



**“IS NOT THIS THE SORT OF FAST THAT PLEASURES ME: ...” (Is 58:6)
FASTING FROM CUTTING CORNERS!**

*2026 Lenten Pastoral Letter of His Eminence, Peter Ebere Cardinal Okpaleke to the Faithful of Ekwulobia
Diocese and People of Good Will*

My dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

1. Introduction

The Lenten season is here again. We thank God for the opportunity given us to participate in this holy season. We pray God to help us heed the call to repentance and to renew ourselves spiritually through prayer, fasting and alms-giving in preparation for the celebration of our redemption at Easter.

2. The Sort of Fast that Pleases God (Is 58:6)

Penance, especially in the form of fasting, is an integral part of the Lenten observance. The Bible shows us that fasting includes but goes beyond abstention from food, drinks and other pleasures. It includes commitment to social justice. Rhetorically, through Prophet Isaiah, God asked, “Is not this the sort of fast that pleases me: to break unjust fetters, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break all yokes?” Other practices enumerated as fasting include sharing one’s food with the hungry, sheltering the homeless poor, clothing the naked, and being concerned about the welfare of others (Is 58:6-7). This amounts to a recontextualization of fasting: from refraining from food and drinks to concern for social justice fueled by love. Following the example of Prophet Isaiah, let us focus on one social justice issue in our context – cutting corners – and recommend fasting therefrom.

3. Cutting Corners: a Social Challenge to be Addressed

In the context of the upgrade of the road infrastructure in our area, cutting corners has become more widespread and its danger more glaring. Before the dualization of some of the major roads, people turned from one lane into or across the other at whatever point they needed to do so. This is not possible anymore because of the physical structures – the road dividers or medians – that dualize the road. There are designated points where one can turn into the other lane. Sometimes, one must drive past one’s destination on the opposite side, get to the designated turning spot, turn, and drive up again. This restricts freedom and requires discipline. Unfortunately, habits die hard. It reasserts itself. Drivers turn into the other lane from a designated point nearest to their destination,

drive against traffic, despite the danger of colliding with oncoming vehicles, just to take the shortest route to their destination. This experience draws attention to what I call a cutting-corners mindset or mentality which, we, as a people, must address.

4. Cutting Corners as a Mentality

Cutting corners does not pertain only to the use of the roads. It is a pervasive phenomenon. That is why I refer to it as a mindset or mentality that predisposes majority of our people to act in a certain way in different spheres of life, including on the roads. What are the contours of this mindset or mentality?

Although the imagery of cutting corners is geographical and relates to movement from one point to another in space, at its root, the cutting-corners mindset draws from a conviction about the relationship between the individual and society. It privileges the individual's desires and conveniences over procedures and rules laid down by society for the good of all, including the individual concerned. The mindset downgrades principles and rules set down by society for order and protection of members of a society and upgrades the individual's will to power. People prefer to play by the ear rather than subject themselves to pre-set plans of conduct. In line with this mentality, personal creativity and convenience supplant any rules and, paradoxically, they become the rule or legitimate principle of action.

When people obey traffic rules, for example, it is not because the rationale for such rules are appreciated. Rather, it is because it is more convenient to do so than to risk harassment and extortion from law enforcement agents. One sees this at the traffic lights. Compliance is only during working hours, when the enforcement groups are there. Obeying the red light outside working hours, usually attracts honking of the horn and being told '*ha anoghi ya!*' (they are not there). In other words, although traffic rules are obeyed, at depth, it is the cutting-corners mindset that is at work. The individual is set over and above society. Sadly, too, law enforcement is also shaped by the cutting-corners mindset. Instead of enforcing the stipulation of the law across the board, enforcement agents become the rule. They intimidate and extort money from offenders, especially the weak ones – *okada* and *keke* riders.

5. Cutting-Corners Mindset: the Bane of our Society

As seen above, the imagery of cutting corners is geographical, but it points to a distorted relationship between the individual and the community/society. The mindset privileges individual interests often at the expense of the community/society. It points to a diminished sense of community/society. Examples abound of this distortion. Adulteration of any kind is an outcome of the cutting-corners mindset. Adulteration is the refusal to adhere to stipulated safety standard for a product. It also shows a lack of regard for the good of other members of the community/society. Adulteration of pharmaceutical products or anything that people ingest show the stark reality and ugly consequence of

this distortion. For personal gain, people produce medications with reduced or no active ingredient. Confident that their malady is being addressed, the sick take the fake or substandard medication. This often leads to complications and sometimes to death. Video clips often surface of syndicates adulterating alcoholic beverages and pushing them into the market. In all of these, no thought is given to the health implications for those who consume these products. This is also the case with those who use harmful substances, like carbide, to ripen fruits.

