



FIRST MEETING WITH THE EKWULOBIA PRESBYTERIUM

ADDRESS OF HIS LORDSHIP MOST REV. PETER EBERE OKPALEKE

Cathedral of St. Joseph, Ekwulobia
Wednesday, May 6, 2020

GRATITUDE

Msgri. and Frs., although we started with the Eucharistic celebration which is thanksgiving to God for the salvation won for us in Christ Jesus, I want to thank you again both for answering the call to the priesthood and for choosing to work in Ekwulobia Diocese. For the *Fidei Donum* priests, we are aware that you belong, at the moment, to Ekwulobia presbyterium, with all the rights, privileges and obligations therefrom. Awka and Ekwulobia dioceses are sister dioceses. We have had a long history and want to maintain it. We appreciate your ministry and pray God to bless our efforts at leading His flock.

WHY THIS MEETING?

The life of our diocese has started in earnest. This is our first meeting as a presbyterium. As I explained to you in my letter of April 22, 2020, we would have had it even before the installation, but for the COVID-19 pandemic. With the relaxation of the lockdown, we made haste to call the meeting and it is only reasonable to have in our midst our brothers working in Ekwulobia Diocese. For now, all of us constitute the Ekwulobia presbyterium.

This meeting has two main objectives. First, is to thank you personally for the warm reception and enthusiasm with regard to the gift of our diocese. I feel this in the interaction on WhatsApp. The second is to share some ideas about where we want to go and how we want to get there and to solicit for your input as regards how you will want us to fulfil our mission as Church in Ekwulobia Diocese.

INAUGURAL ADDRESS

I spelt out the overall direction I want us to go as a diocese in my inaugural speech – grassroot evangelization, care of the poor and vulnerable, systematic and sustained catechesis, through collaborative ministry and effective use of the modern means of communication. Our ministry shall be focused on the family while drawing strength from the Eucharist. Developing deep and enriching personal relationship with Jesus, with one another and the people of God is at the heart of the mission and vision of our diocese. This is the best way of carrying out what we articulated in the logo of our diocese. I will therefore plead that you go back to these foundational documents and symbolisms and allow yourselves to be enriched by them.

EVANGELIZATION AND CATECHESIS

Let me dwell a little bit on evangelization and catechesis. I would like us to pay attention to the 1975 Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. In number 18, the pope writes that “evangelizing means bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new.” Number 19 of the Pope’s document brings out the two prongs of the evangelization process – first, spreading the Good News extensively and second, the Good News permeating and transforming those who have received it. Evangelization, according to the Pope, “is a question **not only** of preaching the Gospel in ever wider geographic areas or to ever greater numbers of people **but also** of affecting and as it were upsetting, through the power of the Gospel, mankind’s criteria of judgment, determining values, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspiration and models of life, which are in contrast with the Word of God and the plan of salvation.” Further, in number 20, Pope Paul VI stated “what matters is to evangelize man’s culture and cultures (not in a purely decorative way, as it were, by applying a thin veneer, but in a vital way, in depth and right to their very roots), in the wide and rich sense which these terms have in *Gaudium et spes*, always taking the person as one’s starting-point and always coming back to the relationship of people among themselves and with God.” In other words, evangelization is supposed to lead to conversion of heart and transformation of culture.

I have quoted the Pope at some length because I want us to embark on evangelization in the full sense of it. The missionaries and our forebears in this ministry, such as Blessed Iwene Tansi, Msgr. Martin Maduka and a host of others, have preached and proclaimed the Good News. Our people have

responded generously. Christian communities have been gathered by the power of the Holy Spirit. We are shepherds of those communities. The other dimension of evangelization should be our focus – ongoing conversion of heart, values, aspirations, visions of life by the power of the Gospel – without losing sight of the task of bringing the Good News to others. This is the core of our ministry in our various parishes. We are not just there as “administrators” of peoples and the sacrament. We are among God’s people primarily as witnesses to the transforming power of the Gospel and a sweet invitation to an intimate relationship with God. That is why the holiness of our lives as priests is critical to our ministry.

It is only when people have been touched by the power of the Gospel, the power of the mystery of Christ, that the internal link between catechesis and evangelization is established. At the heart of catechesis is a person – Jesus Christ. It is only when one has accepted Jesus Christ that catechesis can be fruitful because catechesis is the effort to lead people to see that in the Person of Christ, the whole of God’s eternal design reached its fulfilment. Thus, catechesis is much more than organizing catechism classes. As the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of Pope St. John Paul II, *Catechesi tradendae* (no 5) puts it, “the definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ: only He can lead us to the love of the Father in the Spirit and make us share in the life of the Holy Trinity.” We must therefore find ways and means of helping our people to get and remain in touch and in communion with the person of Jesus Christ. No wonder our father in the faith and the pioneer bishop of Awka Diocese, Most Rev. Albert K. Obiefuna, of blessed memory, bequeathed to us an emphasis on and the practice of contemplation and adoration of our Lord Jesus truly present in the Eucharist.

