

“O BURU NA I CHORO...” (Mk 1:40)

Homily of His Eminence, Peter Ebere Cardinal Okpaleke at the New Year Get-Together of CADEK Presbyterium on January 15, 2026 at St. Joseph Cathedral Ekwulobia

1. Preamble

My dear Msgri. and Frs., once more, I wish you a happy New Year. This is our first meeting as a Presbyterium in the New Year.

We are celebrating Mass of thanksgiving for God’s uncountable blessings. As a Diocese, we have so much to thank God for. Personally, I thank God for each and every one of you, for the bond of fraternity and common purpose found among us, and for the sincere effort being made by many of us in our various places of apostolate. As I thank God, I thank you all, very sincerely. As your chief shepherd, I am acutely aware that I must render account to God for each and every one of you (Heb 13:17). I also want to propose a similar vision to you. As you thank God for numerous blessings in your life, remember that you will be called to account for your life, for the opportunities given you to do good and touch lives positively. I am sure you know that accountability is not only about finances. As priests, shepherds of the flock of Christ, we will give account of the people entrusted to our care or brought to us by God in our parishes and places of apostolate. So, as we thank God for the New Year, we are also challenged to renew our commitment to supporting our parishioners and all Christians in their journey of faith, because we will give an account of them to the Lord. I hope to take this up later in the context of the extraordinary consistory of the Cardinals that was held last week to mark the 8th month of the election of Pope Leo XIV.

We also thank God for bringing many of our brothers working outside our diocese back safely. We pray that God guides and protects you and leads you back safely at the end of your holiday.

In a special way, we thank God with our brothers celebrating the jubilee of their priestly ordination. Very Rev. Msgr. Bertrand C. B. Muojekwu celebrates his golden jubilee while Rev. Frs. Kenneth Okafor, Chinedu Obieli, Anthony Umeh, Patrick Okeke, Chika Okpalike, Anthony Ezeogamba, and Jude Mbanefo are silver jubilarians. We appreciate all that God has achieved through your lives and ministry over the past half and quarter of a century respectively. We pray for a fresh outpouring of divine grace on you.

We continue to pray for the eternal repose of our brothers who have been called back to God, especially Rev. Fr. Chukwuma Philip Ofojebe and Msgr. Jerome Madueke, who died in 2025. May they rest in peace!

When we get to the second part of the celebration, the newly ordained priests and those recently incardinated into the diocese will introduce themselves.

As we begin this New Year, God, in His providence, highlighted in today's readings two important perspectives and emphases that should guide our ministry in the year and thereafter. **First is the vision of faith as abandonment to God's providence.** Against the background of a magical mentality, depicted in the first reading, which has permeated contemporary popular religiosity, we have a big task on our hands. **The second emphasis presented to us is gratitude.**

2. The Magical Mentality

The first reading exposes a magical mentality. The Israelites were at war with the Philistines. Having suffered defeat, they came up with a plan which they considered foolproof. It was bound to bring them victory in battle. They decided to carry the Ark of the Covenant into the field of battle. They reasoned: God cannot allow Himself to be disgraced. *Chukwu agaghị ekwe ka ihere mee ya.* Therefore, in saving Himself, God will save them. What a smart calculation!!! They sent for the Ark. The arrival of the Ark brought by Hophni and Phinehas, the sons of Eli and the priests at Shiloh, revived the morale of the soldiers. They gave a loud shout. The Philistines were terrified when they heard the news. However, the Philistines mustered courage and showed up in the battlefield the next day. The unexpected happened. *Chukwu wuọ umu Izrel n'ala.* God broke their expectations. The Ark was captured. To the Israelites, God could not allow God to suffer such indignity. God showed them that He is not bound to follow their calculations; that God is personal and not a cosmic principle and worse, a machine to be manipulated through the execution of the prescribed ritual or application of the right code.

At the heart of the magical mentality is the illusion that we have captured God in our categories such that we know how to get what we want from God. Yes, God has revealed Himself. Yet, we must reckon with the fact that this is adapted to the human level of understanding and does not exhaust God. Failure to recognize this leads us to a subtle redefinition of faith. This has happened in Pentecostalism, and it has reshaped popular Christianity. Unfortunately, some of us are blindly promoting this recomposed Christianity.

I guess you remember some Pentecostal pastors who preach that Christians need not pray or beg God for something. Rather, they should **command and lay claim** to whatever they want. Why? Because, according to these Pentecostal pastors, in Jn 10:34 Jesus reminded the Jews, who were accusing him of blasphemy when he hinted at his divinity, that the Scriptures called them 'gods, sons of the most High' in Ps 82:6. These pastors then conclude that if the Jews had such a high status, then Christians must have something higher. This is the thinking behind some of the names they take. For example, Christians are those living in "Dominion," "the Lord's Chosen," "the Winners." As those operating at the level of the divine, they can issue commands and lay claims to anything they fancy. The only condition required is faith. Faith is understood as the absence of any

doubt. The pastors quote Mk 11:23 that one could move mountains if one has faith understood as having no doubt in one's mind. When the mountain does not move, this failure is attributed to the quality of faith of the individual.

