



OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

## **ADDRESS BY BISHOP PETER OKPALEKE ON HIS INSTALLATION AS BISHOP OF EKWULOBIA DIOCESE, APRIL 29, 2020**

Your Grace, Archbishop Valerian Maduka Okeke, Metropolitan Archbishop of Onitsha Ecclesiastical Province,  
Your Grace, Archbishop Guido Filipazzi, Apostolic Nuncio to Nigeria,  
Your Lordship, Most Rev. Paulinus C. Ezeokafor, Bishop of Awka Diocese,  
Your Lordship, Most Rev. Solomon Amamchukwu Amatu, Bishop of Okigwe  
Your Excellencies, other Bishops here present  
Your Lordship, Rt. Rev. Dr. Samuel C. Ezeofor, the Anglican Bishop of Aguata Diocese and his wife  
Major Superiors of the Brothers of St. Stephen, Immaculate Heart of Mary Congregation, Daughters of Divine Love Congregation, Holy Family Sisters of the Needy,  
Very Rev. Msgri and Frs.  
Consecrated men and women,  
His Excellency, Chief Willie Obiano, Akpokue Dike, Executive Governor of Anambra State  
HRH, Engr. Emmanuel Onyeneke, Eze ji ofo II Ekwulobia (KSS)  
Members of the Awka Diocesan Pastoral Council  
Knights of the Church and their Ladies  
My dear fellow Christians.

I welcome you with joy to St. Joseph's Cathedral Ekwulobia for the installation of my humble self as the first bishop of this diocese. We have witnessed the fulfilment of a desire that stretched back to 2009 when the request for the creation of Ekwulobia Diocese was made. Pope Francis announced its creation on March 5, 2020. This was during the Lenten season. The inauguration of the diocese and installation of the first bishop, were scheduled for today, April 29, 2020, during the Easter season. But the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic changed everything. The postponement of the inauguration of the diocese, the restriction on attendance to this installation ceremony and the meticulous observation of the safety protocols

with regard to the pandemic show that the worst is not yet over. We must therefore thank our guests, who, instead of staying home and staying safe, came to mark this day in the life of our diocese.

I have learnt from my meditation on the Word of God, especially on Romans (8:28) that God works with those who love him and turns everything to their good. God does not shield us from hard situations but uses them to draw the best from us if we remain open. We only need to trust and discern his purpose. I am therefore convinced that God is saying something to me and to our diocesan family by allowing Ekwulobia diocese to be born within the framework of Easter during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our challenge is to discern what the Spirit is saying to us. I venture to offer some of my thoughts to start the exploration and exchange. My hope is that by bouncing off ideas and rubbing minds together, we can sharpen our vision and commitment and by renewing our minds, we shall be transformed in our lives (Rom. 12:2).

COVID-19 reminds all of us, in a powerful way, that every life is fragile. Our life and safety depend on and are interconnected with the lives of others, even those we do not know. It exposed as fruitless human efforts to secure themselves behind the high walls of social distinction, power and wealth. The poor and the rich are equally threatened by this invisible virus. None could fly out on medical tourism. This highlights the existential basis of St. Paul's recommendation that we should live no longer for ourselves but for one another animated by the love of the one who died and rose again (2 Cor 5:15). This is possible if, in the power of the Holy Spirit, we die to our old selves (Eph 4:22). This is the core of the Good News of the Kingdom of God that Jesus preached and has commissioned the Church to embody and to propagate. It is an invitation to commit oneself to building up true community of life, love, justice and truth with others. Easter proclaims the reality of the power for such new life. As a diocesan family, born during the COVID-19 pandemic and starting off her ministry this Easter season, we take this call seriously.

Before the pandemic, we freely shook hands, hugged, visited each other, went to work, to the market, to the Church, etc. Today we are aware that engaging in these taken-for-granted activities could result in sickness and death. In other words, God is inviting us to take nothing for granted anymore and to cultivate gratitude as a basic disposition in life. This would definitely enhance our appreciation and participation in the Eucharist as celebration of our gratitude to God for the salvation won for us by our Lord Jesus Christ.

We have therefore to continue having the Eucharist at the centre of our life and ministry as a diocese. We remember Archbishop Albert K. Obiefuna, the first bishop of Awka Diocese, who encouraged this tradition.

