

“BECOME SLAVES OF RIGHTEOUSNESS” (Rom 6:18)

Homily of His Eminence, Peter Ebere Cardinal Okpaleke, at the Inauguration of the 2025/2026 Pastoral Year at St. Theresa Parish Isuofia on October 22, 2025

1. Preamble

As already mentioned at the beginning of Mass, today the Church celebrates the memorial of Pope St. John Paul II. Except for five members of our Presbyterium, most of us had our seminary formation and priestly ordination during his pontificate which lasted 27 years from October 16, 1978 to April 2, 2005. Pope John Paul II is a familiar face and a familiar name. He is someone we can relate with, both in his earthly life and now as a saint. He is both a source of hope and a challenge to all of us. Where we are today, he once was. Where he is today, we hope to be at the end of our lives. He is reminding us today that eternal salvation is the ultimate purpose of our lives, whatever our walk of life. As priests, we dedicate ourselves to supporting our brothers and sisters on the journey back to God. We pledge to serve them through the gift of our lives. We are here now inaugurating another year of service – the 2025/2026 Pastoral Year.

2. The 2025/2026 Pastoral Year

As we gather to inaugurate the 2025/2026 Pastoral Year, we come before the Lord with gratitude and at the same time with trepidation. Each time we do a time reckoning such as at the beginning of the Pastoral Year or at the beginning of the calendar year, this song often plays in my head:

Oh, I often sit and ponder, while the sun is sinking low,
where shall yonder future find me,
Does but God in heaven know?
Shall I be among the living?
Shall I mingle with the free?
Wheresoe'er my path be leading;
Saviour keep my heart with thee.

As we started the 2024/2025 Pastoral Year, three members of our presbyterium, Rev. Frs. Clement Onyemelukwe, Chukwuma Philip Ofojebe and Msgr. Jerome Madueke, were with us. Many individuals from our parishes and families set out on the journey with us. It has pleased the Lord call them to Himself. May they rest in peace! We pray God to grant all of us and those who lost loved ones the fortitude to bear the loss.

Some of us, members of our parish communities and/or families recovered from illnesses or were spared from harm. Please take a moment and remember those close to you who experienced divine healing and other favours. Say a short prayer of thanksgiving for them....

Some members of our presbyterium, our parishes and families, are still sick or labouring under certain difficulties. Take a moment and commend such to the loving care of God.

As a diocese, we have a lot to thank God for. We organized a Reunion of our Presbyterium as well as a luncheon to mark the fifth anniversary of the creation of our diocese. Although it is not our duty to score ourselves, I do not think that, as a diocese, we are doing badly on all fronts. There is still much room for improvement. For the good we have been able to do in our places of apostolate, we thank God and for our lapses, we ask for pardon. We also thank God for all those who are supporting the Church and her apostolate in the parishes and in the diocese, through their prayers, encouragement, financial contributions and social network. We pray God to bless all.

In a special way, I thank you my dear Msgri. Frs; Consecrated persons, leaders of the statutory bodies - Laity Council, C.M.O; C.W.O; C.Y.O.N; Mary League and animators of the H.C.A. Everything is not perfect and can never be perfect in this life. What is important is sincere effort. I can say that the effort of most of us is sincere. I feel the joy and the at-home-ness of most of us. I am always thrilled to learn that this priest or this lay faithful feels that the diocese belongs to him or her. Yes, the diocese belongs to you individually and to us all. We (all of us) are CADEK. I thank God for this.

3. Called to Become Slaves of Righteousness

In his providence, God has given us a key concept and vision to guide us in this pastoral year – “Slaves of Righteousness.” Strive to be a slave of righteousness – not a slave to “the disordered bodily desires, disordered desires of the eyes and pride in possession” (1 Jn 2:16). Do not be a slave to social media; a slave to pride, envy and jealousy, bitterness, a slave to your self-will. Remember what came up on our WhatsApp platform the other day about fiefdom. Do not attempt to build one! Your parish is not your fiefdom. We are all slaves. St. Paul tells us: “You are not your own property... you have been bought at a price” (1 Cor 6:20); “you belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God” (1 Cor 3:23); “you have been bought at a price; do not be slaves now to any human being” (1 Cor 7:23). So, let

us not be like the *okeokpa na-eme ka o bu ya nwe nnekwu*. Remember a slave is “*onye enwe enwe ji abali ago ofo*.” Yes, you can say “*parish m*,” “*school m*,” “*office m*,” “*family m*,” “*diocese m!*” etc. But none of these establishments belongs to you to play with as you like. In fact, unless you do not want things to turn out well, you are there to serve others. Parents are the servants of their children; they leave in the morning and come back late at night struggling to provide for the family. I know one man in the 80s when safari suit was in vogue. He had one of such suits. Being the only presentable article of clothing in his wardrobe, he had no option but to wear it at every outing. He only made sure that it was always clean and well ironed. One day, his friend commented that it seemed that he had many of such safari suits of the same colour. “Of course!” he mumbled under his breathe. He then went on to explain that he liked the first one made by his tailor and then commissioned him to make more of the same safari suit. How could he acknowledge that he had not been able to buy anything for himself while his two daughters have wardrobes full of fashionable things? *Dibunọ na-arahu ebe mmiri na-ehi na be ya*.

