, Abuja, on July 28, 2026, where the bishops raised concerns about the economy, insecurity and the country's political climate. Speaking with ARISE NEWS, Archbishop Onaiyekan said President Tinubu responded directly to the concerns raised by the bishops during the meeting, stressing that the President made it "quite clearly" known that he disagreed with their assessment of the economy, insecurity and the country's political climate. "When the nation is bleeding, you cannot expect a polite meeting with the Head of State. We had to let him know. And his reply is that the nation is not bleeding. We told him the economy is not helping our poor people; he told us the economy is doing fine. Frankly speaking, he told us quite clearly that he did not agree with us. "Again, we were not surprised. We didn't expect him to agree with us. We have done our duty, we have delivered our message, and we have a feeling that somehow, along the line, somebody will show him a few of the things we said," he said. He also maintained that the bishops' statement was the product of broad consultations within the Catholic Bishops' Conference of



presenting their concerns to the President. President Tinubu, for his part, accorded them respect by granting them an audience and responding to every issue they raised. That exchange reflected the civility expected in a constitutional democracy. Reciprocity should have dictated that the confidentiality and dignity of that engagement be preserved. As such, it was inappropriate for one of the participants to appear on national television almost immediately to offer his own version of what was essentially a private conversation with the President. Clerical office carries privileges, but it also imposes obligations. Among the qualities the Scriptures require of bishops are temperance, maturity, self-restraint, and the wisdom to remain above needless public controversy. Those virtues become even more important when dealing with matters of state. Public influence should be exercised with discretion,

Nigeria (CBCN), stressing that it reflected the collective position of the conference rather than the views of a few individuals. Onaiyekan added that the bishops had no political ambitions but a duty to speak truthfully about the realities facing Nigerians. "Let me say first and foremost that that statement read by our president was not just put together at random. It was carefully considered and with wide consultation. The Bishops' Conference is bigger than the group of us that were there, but it is very representative of the Bishops' Conference. So, it is the Catholic Bishops' Conference that produced that document. It was written, rewritten, and corrected. So it was not done at random, nor did we deliver it with levity," he stressed. "I think I have an opportunity in this program to remind Nigerians that, as bishops, we have no ambitions to take Mr. Tinubu's job or anybody else's job. We are not politicians running for office. We are, first and foremost,

religious leaders who feel we have a duty—not just to preach our religious doctrines, but also to address the lives of our people, both those who are our members and those who are not. You can see that from the content and the tone of our statement,” he added. Onaiyekan further said he was not surprised that President Tinubu appeared unhappy while listening to the bishops’ statement, noting that the delegation deliberately presented what it believed was the country’s reality rather than a favourable picture. He said the President’s response made it clear that he disagreed with their assessment. “You asked me what I saw on the face of the President in reaction. I was not surprised that he was not looking very happy, nor were his colleagues who were there. We knew that this is different from the kind of statements that our President keeps receiving from all kinds of people. That is one of the things that worries us: there are so many people hanging around Mr. President, giving him a rosy picture of what the country is, which it is not. “We felt that we have a duty not to do that. Indeed, we have the obligation to help him appreciate the reality of the situation in which we find ourselves. That is the reality that we painted, which I know is not the kind of thing that he wanted to hear. And his reply showed that very clearly,” he reiterated. Despite the disagreement, Onaiyekan said the bishops left the meeting convinced that President Tinubu had heard their concerns because he responded directly to the issues they raised. He, however, expressed hope that those around the President would encourage him to reflect further on the bishops’ message, adding that too few people within government were willing to tell him the truth. “He heard it, and he tried to tell us that he heard us, which is precisely why he replied the way he replied. He replied to the points we raised and disagreed with them, so he must have heard it.

“The real question now is: Is this disagreement his final position, or will there be people around him whose job it is to draw his attention that these guys who came here in white garments have not made any personal requests for oil wells or any particular personal things, and maybe he should listen to what they are saying? “We believe one of the problems within our government right now is that there are not too many people telling him the truth, which is a pity. We need to have that, whether in terms of the economy, insecurity, and above all, the area of the political climate,” he said. Turning to the country’s political climate, the bishop said the Catholic Bishops’ Conference’s warning about the “creeping danger” of a one-party dominant state was informed by concerns over the conduct of elections and the growing use of the powers of incumbency. He argued that politics should not be a contest where “everything can be done” simply to secure victory, warning that such an approach could undermine democracy. “The position of Mr. President came very clearly in that statement that he made: ‘In politics, all is fair.’ Is that true? If that is what politics is—that in politics everything can be done provided you win elections. That is certainly not correct. There is propriety in everything. That is why we are worried about it. We are worried about the fact that we see clearly that our government is bent on winning by all means, and unfortunately, they have a lot of means at their disposal to win. They are deploying all those means in a way that eventually, even if we had a free and fair election, the votes of the people may not count. We gave two warnings. The first was the one you mentioned. The second is that if we do not rearrange our election system to make sure that elections are really free, fair, and credible, it can lead to difficulties,” he stressed. Continuing, he said: “We warned that the country doesn’t gain anything by a one-party state in a so-called democracy. Of course, we are not

expecting Mr. President to help the opposition to defeat him—no. But the point we are raising is that even though the President has all the powers of incumbency, in the election, he is a candidate like any other.”