My dear brothers, our ministry is a challenging one. It is God who brings people to Himself. But God has chosen to use us. We therefore need to be men who have experienced the Lord intimately in their lives. We need to have been evangelized ourselves, centering our lives on Jesus Christ. To the extent that we allow our lives to be taken up in Christ, to that extent can we be good catechists and help others to become catechists too, since all are called to be evangelizers. It is very easy to lose focus of this and occupy ourselves with other important but secondary things. When we do this, we become like those men referred to in Jesus’ parable who built their mansion on sand. This collapsed when the rain came (Matt 7:24-27).

EXPLORING OTHER MEANS FOR EVANGELIZATION AND CATECHESIS

I marvel at the variety of talents that God has blessed us with individually and as a presbyterium. In our group WhatsApp, I see poets, composers and musicians of various genres – traditional as well as contemporary. Some of us also have a passion for evangelization through the social media. I am amazed at the variety and the originality of these creative outputs. One thought that keeps going through my mind is that these talents are for the spread of the Good News of Jesus Christ. Remember our diocesan logo. We are supposed to be like the *ekwe* – instruments for the spread of the Gospel message. I do not know how all these talents can be harnessed for this divine purpose. But, be assured that we shall support any thoroughly reviewed proposal for the use of novel approaches and media for evangelization and catechesis.

HARNESSING OTHER HUMAN RESOURCES AND COMPETENCIES

Information and communication technologies (ICT) have succeeded in compressing time and space. It is now possible to hold a meeting or interact with people on the other side of the globe in real time. This has opened two doors for us. First, members of our presbyterium, wherever they may be, can now join in our meetings and make their contributions to the deliberation. The second door that ICT opens for us is the possibility of harnessing the expertise of our many priests and lay faithful, wherever they may be. We have a wider pool of resources and competencies to draw from. Geography is no longer a key consideration as regards appointment to commissions and directorates. When constituted, the commissions and directorates are expected to create their platform for communication and add myself and the chancellor as observers. This will help us follow up adequately the functioning of the various commissions and directorates.

PASTORAL COLLABORATION

In my inaugural speech, I remarked that ours is not ‘uka Fada’ but ‘uka anyi.’ In the context of priests, let me reiterate that it is not ‘uka bishop’ but ‘uka anyi.’ Please take responsibility in whatever task you are set to. Be creative and responsible in your obedience. These are the qualities that make collaboration possible and fruitful.

In this regard, I enjoin the deans and the vicars to step up to their responsibilities. May we refresh our minds, dear Fathers, on the canonical provisions as regards the deans and their role in ecclesiastical governance (canon 553-555). May we not bring up to the Bishop or to the chancery whatever is in the competence of the dean or the episcopal vicar to handle. I

will suggest that, as parish priest or parochial vicar, whatever matter or whichever group you want to refer to the Bishop, first, draw the attention of your dean to it. The dean can then make prudent recourse to the episcopal vicar. We do not want just to talk about collaboration. We want to see it put into practice. I challenge you also to strengthen the collaboration with the lay faithful in your parishes. Remember, the apostles appointed the seven deacons so that they can concentrate on preaching the word (Acts 6:2). You must not do everything. The Bishop must not and cannot do everything. We need to work with others. Let us help our people take more responsibility and have more voice in the Church.

THE PREFERENTIAL OPTION FOR THE POOR

The first bishop of Awka Diocese and our father in the faith, His Grace, Archbishop A.K. Obiefuna of blessed memory wrote a pastoral letter titled “Give them something yourselves to Eat.” This title is taken from an episode when the people followed Jesus to the desert (Matt 14:16). The disciples wanted Jesus to send them away so that they could go to the villages to buy their bread because the cost of feeding them would amount to much. Instead Jesus uttered those words which are challenging. In our part of the world, our people give generously out of the little they have to us because they see us as those who represent the sacred. This, notwithstanding, we are challenged to find ways and means of contributing to the enhancement of their lives and capabilities. More basic to this is the compassion that moved Jesus to challenge his disciples to empathize with the people who had been with them in the desert for many days. We are called to be empathetic and to treat all with love and respect.