The Israelites at Aphek entertained no doubt that bringing the Ark of the Covenant to the field of battle would ensure their victory. Like the Israelites, some priests celebrate Mass or bring the Eucharist to the battlefield of homes and other places with assurance *na Jesu bu o bata, o bie*. Some Pentecostal pastors and Catholic priests organize crusades and promise a miracle galore, as if they have control over God. People are encouraged to stand on the promise of scripture and challenge God. People are exhorted *ka ha kwuru na nkwa e kwere n'akwukwo nsọ, kwubie okwu*. Assurance is given that if one entertains no doubt, one's request will gain a favourable response. This may seem like an articulation of genuine faith; faith in God's nearness and readiness to respond to human needs. One may ask: What if God has other plans? Yes, this must be taken into consideration because God's ways are not our ways and His thoughts are not our thoughts (Is 55:8). If this is not taken into consideration, one easily slides into a magical view. The leper in the Gospel shows us that at the heart of mature faith is abandonment borne out of an appreciation of God's mystery and love.

3. "If you Want to..."

The Gospel tells us the story of the leper who approached Jesus and pleaded on his knee: "if you want to, you can cure me." The leper's affirmation: "you can cure me" shows a conviction about Jesus' capability to heal him. This conviction could have come from the witness of many others whom Jesus healed. Yet, the leper neither generalized nor worked under any presumption. He did not think: "since he cured others, he will also cure me." He did not play the victim by saying, I have suffered long enough, he must cure me now. He did not presume that he was entitled to being cured. Instead, he framed his request while recognizing that the decision lies solely with Jesus.

The leper, by saying "*o buru na i chorọ...*" means that he anticipated that Jesus could refuse that favour. It also signaled a readiness to accept whatever his decision might be. As a human being, he would be disappointed if his plea were to be ignored or his request turned down. If we ascribe mature faith to the leper, we see that he trusted Jesus and was reconciled with his decision either to heal or not to heal him. The deeper implication of this is that, without denying the marginalization and other negative consequences of his leprosy, he is ready to put up with it if Jesus were to decide not to help him. This recalls the figure of Job and his statement of faith: "if we take good from the Lord, shall we not also take adversity" (Job 2:10). Baibul Nso translates that as a rhetorical question: "*Anyi ga-anara iheoma n'aka Chineke ma gharakwa inara ihe ojoo?*" This brings us face to face with the question of whether God can permit negative things to befall even the innocent. The witness of Scripture is that God permits such.

To many of our people, the default setting of the world is a life of abundance – where there is *ogonogo ndu, ahuike, omumu, ihe akụ akụ, ihe enwe enwe*. Lack of any of these values is seen as an omen; an indication of cosmic disequilibrium whose cause must be discerned and rectified. This outlook is found in some layers of the Old Testament. Gradually, however, biblical revelation moved beyond this position. The representation of the coming of the Lord in terms of the refiner’s fire and the fuller’s alkali (Mal 3:2) indicates that the life of a believer is a purification process. The believer should expect to walk in the valley of death. What is promised is God’s abiding presence (Ps 23). In sum, God can permit negative experiences to befall his people. If they love God, these negative experiences can be to their good (Rom 8:28). From this perspective, faith is about abandonment to the providential plan of God. It is about readiness to accept whatever God allows to come to us. It is about living out the example of Jesus. At the Garden of Gethsemane, he prayed with every expectation that the cup would pass him by. Yet, he was ready to accept the Father’s will. He thus concluded his prayer by saying “not my will but yours be done” (Lk 22:42). This is very different from a magical mentality which presumes to know God’s will. The promise in Deut. 7:14, Ex 23:26 that “none of you, man or woman, will be sterile, no male or female of your beasts infertile,” is generalized. This feeds the presumption that God cannot permit someone to be barren. It must be from the devil. More insidiously, the magical mentality presumes to know what to do to “force” God to respond in line with one’s desire. The Israelites presumed that bringing in the Ark would force God to defend Himself and them. This is not faith. Faith entails surrender, doing what is right, loving steadfastly, and walking humbly with one’s God (Micah 6:8). With such an attitude, if things turn out the way one wished or prayed for, there is an outpouring of gratitude, if not, there is patient expectation and surrender into the loving direction of God.

4. The Importance of Gratitude

In the story of Jesus and the leper, we see an amazing situation created by the surge of gratitude. The leper was **sternly** warned by Jesus to say nothing about him but to go and show himself to the priest and make the prescribed offering. It is reported that the man went away but then started talking about his healing freely and telling the story everywhere. Although the healed leper did not obey instructions, his disobedience was not condemned. Rather, it was reported neutrally in acknowledgement of the inevitability of his reaction. He did not feel entitled to be healed. He was, therefore, surprised and grateful that Jesus chose to heal him.