Responding to President Tinubu’s defence of INEC at the meeting with CBCN on Tuesday, where he declared that INEC is neutral, and denied allegations that it favours the ruling party or intimidates political opponents, Archbishop Onaiyekan argued that the commission’s neutrality would continue to be questioned as long as its members are appointed by the President. “He said that INEC is independent, but words are not enough. The Nigerian political system, the way it is now constructed, precisely is leading to a situation where INEC cannot be independent. The chairman, all the members, and all the commissioners have been appointed by the President. “The presumption is that Mr. President will appoint independent, impartial, wonderful people. But on the ground, we see that standard politicians and members of his party are appointed. This means we have a situation where until we find a system where the membership of the electoral commission is put together not by Mr. President, but by a truly independent entity, that would remove the doubts. “And that is not an impossible thing to do; it is done elsewhere. We could do it if we wanted to do it. Whether our present President is in the mood to go that direction, I don’t know,” he said. Urging President Bola Tinubu to strengthen Nigeria’s democratic institutions, Onaiyekan said the President’s reputation as a pro-democracy figure should be reflected in reforms that guarantee a level playing field in elections. He added that the bishops were not acting on behalf of any political party but were united in speaking out on the country’s economy, insecurity and democratic governance, insisting that Nigerians deserved better than their current realities. “We are hoping that that kind of statement challenges him—that you have a reputation to be a democrat, and you can’t under your watch our democratic structures disintegrate. Silence is consent, so he must agree with what we said. How he will do it, we don’t know. We still have this problem in Nigeria of how incumbents can simply allow a free and fair playground in elections. We still have that problem. “I think we have done our duty. I have the feeling that somehow, there are people around him—they may not change everything overnight—but I hope nobody thought that any political party was sending us. There’s no way any political party can gather that kind of group from different parts of Nigeria. Is it that bishops have no political feelings of their own? We do have differences. But when it comes to what is important for Nigeria, when it comes to our existential existence, when it comes to the life of our people, we are united. We are united that we deserve more than what we are getting now. Therefore, when the government keeps congratulating itself, we feel that this is misplaced. Because it is not even looking at the difficulties, they are not doing enough to address those difficulties,” he insisted. Concluding, Onaiyekan expressed confidence that the bishops’ message to President Tinubu would have an impact despite their differences during the meeting. He said the delegation had fulfilled its responsibility by conveying the concerns of many Nigerians who do not have the opportunity to speak directly to the President. “We have delivered our message, and we are quite convinced that it will not go for nothing. It has a way of making an impact. At least we have expressed the feelings of many Nigerians who have no way of meeting Mr. President,” Onaiyekan concluded.

The controversy surrounding the meeting between President Bola Ahmed Tinubu and the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Nigeria (CBCN), as well as subsequent comments by

Archbishop Emeritus of Abuja, Cardinal John Onaiyekan, has continued to generate reactions from political leaders and public affairs analysts. While some have defended the right of the Catholic Bishops and Cardinal Onaiyekan to comment on national issues affecting Nigerians, others have criticized the manner in which the meeting was discussed publicly, arguing that religious leaders should exercise caution when engaging with government officials. The National Organising Secretary of Afenifere, Apagun Kole Omololu, former Speaker of the Ondo State House of Assembly, Rt. Hon. Bakkita Bello, Afenifere leader, Senator Femi Okurounmu, and other stakeholders shared different perspectives on the development. Apagun Kole Omololu, said President Bola Ahmed Tinubu has demonstrated strong commitment to promoting peaceful coexistence among Nigeria's religious communities, particularly the Catholic Church. Omololu recalled that since Nigeria gained independence from Britain on October 1, 1960, five different Popes had been inaugurated at the Vatican, including Pope Paul VI in 1963, Pope John Paul I and Pope John Paul II in 1978, Pope Benedict XVI in 2005, Pope Francis in 2013 and Pope Leo XIV in 2025. He noted that the only time a Nigerian leader was physically present at the Vatican to honour a newly inaugurated Pope was on Sunday, May 18, 2025, when President Tinubu attended the inauguration Mass of Pope Leo XIV at St. Peter's Square. According to him, the gesture demonstrated Tinubu's respect for the Catholic community in Nigeria and showed that the President was committed to strengthening relations with the Church. He said: "That act by the President was to demonstrate to the Roman Catholic community in Nigeria that they have no better friend than President Bola Ahmed Tinubu." Omololu added that Tinubu had extended a hand of fellowship to the entire Christian community and particularly the Catholic Church, describing the President as a leader who would promote religious harmony and mutual prosperity among Nigerians.

