



“GO AND BE RECONCILED WITH YOUR BROTHER FIRST,” (Matt 5:24)

Lenten Message of His Lordship, Most Rev. Peter Ebere Okpaleke, Bishop of Ekwulobia, to the Clergy, Consecrated Persons, and Lay Faithful of Ekwulobia Diocese

My dear Brothers and Sisters,

God has given us another opportunity by making it possible for us to begin this year's Lenten period. Lent is a season of grace when we prepare for Easter. Truly, every Sunday is our weekly Easter, and the mystery of our salvation is active in history all the time. Yet, in a preeminent way, the saving mysteries are commemorated at Easter, which is preceded by 40 days of preparation in imitation of Jesus who fasted for 40 days before his public ministry (Matt 4:2) and the Israelites who journeyed 40 years into the promised land (Josh 5:6).

As we set out on our Lenten journey, I want to recommend for our guidance one of the visions that our Lord Jesus Christ challenges us with. Jesus tells us as he told his listeners, “you have heard how it was said to our ancestors, ‘you shall not kill; and if anyone does kill he must answer for it before the court.’ But I say this to you, anyone who is angry with a brother will answer for it before the court; anyone who calls a brother ‘Fool’ will answer for it before the Sanhedrin; and anyone who calls him ‘Traitor’ will answer for it in hell fire.” Jesus then concludes “So, then, if you are bringing your offering to the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, go and be reconciled with your brother first, and then come back and present your offering” (Matt 5:24).

The choice of the above theme for our Lenten observance was made because violence – physical, verbal and psychological – seems to be on the rise in our communities. Aggression and intimidation are being raised to a style of life and technique for survival. Yet at the core of our Christian calling is the enthronement of a “civilization of love” as Pope St. John Paul II formulated it. It is therefore necessary for us to review our attitude towards violence on the one hand, reconciliation, respect for one another, cordiality and solidarity on the other. This is the challenge presented by Jesus’ teaching in the passage above.

Jesus explicitly forbade those who have something against another from offering any gift to God before effecting a reconciliation. In the unlikely event that they forgot and were already on the line to make their offering and there remembered that they have outstanding issues with someone, they should step aside from the offertory line and go and get reconciled first before coming back to make their offering.

This is a hard teaching, who can accept it? (Jn 6:60). Could Jesus have meant that such common and everyday occurrence as being angry with or calling someone a fool is so serious as to attract the heavy punishment pronounced? Was he joking or simply speaking in parable? Certainly not! Often the Gospels indicate where Jesus was speaking in parables. Was he enunciating an ideal that should guide action but cannot be followed literally? This cannot be.

What is clear is that Jesus' statement deepens the meaning of offertory. Offertory is not simply a way of supporting the Church from the gifts God has given one. Rather, offertory, like the Holy Eucharist, is a mode of communion with God, an expression of love of God which must include love of one's brothers and sisters for it to be authentic. In the offertory, one takes from among God's gift to one and gives back in thanksgiving to God and in acknowledgement of one's union with God. As an expression of communion with God and with others, it makes sense that one should not be angry with one's brother and sister; denigrate or excludes one's brother or sister socially. Any of these actions and attitudes detracts from communion notwithstanding the ease with which human beings slide into them.

It is also important for us to acknowledge the gravity of anger and denigrating words. Words are windows into the heart. That is why Scripture tells us that out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks (Matt 12:34). Every action starts as a thought or a stirring of the heart which could be expressed in words or translated into action. Effective policing of words is not only a way of inculcating mental hygiene but also of mitigating the consequences of words on others. The Epistle of James (3:1-12) highlights the potency of words. He shows that the tongue can set fire to the whole wheel of creation. Some people's lives have been turned upside down with words just as words could also heal. The injunction of Jesus underlines this power of words while also demanding a quick response to neutralize the possible harmful effect of any careless or inappropriate word or action. Like kerosene, any unresolved issue or hurting/hateful word tends to spread by its momentum, contaminating everything.

In the light of the above, Jesus' prohibition of denigrating words and his call for quick resolution of issues capture a deep truth about our human condition. As part of our Lenten observance, we must learn to abstain from hurtful words; let forgiveness be the gift we give as alms to those who have hurt us and to all, the

commitment to work for the emergence of an environment conducive for integral human flourishing by sowing seeds of goodness as the Holy Father Pope Francis, challenges us in his Lenten Message, titled “Let us not grow tired of doing good, for in due time we shall reap our harvest, if we do not give up. So then, while we have the opportunity, let us do good to all” (Gal 6:9-10). May our prayer during this period and always be directed towards losing ourselves in the warm embrace and communion with God. It is only in such loss of self in God that we can find ourselves and others in God (Matt 10:39).

I commend you to the maternal intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, as we embark on this Lenten journey seeking reconciliation, respect and reverence of one another and greater communion with God and with one another.

I wish you a fruitful and grace-filled Lenten season.

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