

HAPPY NEW YEAR!

Homily of His Eminence, Peter Ebere Cardinal Okpaleke, at Blessed Iwene Tansi Major Seminary Onitsha on March 25, 2025 on the Occasion of the Convocation Ceremony

1. Preamble

We congratulate the graduands. We are gathered here because of you. We thank God for leading you through your studies. Most of you have been ordained priests and have worked for some months, others are still doing their internship. You have gathered some experiences. You must have also noticed some inadequacies in your preparation in the seminary or made adjustments to your expectations and visions of the priesthood and life outside the seminary. This homecoming is for you to share some of your experiences with those still on the journey. Be like Barnabas – sons of encouragement (Acts 4:36) and sources of good counsel. I pray that you reset the usual “I have arrived mentality” which, often derives from the fact that you can now wear soutanes with cape. Really, there is nothing like arrival till we get to heaven. Ordination is the end of a phase and the beginning of another phase. We keep moving in phases until, hopefully, we arrive at the final phase when we shall see God, face to face (1 Cor 13:12; 1 Jn 3:2, Rev. 22:4). Please have this at the back of your heads and learn the lessons mapped out for each phase of your life and use them to become better versions of yourselves.

2. Solemnity of Annunciation of the Lord

As mentioned at the beginning of Mass, today is the Solemnity of Annunciation, the event we recall in the first Joyful Mystery of the Rosary of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Archangel Gabriel came to the blessed Virgin Mary, acknowledged her openness to God and gave her the news of the divine plan. She signaled her consent through those profound words of surrender to the divine will: *ecce ancilla domini, fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum* – behold the handmaid of the Lord, let it be done to me according to your words. I will come back to this after speaking about the New Year which is the theme of this reflection.

3. Happy New Year

I guess that many of you would have been surprised if not shocked if, at the beginning of Mass, I wished you a happy New Year! You would have wondered how and why I got things mixed up. But, for centuries, March 25, was celebrated by Christians as the New Year. Why? And why was it changed? It is a fascinating story that can help us appreciate the deep theological meaning of the Solemnity we celebrate today.

Every day is like the other. The sun shines and/or the rain falls. It can also be hot or cold. The moon may or may not shine. For us near the Equator, it is either the rainy or dry season. In temperate regions, there are more remarkable variations in the seasons. What is clear is that there is nothing natural regarding which day or season is the first day of the cycle of seasons that make up a year. Different cultures mark the beginning of the cycle differently and for different reasons.

For the Igbo, the moon is the celestial object used for reckoning. There are thus 13 lunar months in the Igbo calendar. *Onwa mbyu* is between February and March. You may ask: why did our forefathers choose this as the first month? Maybe, because this is the period when preparations are made for the planting season. They might have reasoned that if such preparations were not made and the gods placated, their labour on the farm would be futile. This would mean hunger and the end of their community. So, because of the importance of the preparation, they marked the period it was done as the first, *onwa mbyu*.

In the Julian Calendar, part of the reform by Julius Caesar was the choice of January 1 as the beginning of the New Year, partly because it coincided with the festival of Janus – the Roman god of beginnings, transitions and endings. This god is usually depicted with two faces looking in opposite directions – one towards the past and the other towards the future.

When Christianity gained influence and with the fall of the Roman Empire, there arose the need to use something foundational in Christianity to mark the beginning of the year. What is foundational to Christianity is the person of Jesus Christ. To emphasize this, Dionysius Exiguus, a 6th century monk, came up with the division of history into “Before Christ” (BC) and AD

(*Anno Domini*) (Year of the Lord).” His work also helped in making March 25, the New Year. How? In Dionysius Exiguus’ understanding, the salvific death of Jesus is the high point of Christianity. He therefore sought to ascertain the exact date of the Lord’s death. According to the Gospel of John, Jesus was crucified on the day before the Passover (Jn 19:14, 31), that is, the 14th Day of Nisan, in the Jewish calendar. With this historical information and through some calculation, Dionysius Exiguus and his colleagues arrived at the conclusion that Jesus was crucified on March 25 of the year of his crucifixion. What day would be more appropriate to mark the New Year, a new beginning, than the day Jesus inaugurated the new covenant in his blood?

What is the connection with Annunciation? I can imagine that this is the question going round your heads. In those days, it was common belief that one died on the same day one was conceived. If Jesus died on March 25, then he must have been conceived on March 25. One may ask again: what better day to mark a new beginning and a New Year than March 25, the day Jesus was conceived and the day he died? You can now confidently respond when I wish you a happy New Year. By that, we acknowledge that new life dawned with the conception of Jesus. This new year was introduced in AD 527. Later, Pope Gregory XIII reformed the calendar in 1582 and moved the New Year Day back on January 1.¹

4. Who is Jesus Christ for You?

The above exploration of the history of the New Year has illumined how our forefathers in the faith thought about what is most important and determinative in history. For them, it is Jesus – God’s decisive intervention in human history. Suffice it to remind you of the opening words of Pope St. John Paul II’s first encyclical letter, *Redemptor Hominis*. The Pope wrote: “the Redeemer of man, Jesus Christ is the centre of the universe and of history.” These are profound words. Jesus is the centre of the universe and of history. But how many human beings realize this? How many Christians

¹ Joseph Pronechen, “Why March 25, the Annunciation, Was Once the New Year Day,” *The National Catholic Register* <https://www.ncregister.com/blog/why-march-25-the-annunciation-was-once-new-year-s-day> (accessed March 20, 2025).

do? Are we not more likely to think that history is made by human beings – by the powerful, the rich and the influential?