However, he stressed that while the Church has a responsibility to speak truth to power, such interventions must be based on facts and should not carry political undertones. Also speaking a former Speaker of the Ondo State House of Assembly and Chairman of Afenifere in Ondo State, Rt. Hon. Bakkita Bello said that the Catholic Bishop Council of Nigeria has all the right to raise National concern over issues affecting Nigeria and Nigerians. Bello said the President, as the nation's leader, has the constitutional responsibility to manage the country's resources, protect lives and property, ensure citizens' welfare and promote peaceful coexistence. He described the CBCN as an important stakeholder in national development, saying the organization plays a significant role in promoting stability through faith-based counselling and interventions. According to him, President Tinubu did not do the bishops any favour by granting them audience but simply listened to critical stakeholders whose views could contribute to better governance. He said: "As a major block of faith-based leaders, if the CBCN requested audience with the President and it was granted, President Bola Tinubu has not done the CBCN any favour but listening to critical citizens and leadership, which is necessary towards the advancement of the country and through all-round inclusivity."



Bello argued that the bishops represented millions of Nigerians and were not at the Presidential Villa as individuals but as representatives of the Catholic faithful. He added that issues discussed between the President and the bishops were matters concerning Nigeria and should not be considered confidential if they did not involve classified national security information. Questioning claims that Cardinal Onaiyekan breached confidentiality, Bello asked: "Did the President, after being advised to do more in stemming Nigeria from further bleeding and forestalling electoral banditry in the 2027 elections, give the CBCN any national classified information or national sensitive security details

which has now been disclosed to the public?" He also questioned whether the issues discussed by the bishops on television platforms were unconstitutional, saying the focus should rather be on addressing the concerns raised. Bello warned presidential aides against making statements that could alienate important groups, especially as the country approaches the 2027 elections. He said government officials should defend the administration while also building bridges with people who hold opposing views.

Afenifere leader and former Senator Femi Okurounmu said he saw nothing wrong with the comments made by Cardinal John Onaiyekan on the meeting between the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) and President Bola Ahmed Tinubu. Okurounmu argued that the President, as a public office holder, must be prepared to accept criticism because his actions and decisions affect the entire country and are subject to public scrutiny. According to him, the principle applies to all elected officials, including governors, lawmakers, local government chairmen and councilors. He said: "The President is a public figure who governs Nigerians in the public interest. His actions and decisions are therefore subject to public scrutiny and criticism. Anyone who accepts the responsibility of governing the people must also be prepared to accept criticism." The former lawmaker noted that criticism could be objective or biased, fair or unfair, but public officials must understand that accountability comes with leadership. Okurounmu also faulted the decision of some government officials to respond aggressively to the cardinal's comments, saying the Presidency should not react to every criticism. He maintained that Cardinal Onaiyekan did not violate any confidentiality agreement by speaking about the meeting because there was no indication that both parties agreed that discussions should remain private. According to him, the cardinal attended the meeting as a representative of the Catholic Church, and members of the Church had a right to know what issues were discussed on their behalf. He said: "They met with the President in their capacity as public and religious leaders. Even if one argues that he represented only the Catholic Church, he still has a responsibility to inform members of the Church about what transpired." Okurounmu added that there was nothing confidential about a public figure discussing national issues with the President unless both parties expressly agreed otherwise.

He said Catholics across Nigeria deserved to be informed about matters discussed with their representatives, stressing that public accountability remained a fundamental part of democratic governance. In his contribution to



the issue, Public affairs analyst, Hon. Ayo Fadaka, said the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria has historically played a significant role in national affairs and urged the Presidential Media Team to adopt a more strategic approach in managing public communication. Fadaka recalled that the CBCN had remained an important voice in Nigeria's democracy, particularly during periods of military rule when religious leaders challenged government policies. He cited the role of Archbishop Olubunmi Okogie during the military era of General Muhammadu Buhari as Head of State, saying religious leaders had historically served as a conscience for the nation. According to him, the State House Media Team should learn from history and understand that managing the image of the Presidency goes beyond reacting to every criticism. He said: "While I agreed very readily that the cream of that team remains practicing journalists, either as reporters, columnists and even editors, it is incumbent for them to know that managing the media profile of the Presidency goes well beyond being ultra-reactive to issues concerning the Presidency." Fadaka advised presidential spokespersons to conduct proper assessment before engaging in public confrontations, warning that poorly calculated responses could generate unnecessary negative publicity for the administration. He said the Catholic Bishops Conference had always existed as an institution that contributed to national discourse and was not created by any government.

