

“OFFER YOUR BODIES AS A LIVING SACRIFICE, HOLY AND ACCEPTABLE TO GOD” (ROM 12:1)

Keynote Address Delivered by His Eminence Peter Ebere Cardinal Okpaleke at the Liturgical Seminar for the Presbyterium-CADEK, on Wednesday, 11 June 2025, held at St. Joseph's Cathedral Underground.

1. Welcome and Gratitude

Dear Monsignors and Fathers, I welcome you to this liturgy and inculturation seminar. Please excuse my physical absence as well as that of our diocesan Chancellor - Rev. Fr. Lawrence Nwankwo due to our on-going pastoral visit to our Cadek faithful in Europe. I am pleased to inform you that we are, by the grace of God, progressing smoothly and successfully.

I extend my gratitude to the Liturgy and Inculturation Commission led by Rev. Fr. John Umeojiakor, for all the efforts in making today's seminar possible. I thank the Vicar General, Rev. Fr. Anthony Chiegboka and indeed all of you who are cooperating. I also thank our two facilitators, Rev. Fr. Nikolas Abazie and Rev. Fr. Gabriel Chika Okpalike for their availability. We look forward to a fruitful outcome.

2. Introductory Remarks

The resurgence of neo-paganism in our society, particularly among young people, renders the topic chosen for today's seminar, “*ichu aja*” (sacrifice), especially relevant. If we, as a Church, do not address their concerns and legitimate doubts, we risk losing a substantial segment of our young population in the near future.

Research shows that the Internet is the primary vehicle for spreading neo-pagan ideas in our society. Many young people mock Christianity and our religious practices on social media platforms. Their common expressions include “Christianity is a scam,” “Reality will teach you,” “They replaced our shrines with images of white people,” “the Bible is an instrument of oppression,” and “Priests and pastors are deceivers.” One person boldly and blasphemously claims, “Jesus Christ is a criminal.” Such expressions significantly influence young Catholics, causing confusion and identity crises. Today's seminar on “*ichu aja*” (sacrifice) is a step in the right direction. The expositions, clarifications and discussions that will focus on this all-important theme will undoubtedly strengthen our readiness to confront the challenges we face in defending the core element of our faith. In addition, widening the horizon of our knowledge will surely go a long way in facilitating the huge task laid before us: to educate the faithful placed under our pastoral care, so that the wind of misleading doctrines or irrational fear does not sway them.

3. Religion and Sacrifice

Sacrifice has historically constituted a significant aspect of religious expression. It is a complex phenomenon that has pervaded the earliest forms of worship and continues to

maintain profound significance across diverse cultures and belief systems globally. At its essence, it represents a religious rite in which an object or action is offered to a divinity or supernatural power to establish, sustain, or restore an appropriate relationship between humanity and the sacred order. While the forms and intentions of sacrifice vary considerably, the fundamental principles of devotion, atonement, communion, and transformation remain central to its practice.

St. Thomas Aquinas notes that the Latin term for sacrifice, “*sacrificium*,” is derived from a combination of two words: “*sacer*” (meaning “holy”) and “*facere*” (meaning “to do” or “to make”). Consequently, a sacrifice is understood as a “*making-holy*.” This etymology underscores the fundamental notion of consecrating an offering to transcend the profane and enter the sacred realm.

Beyond Christianity, many scholars have offered different opinions on the origins and significance of sacrifice. Regardless of its precise origins, sacrifice invariably involves the offering, in some form, of life itself – whether literal or symbolic. It is seen as a celebration of life, a recognition of its divine source, and a means to regenerate the power of that source, establishing a bond between the sacrificer and the sacred.

Sacrifice may be bloody, involving the offering of animals, and in rarer or ancient instances, humans. In Judaism, before the destruction of the Second Temple, animal sacrifices (e.g., burnt offerings, sin offerings, peace offerings) were central to Israelite worship, serving various purposes including atonement, thanksgiving, and communion. The Passover sacrifice, commemorating the Exodus, is particularly significant. With the Temple’s destruction, prayer and ethical deeds largely replaced cultic animal sacrifice, though the memory of the sacrificial system is preserved in liturgy. The Israelites were not known to have indulged in human sacrifice. The story of Abraham’s attempted sacrifice of Isaac and God’s provision of a ram as an alternative portrays how God rejected human sacrifice.

In Christianity, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ are understood as the ultimate and perfect sacrifice. Through His self-offering, He became the Priest, Altar, and the Lamb of sacrifice (Easter Eucharistic Preface V). He is considered the “Lamb of God” whose sacrifice atoned for humanity’s sins, replacing the need for animal sacrifices. The Eucharist (Holy Communion or Mass) is seen as a ritualization, re-enactment, or sacramental representation of Christ’s sacrifice, a “sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving.” Those present experience the Calvary event as if they were there over two thousand years ago when Jesus Christ was crucified. The eternal effects of that singular salvific event are made present too to the celebrating community.