The certification process is one bastion in which the cutting-corners mentality has insidious consequences. Certification or licensing is a society's mechanism for quality assurance and maintenance of public safety standards. Through it, society ensures that those entrusted with sensitive tasks, on which the wellbeing of others depend, have the requisite training, know-how and competence to carry out the task. A driver's license is supposed to be a statement by a society that the holder has undergone rigorous training and has been found to have acquired the competence to drive a vehicle without being a danger to himself or herself and to others. A doctor's or pharmacist's license is about the same. It is a proclamation that patients can safely entrust themselves to their professional care. Similarly, the institutions that train these professionals are periodically assessed for compliance with the requisite standards. The frightening reality is that the cutting-corners mentality can undermine and hollow out the process of certification. What if people obtain driver's licenses without undergoing any training? What if the *okada* and *keke* drivers who overtake other vehicles from the right side are reproducing what they see other drivers do because they received no training or certification and therefore are unaware of the dangers they expose themselves to by overtaking from the right side? What if, although in possession of a licence, the doctor attending to one in the hospital, or the engineer entrusted with a building project, lacks the requisite competence because corners were cut and due process truncated in his or her favour, during the years of formation? Your guess is as good as mine whether or not our society is already reaping the fruits of the corrosion of the certification process by the cutting-corners mentality.

6. Fasting from Cutting Corners

I remember that it was when I got to the seminary that emphasis was laid on not crossing the quadrangle or the football field. One was expected to go down the whole length of the field or quadrangle rather than cutting through the middle to shorten the journey. Doing otherwise attracted punishment. This was a new reality with a matching infrastructure. All the buildings and locations for seminarians' activities are linked up by well defined pathways. The pathways were contrasted with the green areas – fields and quadrangles. We spent a considerable amount of time planting a particular type of grass on these designated green areas. We were also made to appreciate the beauty of a football field or quadrangle covered uniformly by green grass. It is from this backdrop that I reviewed the primary school compound I attended. There was no network of paths to the different

buildings in the school. From different directions, pupils cut through the school compound taking short cuts to their destination.

As I go around, I see that many schools do not have defined network of paths. Whichever direction one walks is a pathway. This gives the illusion of freedom without constraints. A structured environment, however, gently trains the mind to follow the structure on the ground. It canalizes the expression of freedom along a socially constructed path. This is a subtle but powerful preparation for a healthy relationship between personal freedom/preference and socially enacted principles and rules. Fasting from cutting corners requires that we consciously provide our young ones with the opportunity to learn, and experience early in life, the beauty of structures in the expression of their freedom. The school environment is a veritable means to do this. Let me, therefore, direct and entrust the coordination of the structuring and beautification of the school environment in all schools belonging to the Catholic Diocese of Ekwulobia to the Diocesan Education Office. While this is being done, we take the next step of opening the eyes of the pupils to beauty and order. If they learn to walk a longer distance for the beauty of a uniformly green area, the basis has been laid for them to appreciate the need to drive a longer distance for their safety. Hopefully, they would also learn that by being members of a society, they subscribe to an implicit social contract, which, if a majority of the people upholds its term, would guarantee social order and the wellbeing of all. This implies that personal convenience or gains must not trump other considerations about public safety, order and wellbeing of all. This demands civic education and formation. This season of lent is a good time to begin this formation.

A formation programme targeted at dismantling the cutting-corners mindset in Nigeria faces an uphill task. This is because this mindset is insidious and pervasive. It has also become an invaluable element in the survival toolkit of Nigerians. But, as individuals and as a community, we are all paying the price for this mindset. And the cost is rising by the day. It is at the root of the decay in our society. We must not wait for the collapse of our society and communities before we make an effort to remedy the situation. However, may no one think of changing Nigeria or even one's neighbour. Let each person focus on changing himself or herself. Remember the Igbo saying: *onye ọbuna zaa ama be ya, obodo adi ọcha* (if everyone sweeps his or her compound and the road leading to it, the community becomes clean). Let us become aware of how this mindset, like a malware, runs in our systems and inspires some of our actions; let us acknowledge that we live in a disorderly environment and this affects people's minds. Let us fast from cutting corners in all we do.

7. Cutting Corners and the Challenge of Love – Concluding Reflection

At the heart of Christianity is love: God's love for us and the challenge that we love others as we love ourselves. Out of love, God took human form. He also bore human indignation on the Cross. In this way, God taught us that love is unconditional and enduring. Love

moves us out of ourselves to consider the good of the other as individuals and as members of a community/society. The cutting-corners mentality focuses on the self and its conveniences. Fasting from cutting corners is, therefore, an invitation to embrace truly the love God has shown us and which God wants us to share with the world. Embracing such love helps us to create a social environment where there is order, where people honor the social contract for healthy and harmonious common life and flourishing. May we strive to step up to this vocation, especially in this holy season of Lent.

Peace be with you!

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