Recalling the confrontation between Catholic leaders and the military government of General Sani Abacha in 1996, Fadaka said the Church had a history of speaking on national issues regardless of political circumstances. He said: "Before President Tinubu's tenure, there has always been the Catholic Bishops Conference, always irrepressible and continually propelled by its acclaimed social intervention roles in this nation." Fadaka argued that the recent controversy would likely have faded if not for what he described as unnecessary attacks on Cardinal Onaiyekan by some presidential supporters. According to him, the Presidential Media Team should recognize the influence of the Catholic Church and avoid actions that could create unnecessary tension between the government and millions of Catholic faithfuls. He said: "They should have taken due cognizance of the strength of the Catholic Church pulpit and its overlapping capacity within Christendom should it be deployed against government." Fadaka stressed that the role of presidential spokespersons was to promote understanding between government and citizens, not to act as attack agents. He added: "They must be Presidential always, it is their duty to engender understanding and harmony between the Presidency and nation, anything short of this is a disservice to the Presidency." Former Abia State Governor and Senator representing Abia North, Orji Kalu, has said he would resign from the All Progressives Congress (APC) if President Bola Tinubu ever disrespects Catholic bishops or the Catholic Church. Mr Kalu made the declaration during an appearance on Politics Today, a Channels Television programme, where he defended the president against allegations that he had insulted the Catholic Church following recent exchanges between the Presidency and Catholic leaders over the state of the nation. The senator dismissed claims that President Tinubu



was hostile to the Catholic Church, insisting that the president had maintained a cordial relationship with the church and respected its role in national discourse. According to him, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) has historically served as the conscience of the nation by speaking on issues affecting Nigerians, regardless of the government in power. "President Tinubu did not insult the Catholic Church. This is not the first time the Catholic Church will visit the president.

In every country—from the Democratic Republic of Congo to Angola, South Africa and elsewhere—the Catholic Church and other churches are the conscience of the country," Mr Kalu said. He noted that the CBCN had consistently issued statements on the state of the nation, including during military rule, stressing that such interventions should not be interpreted as hostility towards any administration. "I do not see what Cardinal Onaiyekan said that was wrong. During the military era, the Catholic Bishops' Conference met every year and expressed its opinion about the state of the nation," he said. Mr Kalu added that President Tinubu was not a threat to the Catholic community, arguing that the president had always maintained a constructive relationship with church leaders. "To me, Tinubu is not a threat to the Catholic community. The president has a good relationship with the Catholic Church. Any time they ask for his opinion, he gives it. What politicians cannot tell a president, a Catholic bishop can say," he said. The senator also rejected suggestions that Mr Tinubu intended to undermine Nigeria's democratic process, saying the president remained committed to conducting credible elections. "If you heard him well, he said there would be a free and fair election and that he would not intimidate anyone. Any day the president disrespects Catholic bishops, I will resign from the APC," he said. His comments come amid controversy sparked by recent remarks by Archbishop Emeritus of Abuja, John Onaiyekan, a cardinal, who raised concerns about worsening economic hardship and insecurity during an engagement with President Tinubu. The response by some presidential media aides drew criticism from sections of the public, with some describing their remarks as disrespectful to both the cardinal and the Catholic Church. The Northern Christian Association has backed the Catholic Bishops of Nigeria over their recent meeting with President Bola Tinubu, accusing the President's Special Adviser on Media and Public Communications, Daniel Bwala, of attempting to sow discord within the Christian community. The association said the Catholic bishops spoke not only on issues affecting the Catholic Church but also on matters concerning Christians and Nigerians generally, insisting that their intervention was in the national interest.



