

Nigerian bishops ask officials to review church licenses to marry couples

LAGOS, Nigeria (CNS) – Six Catholic bishops appealed to the Nigerian government to review its stand on a directive that houses of worship must obtain an annual license before performing marriages and issuing marriage certificates to newly wedded couples.

Archbishop Gabriel Abegunrin of Ibadan and Bishops Felix Ajakaye of Ekiti, Emmanuel Badejo of Oyo, Jude Arogundade of Ondo, John Oyejola of Osogbo, and Paul Olawoore of Ilorin made the appeal in a statement released at the end of their provincial meeting Aug. 6 in Ado Ekiti.

The bishops urged the government to review the Ministry of the Interior directive to all places of worship.

“It deserves a second look especially as it concerns the new annual levies for individual places of worship,” the statement said of the directive from the Ministry of the Interior. “Contemporary circumstances in Nigeria demand that government needs to approach religious matters with utmost caution so as not to be considered partisan and partial on national issues.”

Georgina Ehuriah, permanent secretary in the ministry, raised concerns at a July conference that just 314 worship centers in the country were licensed to conduct statutory weddings.

“Presently, only about 4,689 licensed places of worship in Nigeria have updated their records with the Ministry of Interior of which only 314 have renewed their licenses to conduct statutory marriages,” she said. “The implication of this is that marriages conducted in unlicensed places of worship are not in line with the Marriage Act and cannot serve

legal purposes when the need arises.”

There was no immediate ministry response to the bishops.

In other action, the also commended the government for improving on payment of workers’ salaries and pension.

However, they expressed concern that Nigerians still were being confronted with woeful news of killings, lynching, kidnappings and other violence.

“Many people, including Catholic Priests, have fallen victims to this tragically insecure environment,” the provincial bishops said.

They attributed criminal activity to inconsistency in the prosecution of crimes. They said the government and law enforcement authorities had given “lip service” to their commitment to protect life and property.

As a result, they said, many Nigerians live in fear from day to day.

“We call on governments at all levels, traditional and other civil authorities to please save the country,” the provincial bishops said.