In the epistle of James (2:2) we have the classic description of a tendency we all share of treating the rich and the poor differently; respecting the former and ignoring or marginalizing the latter. That is why the Church speaks of preferential option for the poor. The rich are equally God’s children and we have a ministry to them. But because of the tendency to disregard and relegate the poor to the background we are challenged to give preference to them. I want us to take this seriously. In my own case, I want it to be made known to the people that the bishop is willing, where possible, to identify and celebrate with his flock – rich and poor alike – in their times of joy and sorrow. From experience, however, I know that those not so materially endowed will not even dream of inviting the Bishop because they are afraid of “*ihe ya na ya so.*” Please tell them “*na o nweghi ihe ya na ya so.*” The Bishop is the father of all. If it were possible, he would like to identify with all the

members of his diocesan family in their joys and sorrows. Since this is not possible, what he does not want is a situation whereby the bishop is made to identify only with the rich in their times of joy and sorrow because of the unfounded bias that inviting the bishop “*nwere ihe ya na ya so*” and thus excluding the poor from those the bishop can identify with. This is against the core Gospel value of God’s preferential love for the poor.

In like manner let me plead that we abstain from what has become popularly known as “*off shore* ministry.” It cheapens us and invariably the Gospel we preach. I want to believe that people are driven into that because of need. So, if you have needs, not just wants, please approach me, the vicar for the clergy or any of the curia officials you are more comfortable with. We will do our best to help. Let us together uphold the dignity of our sacred calling and the Gospel we are called to preach.

THE BISHOP: THE SHEPHERD OF HIS FLOCK

It is my desire to be close to the flock which, God in His infinite mercy, has entrusted to my care. It is my desire to be visiting and celebrating with them not only during pastoral visits or other scheduled visits but, any and every time, especially on Sundays, whenever I can afford to do so. I can also send my curia officials. This is to complement the efforts of the episcopal vicars and deans, who are often tied to their parishes. Consequently, let all the parish priests furnish the chancery with the mass schedule in their parishes. This means that if you have to change the schedule, you give information to the chancery in case an unscheduled visit had been planned for that station that Sunday.

CO-RESPONSIBILITY

As already said elsewhere, the creation of Ekwulobia Diocese is an opportunity for a new beginning. It is a *Kairos* moment. As I mentioned in my inaugural address, we should feel co-responsible for this diocese. It is ours. We should contribute our own quota to building it up. I want you to reflect on the mission and vision of our diocese. So, let me invite you specifically to contribute your ideas to this project that has been entrusted to all of us in our different ways. Good ideas, they say, rule or, better still, lead the world. No one has a monopoly of it, including myself. So, please be generous with your ideas. May you also be patient and humble enough to realize that there might be other ideas, which in the light of the prevailing circumstances could be considered more suitable.

To complete this feedback loop, I designate the office of the chancellor to be responsible for collecting and processing these suggestions. You can send your suggestions to the email address chancery@ekwulobiadiocese.org as soon as our website becomes fully functional. There will also be a virtual suggestion box on our website so that other people, irrespective of where they are in the world, would be able to give us feedback or share their ideas.

THE CHALLENGE OF A NEW BEGINNING – NEED FOR SUPPORT

Starting off any project is not easy. This applies to our diocese. We are beginning and have many needs. What I know is that we shall take things easy. My primary concern is to build up the people and make them better disciples. But I will challenge all of us to pay attention in your various communities as regards any opportunities that may be thrown up. The facilities needed by the diocese, such as centre for retreats, etc – need pieces of land on which they can be built. I therefore appeal to you as indigenes of the various towns and as priests working in the area to please help us initiate and complete the process of acquiring pieces of land for diocesan use.

I want also to plead with you to sensitize members of your parish communities with regard to the need to support the diocese spiritually as well as materially. We have a project director, Rev. Fr. Jude Mbanefo. Feel free to draw his attention to any member of your parish that may need to be approached for assistance. Also, till we constitute the Diocesan Building Committee, which will be very soon, liaise with Fr. Mbanefo with regard to any construction project you are undertaking in your parish.

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

My dear brothers, I want to remind us again of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is like a dark cloud hanging over our heads. We should be very careful. This corona virus spreads so easily. It is our duty to enlighten our people and help protect them through the safety protocols we adopt in the parish. Please let us continue in our effort of mutual support and acts of generosity towards everyone, especially those who are suffering the most in these trying times. And don't forget to take good care of yourselves and those around you.

May God bless us all.

Thank you for your attention.

+ Peter Ebere Okpaleke

Bishop of Ekwulobia