The above shows the truth of Jesus’ statement that the greatest in a group must be the servant of others (Matt 20:26, 23:12). The good thing and this is a paradox too, is that it is only when we submit to a higher principle of common good, love and truth; when we do not make ourselves and our whim and caprices the determinant of activities, that we attain peace and progress. This is the point of the contrastive image of the two servants in today’s Gospel. One of the servants was committed to his duties and carried them out despite the absence of the master. The other enthroned his ego. He did what he liked. In contrast to the second, the first, lived according to higher principles. I can imagine that even before the master showed up, both servants were already reaping the fruit of their labor. There would be peace, joy, love and laughter in the group with a responsible leader and wrangling, bitterness and enmity in the second. We are being invited at the beginning of the pastoral year, to strive to become slaves of righteousness; those committed not to our personal comfort, whim and caprices; but those who know that we are called to be servants of others in whatever situation we find ourselves – in the family, in the Church, in the statutory body, in the diocese, etc.

4. Priorities in the Pastoral Year

Before I remind you of the pastoral focus of our diocese in this pastoral year, let me call your attention to the spate of desecration of the Lord in the Eucharist in

our locality. I gave a directive about the Chapel of Perpetual Adoration in the second plenary Fathers' meeting of August 21, 2024. The address is titled: "I Bow my Knees to the Father of Jesus Christ, from whom all Fatherhood takes its Name." It is online. Please if you had not joined our Presbyterium then and/or do not remember what was said, go online to the diocesan website and read it up. Remember, as a priest, you are directly responsible for forestalling such sacrileges. We will not take it kindly with anyone who is found not to have done all in his power to ensure that such an embarrassment is not visited on our Eucharistic Lord.

The second issue I want to remind you of is children's ministry. We focused on children in the 2021-2022 Pastoral Year with the slogan "Catch them Young and Keep them for Christ." Parishes procured audio-visual aid for children's ministry. I wonder how many parishes have this ministry and still make use of the equipment acquired. I had asked the Deans to ensure that parishes are still carrying out this ministry. May I appeal to all parish priests to please sustain this ministry. The newly ordained or those who joined our presbyterium recently, can find on our diocesan website materials on this. **I have added inspection of the audio-visual aid for children ministry to my schedule for pastoral visits. I will also inquire from the children whether the audio-visual aid is still in use or not. I will be more inclined to believe the children.** May the Deans ensure that this ministry is ongoing in the parishes in their deaneries.

At the burial of Msgr. Jerome Madueke, I announced an extension of the Year for Men and Fathers by one pastoral year. At the second plenary Fathers' Meeting, I entrusted the planning of this celebration to the chaplains of the Laity Council and the C.M.O. Whatever events they will come up with for this celebration will only complement the dissemination of the insights in the Manual, the last major work of Msgr. Jerome, at the zonal and parish/chaplaincy levels. I challenge you all – priests, catechists, and leaders of the different statutory groups etc – to draw insight from the Manual for your homilies, seminars and reflections. Remember, the Year for Men and Fathers is not reserved for men and fathers. It is the whole diocesan family focusing and learning about the joys, the pains, the challenges of Men and Fathers to be able to support them to become the best versions of themselves.

In my address at the Second Plenary Meeting of the Presbyterium on September 3, 2025, I reminded the priests that "Documentation is an Essential Dimension of the Life of an Organization." I am extending the same idea to all here gathered.

Documentation is not only important in the Church. It is important in all organizations – *umunna*, *umuada*, village meeting, etc. Many of the challenges we face today in various kindreds, and communities arise from lack of documentation. Our forefather, for example, knew and respected a sharing formular or order of seniority. They knew and respected the boundaries of one another's property. They leased some of their parcels of land to other families almost always without any written documentation. At death, the lessee may decide to change the narrative to claim the land. He or she may tell the children that the land belonged to them or suppress the truth. If the original owners were to stake their claim for the property, then they run into claims and counter-claims each supported by "*papa gwara m*" (my father told me). This is irresolvable because there is nothing outside the claims, like a document, to base judgement on. So, I want you to be part of those who will forestall this challenge for future generation. Encourage the documentation of your family history and ensure that it is preserved in a form that is easily retrievable. Perfect the documents so that its authenticity will not be put in doubt. As it relates to our affairs in the Church, please keep record of events in the parish and let the Parish Pastoral Councils in consultation with the Diocesan Chancellor and Spero Law Office seek ways of formalizing the Deeds pertaining to the immovable diocesan good in the parish. Let this be our administrative focus for the year.

5. Conclusion

My dear brothers and Sisters, as we celebrate the Memorial of Pope St. John Paul II, let me remind ourselves of his papal motto: *Totus tuus*. Totally Yours. He gave all to Jesus through our Blessed Mother. May this acknowledgement that we are slaves of righteousness and this vision of giving all to God through our Blessed Mother Virgin Mary and St. Joseph guide us in our Pastoral endeavours in this year. May God, through our feeble efforts, draw people to Himself.

Peace be with you.