Let us be personal. **Who or what is the centre of your universe and history?** I repeat, **who or what is the centre of your universe and history?** You may not have an answer. You might not have even thought about it. Whether you have thought about it or not, something or someone is at the centre of your life and history. It is, therefore, important that you take time to reflect on this question. This is indeed a foundational question. Your response to it – whether articulated in words or tacitly assumed – provides the energy that drives your life. One's view of what is important in life, and above all, about what is **most** important in life, shapes one's idea of life and provides the driving force for one's life.

The answer implicit in the action of some people underlines power as the most important thing. If you are in this group, your imagination of life here in the seminary and after ordination is how to wangle your way and be in the corridors of power, be in the good books of any authority figure in order to fulfil your ambition of building up your power base either through acquiring academic degrees, traveling abroad or through association with the powerful people in government and in business. Such people sign up for anything that will enhance their power, wealth and influence. That is why some seminarians, for the sake of wealth and relevance/influence, spend their seminary days as apprentices of one Pentecostal pastor or one of the priests who feel that they have 'excess' or extraordinary powers. After ordination, they start producing YouTube and Facebook clips or circulating prayers, etc., to present themselves as a certain kind of priest, rather than simply as a priest. Whatever your situation, it is not late yet. Examine yourself! Face yourself and ask yourself: Is Jesus actually at the centre of my universe and history? If so, how? If not, why not? That is the way to make the annunciation of his birth a new beginning and a new year!

5. Here I am Lord, I Have Come to Do Your Will - Behold the Handmaid of the Lord

In the Responsorial Psalm, we proclaimed with the Psalmist: "Here I am Lord, I have come to do your will." This proclamation is at the heart of the

lesson in the letter to the Hebrews, from which the second reading was taken. As you know, the Letter to the Hebrews seeks to show the superiority of the priesthood and mediation of Jesus Christ to that of the Old Testament and temple worship. In the passage we listened to, the writer insists that the blood of bulls and goats is incapable of taking away sin. The writer then, on two occasions, underlined Jesus' obedience by quoting the Psalmist, "behold I have come to do your will, O Lord." Finally, we see the same sentiment echoed in the response of Mary: "behold the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be done to me according to your word." What does this teach us about the feast we are celebrating?

The Annunciation effected the self-emptying of Jesus. As St. Paul put it, though he was in the form of God, Jesus did not count His equality with God, a thing to be grasped. But He emptied himself, taking the form of a servant. And being found in human form, he was humbler even to accepting death, death on a cross (Phil 2:6-8). This self-emptying at the incarnation continued in his earthly life. Jesus himself affirmed: "my food is to do the will of the one who sent me" (Jn 4:34). This obedience to the Father culminated on the cross. On the part of our Lady, her disposition of total openness and availability to cooperate with the divine, marked her out. This is at the basis of her consent which formed an integral part of the story of the incarnation. What does this say to us, as human beings, and then as Christians?

A line from the Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes* no. 22, will help us greatly to answer the question. Here, the council fathers wrote, "the truth is that only in the mystery of the Incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light." What does this mean? We are human beings. We may think that we know what it means to be human. Yet, being human is still a mystery, a mystery that is illumined by the mystery of the Incarnate Word. We are made in the image and likeness of God. Jesus is the image of the invisible God and the first born of creation (Col 1:15). Although he took flesh at the fullness of time (Gal 4:4), after many generations of human beings had lived and died, everything was made through him and for him (Col 1:16). He is the exemplar, the model after which human beings are made. He is the way, truth and life (Jn 14:6).

If we want to know the truth about life in fullness and the way to attain it, we must look to him because he embodied all those and made them known. If not, we will only have distorted views.

In the light of the above, let us get back to our question? What is the implication for us human beings and Christians of the “*ecce ancilla domini*,” the response of the Psalmist, “here I am Lord, I have come to do your will” and the self-emptying of Jesus in obedience to the Father? My answer is: God made us human beings in such a way that true fulfillment, can only be attained by living in radical openness to God and to others. We can only find our life by giving it up (Matt 10:39). This is paradoxical. Yet, it has consequences in practice. It means having a balanced sense of self which comes with the awareness that living for the self is suffocating and limiting; the human spirit is created to soar high and commit in freedom to the good of others. Just like the rain that does not drink its water, the flower that does not see its beauty and the eye that does not see itself only others, we are supposed to live for the Other (God) and for others. From this perspective, power, wealth, influence and all other attractions of the world acquire a new appeal. Power, authority, wealth and influence are no longer sought, exercised or wielded for the benefit or projection of the self. Rather, these are seen as gifts for service in imitation of Jesus who is among us as the one who serves (Lk 22:27) and who, thus, redefined greatness as service, self-giving to the point of death for the good of others.

6. Conclusion

Celebrating the Annunciation as our New Year and new beginning challenges us to take Jesus Christ as the centre of the universe and of history. Because we are made in his image and likeness, we must take him as the way to true and fulfilled life. Making Jesus the centre of our lives entails knowing that no one lives for himself or dies for himself (Rom 14:7). For us to live is to live for Christ, that is, to live in imitation of him who, out of love for humanity and in obedience to the Father, emptied himself to the point of death. We are made to give of ourselves without reservation for the good of others. We have our Lady’s *ecce ancilla domini* as a reminder. Live your life in total openness and availability to the divine will. That way, like

our Mother Mary, God will continue to take flesh in you and through you touch the world and transform it to God's own greater glory.

Peace be with you!

✠ Peter Ebere Cardinal Okpaleke
Bishop of Ekwulobia