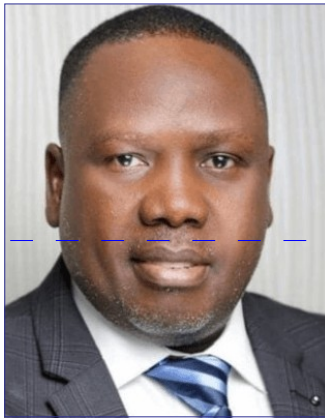
The NCA's position follows a controversy sparked by comments attributed to Bwala after the Catholic bishops met with Tinubu and raised concerns over the country's socio-economic and security challenges. In a recent statement issued, the Chairman of the Northern Christian Association, Rev. Joseph Hayab, warned against what he described as divisive politics, saying the association would resist any attempt to pit one Christian denomination against another. He stressed that the NCA comprises members from virtually all Christian denominations in Northern Nigeria, including the Catholic Church, Baptist, ECWA, Methodist, Anglican and Pentecostal churches. "We should tell Bwala to know that

Catholics are Christians and Nigerians. "Our members are Catholics, Baptists, ECWA, Methodists, Anglicans, Pentecostals and people of all denominations. We refuse to be divided by Bwala's politics of division," Hayab said. The cleric said the Catholic bishops and Cardinal John Onaiyekan deserved respect, noting that they met Tinubu to discuss issues affecting humanity, Christians and all Nigerians, not matters exclusive to the Catholic Church. "Our Cardinal is our respected leader, and the bishops that visited the President went to speak to him about humanity, Christians and all of us, not only Catholics," he said. Hayab described it as "shameful and a disservice" to the President for his spokesperson to disrespect the Cardinal, maintaining that the bishops merely offered sincere counsel aimed at helping the administration address the nation's challenges. "It is therefore shameful and a disservice to Tinubu for his spokesperson to disrespect our Cardinal. "An honest counsel has been given to Mr President for his own good and for a better Nigeria," he added. The NCA chairman also faulted what he described as the growing tendency of some government officials to dismiss legitimate concerns raised by religious leaders and other stakeholders.

According to him, appointees who resort to propaganda instead of confronting the realities facing Nigerians were doing the country more harm than good. "Any voice of greed, propaganda or disconnect with the citizens by any government appointee like Bwala should be seen as those destroying the country for their selfish interest, not minding the larger population," Hayab said. He warned that unless Nigeria's mounting challenges were urgently addressed, the consequences would affect all citizens, regardless of political affiliation. "Sadly for people like Bwala, if things do not improve, we shall all suffer together and live to see our country not growing as it should be," he said. Reaffirming the association's confidence in the Catholic bishops, Hayab described them as patriotic leaders committed to the country's progress. "The NCA knows that our Catholic bishops mean well and love the President and the country more than those insulting their honest counsel," he said. He urged political office holders to engage constructively with the concerns raised by religious leaders rather than making comments capable of deepening divisions among Nigerians. Prominent pro-democracy and civil rights advocacy organization, HUMAN RIGHTS WRITERS ASSOCIATION OF NIGERIA (HURIWA) has carpeted two presidential aides Mr. Daniel Bwala and Temitope Ajayi for criticizing the Archbishop Emeritus of the Catholic Archdiocese of Abuja John Cardinal Onaiyekan for granting a television interview to analyse the recent visit to president Bola Ahmed Tinubu by the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) to president Tinubu at the presidential villa Abuja.

Whilst Mr. Bwala one of the many Special Advisers on communications to the president said Cardinal Onaiyekan spoke for only Catholics on his impressions from the Bishops' recent visit to the president, his counterpart Mr. Temitope Ajayi the Senior Special Assistant on media and publicity to the president accused the respected Christian leader John Cardinal Onaiyekan of abusing what he calls the clerical privilege of attending the meeting with this Nigerian leader.

Temitope Ajayi had argued that the Catholic Bishops discharged what they considered their



moral obligation by presenting their concerns to the President. President Tinubu, for his part, accorded them respect by granting them an audience and responding to every issue they raised. That exchange reflected the civility expected in a constitutional democracy. He continued his criticism of the Cleric by asserting that reciprocity should have dictated that the confidentiality and dignity of that engagement be preserved. Mr. Ajayi insisted that as such, it was inappropriate for one of the participants to appear on national television almost immediately to offer his own version of what was essentially a private conversation with the President. Clerical office carries privileges, but it also imposes

obligations. Among the qualities the Scriptures require of bishops are temperance, maturity, self-restraint, and the wisdom to remain above needless public controversy. Those virtues become even more important when dealing with matters of state. Public influence should be exercised with discretion, not by converting privileged access into a platform for post-meeting commentary. HURIWA through the National Coordinator Comrade Emmanuel Nnadozie Onwubiko accused the duo of being disrespectful to an elderly statesman and a respected clergy who is widely reputed to be one of the choicest patriots and nationalists in the person of John Cardinal Onaiyekan, just as HURIWA said the interview granted by the senior clergy is for the best public interest and that the emeritus Archbishop of Abuja definitely spoke for the over 130 million households afflicted by multidimensional poverty and for the over 60% absolutely poor Nigerians as ascribed by the World Bank who cut across ethnicities and religious affiliations, therefore the unfortunate and irrational rants by the two presidential aides are inconsequential and unreasonable. Besides, HURIWA said the statements by the aides of president Tinubu make them look amateuristic, inexperienced and lacking knowledge of the political history of Nigeria because if these two young men know about the political history of Nigeria, they would have known that John Cardinal Onaiyekan has been visiting Presidents for decades long before these two rookies entered the primary schools and indeed the respected Christian leader Cardinal Onaiyekan has remained consisted in speaking raw truth to power and has never been known for double speak unlike for instance, Mr. Bwala, who was once against President Tinubu but when President Tinubu dangled a juicy post as one of his several special communication advisers, Bwala collapsed on his 'conscience' and swallowed his vomits to serve the same Tinubu he had called all sorts of unprintable names.