For the first time in living memory, churches were closed down even for Easter celebration. It was like the world was coming to an end. But like Jesus' empty tomb, the empty Churches at Easter could be a sign of the transformation of consciousness that God wants to bring about. It seems God wants to remind us that the Church is the people of God; those gathered by the Holy Spirit, made brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus and adopted sons and daughters of God. The Church as people of God needs churches as places of worship. Yet not every gathering in the church is the Church in the sense of the People of God. Through the pandemic, God has allowed the Church buildings to be locked up so as to allow the question of the deeper meaning of Church to emerge. Hopefully, after the storm, there would be due sensitivity and commitment to becoming more truly the People of God in our communities.

In the lockdown, people were stuck with their families. It reminded all that when the chips are down, family is what we are left with. It is therefore important to invest time, energy, emotion into building up this unit. This also entails building up the family as domestic Church. When COVID-19 made the gathering of the parish community impracticable, the domestic church, our biological families became the source of our spiritual nourishment. Therefore, as diocese we are committed to living out the mystery of the Church as family. We will also pay extra attention to the family, as domestic Church and as the basic social unit whose health or dis-ease affects the Church and the society at large. This entails sustained and systematic catechetical formation not only of those about to marry but also accompaniment of married couples and enabling the young ones attain Christian maturity that would blossom into happy married life or well-adjusted lives as priests and religious.

Another important lesson that COVID-19 underscored is co-responsibility: all for one and one for all. We are connected with each other. May you excuse this analogy: a droplet of COVID-19 virus from one person can infect the whole community just as a droplet of love, truth and goodness can transform a community for good. If one finger is smeared by oil, as we say in Igbo, others will most likely be smeared as well. We are the one body of Christ – clergy and the lay faithful. We have to work together to be the light and the salt of the earth (Matt 5:13, 14). It is not "*uka Fada.*" It is "*uka anyi.*" We are

all responsible and should live out our responsibility towards one another in such a way that smeared by the oil of grace and not the stain of sin, we can be channels of grace for others. This is our way of preparing for the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in 2022 on the theme, “For a Synodal Church: communion, participation and mission.”

In sum, I have tried to highlight our commitment to making a fresh push for grassroot evangelization in the sense of inviting people to personal and intimate relationship with Jesus and with one another in the bosom of the Church. This has to be followed up with sustained catechesis. We look forward to a style of ministry that is collaborative, centred on the Eucharist and on the family in view of contributing to the integral human development of one and of all. In line with the appeal of the Synod Fathers at the First Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops in 1994, we hope to harness the means of social communication for this outreach. We seek to be a community of love and service, open to working with our brothers and sisters of other denominations and faith persuasions, to let the Lord lead His flock to greener pastures, especially in the face of the anticipated intensification of hardship due to the pandemic.

I want to end on a note of gratitude. Once more, I thank all of you gathered here. I thank all those who would have loved to come but could not because of the pandemic. I thank the many priests and faithful of Ahiara diocese who sought to respect and uphold the Catholic Church’s understanding of herself and proved themselves worthy sons and daughters of the Church. I thank Bishop Paulinus Ezeokafor and the Auxiliary Bishop, Jonas Benson Okoye for their support all these years. Two wonderful decisions of Bishop Ezeokafor triggered off a thought in me. First, he allowed all the priests to continue in their places of pastoral assignment till the next pastoral year, even if they no longer belong to the diocese where the work. Second, he decided that both dioceses be involved in the organization of the inauguration of Ekwulobia Diocese and my installation. These show a recognition of the common history of our dioceses and a deep appreciation of communion which is central to the self-understanding of the Catholic Church. However, unless something is done now, the future generation of priests without any experience of this common history will drift apart. The merit of continuing the formation of junior seminarians together occurred to me. Details can be worked out later. Finally, to all the priests and the faithful of Awka Diocese before and after the creation of Ekwulobia Diocese, we say thank you for all

you have been to us, as individuals and as Ekwulobia Diocesan family. We remain one in God's love and life in His Holy Church.

My prayer is that we shall not only survive the COVID-19 pandemic but that it will lead to a revival of brotherliness and the emergence of a new world that mirrors more closely the Kingdom of God. I pray too that the Holy Spirit may lead us all into the fullness of the truth made known in Jesus Christ; inflame us with the fire of God's love, make us worthy ambassadors of His mysteries (2 Cor 5:20) and instruments for the renewal of the face of the earth. I commend our diocesan family to the intercession of St. Joseph, the spouse of our Blessed Mother Mary and our patron saint. May he obtain for us the graces of obedience of faith and intimate relationship with the incarnate Lord and our Blessed Mother. May he help us also make our families more like the Holy Family.

Happy Easter and God bless you all.

+ Peter Ebere Okpaleke  
Bishop of Ekwulobia