My New Year message was on gratitude. I will challenge you to re-read that short message and try to let it speak to you, and see how to communicate it to your community.

5. A Synodal Church on Mission – First Extraordinary Consistory by Pope Leo XIV

Pope Leo convoked an extraordinary consistory from January 8-9, 2026. Let me share with you the highlights of the meeting. First is the emphasis on synodality. Though new, this concept refers to something we have always known. I can translate it into a vision of the Church as a healthy family. The emphasis is on a **healthy family**. A healthy family is where the members of the family feel their belongingness, where each feels respected and respects others, where all are focused on the upliftment of each member and the attainment of the family goal. A healthy family is where the power of love, not the love of power, is at the heart of the relationship. There is a differentiation of roles, but each person contributes his or her own quota to the benefit of all.

The consistory is a manifestation of synodality in action. The Holy Father and members of the Curia could take decisions, write documents and send to Bishops. Such a top-down approach is not in line with the Church's understanding of herself as a community where everyone is firstborn sons and daughters of God and citizens of heaven (Heb 12:23). The Pope therefore called a meeting with the aim of cross-fertilizing ideas from the different and divergent local contexts to arrive at the best way forward regarding the mission of the Church. During the meeting, those of us, Cardinals who are diocesan bishops, that is, those who are actively involved in the apostolate, were grouped into nine different groups. Cardinals who are emeritus bishops or curial cardinals were in twelve different groups. Much more was expected of us as those directly in touch with the faithful in the Particular Churches all over the world. This shows a solicitude to formulate programs and views that will resonate with the people in their different contexts.

Consistory, as a structure of consultation and governance at the level of the Church universal, has been there. Similarly, there are the Diocesan Pastoral Council, the Parish Pastoral Council as organs of consultation at the levels of the diocese and of the parish and the Commissions, Committees, Boards and Associations at the schools, hospitals and other establishments. The question is whether parish priests or managers of establishments are using these structures. Many people prefer being sole administrators. They take all the decisions as if they are the only wise person or the only person that the Holy Spirit speaks to, in the community. What is worse is that some talk down on the people, insulting them as if they must diminish others to feel relevant. Others purposefully micro-manage the election into the parish pastoral council or other boards so that they have people they can intimidate or manipulate as members. As you can see, having structures conducive to a synodal way of being Church is one thing, activating these structures to serve synodality is another. Put differently, you can have a family but making the family healthy with members relating in a life-giving way requires extra work. This is the challenge of synodality. This is what

the Pope wants to remind us of. We are invited to invest in making our parish communities veritable families where everyone feels welcome and supported to contribute to the mission of the Church according to his or her endowment.

Please remember that the seed of faith was sown among our people through the sweat and blood of other people. Last year marked the 140th anniversary of the arrival of the missionaries at Onitsha. Some early missionaries died after less than 20 days on our land. Others kept coming. Patiently and through enormous sacrifices, they grew the number of Catholics from zero to what we have today. Now we inherited Christian communities, who, because of their faith, go out of their way to support us and our ministry. Yet, someone is callous to the point of bragging to his parish community that, whether they like it or not, they are stuck with him for the next three years. If they like, let them stop coming to the Church, that he cared less. This is very sad and the missionaries must have turned in their graves at such a statement. Please, my dear Msgri., and Frs., if you are tired of pastoral ministry, let me know and we can look for another apostolate for you. What we will not accept is the creation of confusion in the community. We are ready to help you so that you do not become occasion for someone to fall away from the faith (Matt 18:6).

The second theme discussed at the consistory is mission. Remember that it is the whole Church that is missionary. The question is how to make your parish community missionary? How to help the families in your parish to realise that they are domestic Churches and should be missionary. I can imagine that some might be wondering how this vision of a missionary Church can be made operational. My simple response is that our Church can be missionary by engaging in the evangelization of culture. I can imagine that this needs to be unpacked. Let me therefore task the Theological Commission to organize one of the seminars during the pastoral year on this theme. Please find resource person or persons who can tease out the ideas in a down- to- earth and actionable way so that priests in their parish ministry can take this forward.

6. Conclusion

As we continue our celebration, we pray God to bless all of us, bless our parish communities, family members and well wishers. We pray for all who support our diocese and parishes in a special way. We commend ourselves and our ministry into the hands of God and ask for the intercession of our Blessed Mother, Virgin Mary and St. Joseph our Patron Saint. May we grow in faith as abandonment to divine providence and in gratitude. May these sustain us in our effort to make the Church, in the homes, our parishes and in our diocese, a healthy family on mission.

Peace be with you.