HURIWA faulted the comment by Temitope Ajayi that the interview granted to the popular Arise Television station amounted to a breach of privilege even as the Rights group



stated that the meeting of the president and the Catholic Bishops of Nigeria were extensively televised and covered by the media just as the positions of both the Bishops and the president were the focus of news reports thereafter for which prominent Nigerians including the former Vice president Atiku Abubakar and the frontline opposition presidential flagbearer for the 2027 presidential poll Mr. Peter Obi also canvassed their positions as opposed to that of the president. "How did the Archbishop Emeritus abused any privilege? Were the meeting secret conversations or were the participants plotting any partisan objective that does not concern the public

interest? Is president Tinubu not the president of all Nigerians and are the clerics who attended the meeting in their position as Catholic Bishops of Nigeria not the spiritual leaders of millions of Nigerians? So what was secret that John Cardinal Onaiyekan divulged or were the participants administered with oaths of secrecy and confidentiality? As far as we are concerned, John Cardinal Onaiyekan deserves to be praised for speaking truth to power and for contributing significantly to alert both the politicians and the electoral governing body INEC of their legal, moral and absolute obligations to conduct free, fair, peaceful and transparent general election in January 2027. Or is the president hiding anything from Nigerians on why he is afraid of a free and fair election?

Former Ekiti State Commissioner and public affairs analyst, Lanre Ogunsuyi, urged the Presidency to welcome constructive criticism instead of engaging in public confrontation with religious leaders. Ogunsuyi said the controversy surrounding Cardinal Onaiyekan's comments should not distract attention from the major economic and security challenges facing Nigeria. He noted that the cardinal did not merely confirm that the meeting took place but used the opportunity to explain concerns previously raised by the Catholic Bishops regarding the country's worsening economic situation and insecurity. While acknowledging that participants at private meetings are generally expected to exercise discretion, Ogunsuyi said there was a difference between revealing confidential discussions and restating publicly known concerns. He observed that religious leaders around the world routinely brief their followers after engagements with heads of state. According to him, the key issue was whether the cardinal disclosed privileged information or simply repeated positions already known to Nigerians. Ogunsuyi said: "The Catholic Church is one of the largest churches in Nigeria and its observations on governance often resonate beyond Catholic members." He added that governments should be willing to listen to criticism from respected religious leaders and other stakeholders, while religious leaders must also ensure that their criticisms are presented accurately and responsibly.

He said: "It is not everybody that comes to Aso Rock that should come there to clap." Ogunsuyi added that President Tinubu would have gained more from appreciating the bishops for their contribution towards finding solutions to national problems rather than allowing controversy to trail the meeting. Public affairs analyst, Wisdom Oniekpar Ikuli, defended Cardinal John Onaiyekan's record and urged government officials to handle criticism from respected national figures with maturity. Ikuli described Onaiyekan as one of Nigeria's most influential religious leaders, highlighting his decades of service at national, continental and international levels. He recalled that the cardinal had served as President of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN), President of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), Co-President of the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC), President of the Regional Episcopal Conference of West Africa (RECOWA), President of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM), and held several other international positions. According to him, Onaiyekan's influence extends beyond Nigeria and Africa due to his contributions to global religious dialogue. Ikuli said: "Onaiyekan has been president of every possible national and continental Christian body you can dream of." He described the cardinal as a respected scholar and

statesman whose contributions to peace-building and interfaith dialogue had earned him international recognition.