In many religions, by partaking of items offered to gods, individuals and communities establish a direct link with the divine, fostering a sense of unity. In the same way,

Christians who receive the Holy Communion, which is not just an item offered to the Almighty God, but God Himself, connect more intimately with the Lord, whose body and blood they eat and drink respectively.

Igbo Traditional Religion also practise animal sacrifice (*ichu aja*). This is well-documented by scholars, including Francis Cardinal Arinze, in his work “Sacrifice in Igbo Religion.” Arinze highlights the distinction between two senses of sacrifice: the everyday act of self-denial (popular sense) and the religious act of offering a victim to the divine (ritual sense). The ritual sense is seen as a way to establish contact or communion with the divine. He also notes a significant aspect of sacrifice in the traditional religion, which is the use of sacrifice to influence divine interest in human affairs. Arinze observed that, in the olden days, some sections of Igbo society also sacrificed humans to the gods, a practice, he says, was stopped at a certain point. Unfortunately, this has staged a comeback through the resurgence of neo-paganism.

In Islam, sacrifice (*Qurbani*) plays a key role during the annual celebration of *Eid al-Adha*. This practice involves the ritual slaughter of a prescribed animal (sheep, goat, camel, or cow) to honour Abraham’s sacrifice. The meat is distributed among family, friends, and those in need, representing a submission to God and a generosity of the community.

Certain sacrifices are non-blood offerings, which can include food items such as grains, fruits, vegetables, or cooked dishes; incense; libations, such as water, wine, or oil; and symbolic objects. In various cultures, the concept of sacrifice extends beyond physical gifts to encompass personal disciplines, such as relinquishing desires or dedicating oneself to a greater cause.

Sacrifices are made to appease gods, seek forgiveness for misdeeds, purify oneself, express gratitude, request blessings, or show reverence to a higher power without expecting anything in return. Many faiths also offer communion sacrifices, where ritual meals are shared with the divine, creating a sense of collective spirituality. Fertility sacrifices are common, including in Igbo Traditional Religion, aimed at enhancing fertility, ensuring the prosperity of new initiatives, or constructing sacred spaces. Additionally, for the deceased, sacrifices are performed to honour them, helping them on their journey in the afterlife or ensuring their peaceful transition.

Thus, sacrifices exist in different forms in different religions worldwide. Each sacrifice has a purpose for which it is offered, and it always concerns human connection with the sacred realm of existence.

4. A Living Sacrifice, Holy and Acceptable to God

Having examined the concept and practice of sacrifice in various religions, we can better appreciate St. Paul's exhortation to Christians to offer their bodies as "a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God." This exhortation serves as a call for them to commit themselves wholly and deeply to God, transcending mere rituals or external observances. Although in the Greco-Roman world, the body was often regarded as inferior and an obstacle to spiritual life, St. Paul's use of "bodies" here implies the whole person unreservedly – all we are and do. By urging them to present themselves as a "living sacrifice," St. Paul draws a sharp contrast with the animal sacrifices of the Old Testament, which focus solely on the death of the victim. "Living sacrifice," therefore, entails not a one-time event, but a continuous and ongoing dedication of our entire lives to God, encompassing our minds, bodies, emotions, talents, time, and resources. Every aspect of our being should be devoted to serving God's purpose.

St. Paul's labeling of the sacrifice as "holy" emphasizes our need to pursue moral and spiritual purity, aiming to live a life devoid of sin and in alignment with God's righteous standards. This indicates a commitment solely to God, rather than aligning with worldly patterns and values, enabling God to transform us internally and shape us further into the likeness of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour. These aspects ultimately render the offering pleasing to God, bestowing upon us His favour and blessing.

5. Conclusion

The concept of sacrifice, in its multifaceted forms, is a testament to humanity's enduring quest for meaning, connection, and harmony with the sacred. From ancient blood offerings to modern acts of selflessness, it reflects a deep-seated recognition of dependence on forces beyond human control and a profound desire to engage with the divine. While the literal practices have evolved over millennia, the underlying spiritual principles of devotion, surrender, and the yearning for a deeper relationship with the transcendent continue to shape religious understanding and human experience worldwide. Sacrifice remains a powerful reminder of the profound interplay between the material and the spiritual, as well as the enduring human impulse to give oneself for a higher purpose.

Once more, I wish you a fruitful deliberation. I pray that the proceedings of today lead to greater dedication to our ministry, enabling us to better assist our people in countering the wave of neo-paganism in our communities.

May the Holy Spirit enlighten our minds to assimilate the fruits of this seminar!

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