The analyst urged presidential aides to improve their handling of public criticism, especially as Nigeria approaches the 2027 general elections. He also warned that dismissing the influence of the Catholic community in Nigeria would be politically unrealistic. Ikuli said: "It shall amount to wishful thinking to ever wish away the influence of over 38 million Nigerian Catholics in Nigeria's politics, particularly as we countdown to the 2027 general elections." He called on officials involved in the controversy to consider reconciliation and issue an apology to the Catholic Church, the CBCN and Cardinal Onaiyekan if necessary. According to him, apologizing should not be interpreted as weakness but as a demonstration of maturity and responsibility. Former Abia State Governor and Senator representing Abia North, Orji Kalu, has said he would resign from the All Progressives Congress (APC) if President Bola Tinubu ever disrespects Catholic bishops or the Catholic Church. Mr Kalu made the declaration during an appearance on *Politics Today*, a Channels Television programme, where he defended the president against allegations that he had insulted the Catholic Church following recent exchanges between the Presidency and Catholic leaders over the state of the nation. The senator dismissed claims that President Tinubu was hostile to the Catholic Church, insisting that the president had maintained a cordial relationship with the church and respected its role in national discourse. According to him, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) has historically served as the conscience of the nation by speaking on issues affecting Nigerians, regardless of the government in power.

"President Tinubu did not insult the Catholic Church. This is not the first time the Catholic Church will visit the president. In every country—from the Democratic Republic of Congo to Angola, South Africa and elsewhere—the Catholic Church and other churches are the conscience of the country," Mr Kalu said. He noted that the CBCN had consistently issued statements on the state of the nation, including during military rule, stressing that such interventions should not be interpreted as hostility towards any administration. "I do not see what Cardinal Onaiyekan said that was wrong. During the military era, the Catholic Bishops' Conference met every year and expressed its opinion about the state of the nation," he said. Mr Kalu added that President Tinubu was not a threat to the Catholic community, arguing that the president had always maintained a constructive relationship with church leaders. "To me, Tinubu is not a threat to the Catholic community. The president has a good relationship with the Catholic Church. Any time they ask for his opinion, he gives it. What politicians cannot tell a president, a Catholic bishop can say," he said. The senator also rejected suggestions that Mr Tinubu intended to undermine Nigeria's democratic process, saying the president remained committed to conducting credible elections. "If you heard him well, he said there would be a free and fair election and that he would not intimidate anyone. Any day the president disrespects Catholic bishops, I will resign from the APC," he said. His comments come amid controversy sparked by recent remarks by Archbishop Emeritus of Abuja, John Onaiyekan, a cardinal, who raised concerns about worsening economic hardship and insecurity during an engagement with President Tinubu. The response by some presidential media aides drew criticism from sections of the public, with some describing their remarks as disrespectful to both the cardinal and the Catholic Church.

ADDRESS BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF NIGERIA DURING A COURTESY VISIT TO HIS EXCELLENCY, PRESIDENT BOLA AHMED TINUBU, GCFR ON 28 JULY 2026

PARTNERS IN BUILDING A JUST, PEACEFUL AND PROSPEROUS NIGERIA

Mr. President,

Greetings: I bring you warm greetings and prayers from all the members of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria. I am Archbishop Matthew Man-Oso Ndagoso, the Archbishop of Kaduna and the newly elected President of our Conference. I thank you immensely for granting us this audience, which offers us the opportunity to share with you some of our observations and genuine concerns about our country. This ensures the continuity of our collaborative engagement in the task of building a healthy nation that all of us would be proud to belong to: "a nation of justice, love and peace."

2. The Visit of Archbishop Gallagher: Your Excellency, may we use this opportunity to express our gratitude to you and the Ministry of External Affairs for the warm reception that you gave to the Holy See's Secretary for Relations with States and International Organizations, Archbishop Paul Gallagher, during his recent visit on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of Diplomatic Relations between the Holy See and the Federal Republic of Nigeria. We, as Nigerians and Catholics, are happy to share the two identities and proud of the healthy and unbroken relations between the two states. We believe that the relations will bear perceptible fruits for Christianity and Christians in our country. This, Mr. President, is a time when many Christians have legitimate concerns about their place in Nigeria, especially

regarding the departure from the Christian/Muslim presidency, and we hope that, through deliberate government policies, those concerns will be addressed and Christians will be reassured of their rights as citizens. We expect that you will take steps to soothe frayed nerves and address the concerns.

3 Quality tertiary education and the challenge of limited spaces: Mr. President, Sir, you have shown a commitment to giving hope and succour to our youth through NELFund, the Student Loan Initiative. This deserves commendation. Unfortunately, by global standards, Nigeria does not as yet have enough universities to cater for a bulging youth population. Only a tiny fraction of the persons seeking admission into the university actually get it, owing to limited number of places available. We therefore hope that the recent moratorium placed by the National Universities Commission (NUC) on the establishment of new private universities does not cancel out the gains of NELFund.

4 Sustaining the gains of the democratic experience: Mr. President, on matters of the state, we are genuinely concerned by fears expressed across the country on the fate of opposition politics. You have a track record of having been in active opposition. Many voices are screaming over what they consider to be the constriction of the political space, with some fearing that a one-party state is being anticipated. Whether these fears are genuine or not, can only be tested by the signals citizens receive



from Your Excellency as the leader of the party in power. To this end, we urge you to encourage elected political office holders who are members of your party – Governors, members of the National Assembly, Local Government Chairmen – to ensure that a genuine level playing field is maintained and that focus is placed on making everyone see that the rules and processes are fair to all and respected by all. As a man who risked so much in the struggle for the return of democratic rule in the dark days of military dictatorship, your greatest legacy would be the strengthening of our democratic institutions.

5 Credible elections for the avoidance of disaster: Furthermore, there have been growing concerns about the electoral processes. We note the efforts being made to ensure that the elections are free, fair and credible. Sadly, there is an increasing feeling of disenchantment with the clear manipulation of the electoral processes, and the collective feeling that people's votes do not count. Lower voter turnouts are a mark of distrust in the electoral processes. It is our hope that you be on the forefront in demanding that the Independent National Electoral Commission, INEC, delivers credible elections, to ensure that Nigeria is set on the path of national development and integrity. This ought to start with making voters' cards easily available to all eligible voters and end with election results that reflect the true choice of Nigerians. Adequate and timely funding of INEC is required to ensure that the Agency inspires the confidence of citizens. Anything short of transparent, free, fair and credible elections in 2027 would be an invitation to avoidable disaster against which all well-meaning Nigerians have been praying. We urge that the conduct of the political class should be in tune with the voices we lift to God in prayer.

6 But we need to be alive and secure first: Mr. President, we congratulate you for the recent successful release of the kidnapped school children and their teachers in Oyo State. The arrest of some of the kidnappers and their speedy prosecution is one of the few positive indicators of what a willing government and its agencies could do to protect the life and property of the citizens. We commend you for this and for other such cases in recent times. Unfortunately, these remain few and isolated exceptions. Our nation still remains a favourable destination for terrorism, banditry and high levels of insecurity that threaten our collective existence. Schools, places of worship, homes, farms, rural roads and highways. Nowhere is safe anymore, as bandits and criminals freely carry away scores of worshippers and schoolchildren, even in broad daylight undisturbed, kidnap and butcher simple as well as high profile citizens mercilessly and unapologetically. Our sovereignty is at stake and, even by African standards, our insecurity continues to diminish our standing and our ability to serve as the leader of Africa.

7 Worsening quality of life, suffering and pain: When the security situation in the country is taken together with the deterioration and near collapse of the power sector, the sorry state of our roads, the economic hardship, one wonders how much of the renewed hope agenda flaunted by your administration is being realized. Mr President, our nation is bleeding. The citizens are suffering and

crying. Not only on account of the constant threat to their life by criminal elements, but also because of some policies of government whose promised positive effects have been delayed too long before being felt. You have said a couple of times that you hear their cries and feel their pain. But words are not enough. They expect concrete action that engenders some change in their condition.

8 Pope Leo XIV among us will strengthen our collective prayers and efforts: Finally, we believe that the problems and burden of our nation require a sincere commitment to good governance for the common good to the glory of God. We continue to pray for our dear country and appeal to you to take seriously our pleas for greater collaboration between the Church and the State for the overall wellbeing of our people. We believe that Mr President is aware that the Holy Father, Pope Leo holds our country very close to his heart and constantly prays for us. During our visit to him in March this year, he was quite enthusiastic about a visit to Nigeria on a date in the future. As you know, Sir, that will only happen if you invite him. We request that this be done soon. Our land and its people will benefit immensely from his presence and blessing.

9 Two particular requests: Mr. President, we respectfully place two specific requests before Your Excellency. First, we ask that Your Excellency give favourable consideration to the request on the return of mission schools to their original proprietors. We recall that this matter was raised during our meeting with you last year, and we remain hopeful that your Government will take the necessary steps towards its implementation.

Second, in the light of the Supreme Court judgment of 10 February 2026 affirming the constitutional right of Muslim students at Rivers State University to freedom of religion and worship, we respectfully request that Your Excellency direct the appropriate Ministries, Departments and Agencies of Government to ensure that this same constitutional principle is faithfully implemented throughout the Federation. In particular, we appeal that Christians, especially in the northern part of the country, who continue to face difficulties in acquiring land for the construction of churches or in freely exercising their right to worship, should enjoy the same constitutional rights and protection accorded to all Nigerians. Equal citizenship must be reflected not only in law but also in practice.

Once again, we thank you very sincerely for granting us this audience. We pray that the Almighty and merciful God may grant you the wisdom and strength to lead our nation and all its citizens towards that greatness that God has destined for us.

Matthew Man-Oso NDAGOSO
Archbishop of Kaduna
President, CBCN