

“BLESSED ARE YOU WHO ARE POOR: THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS YOURS” (Lk 6:20)

“Ngozi na-adiri unu bu ndi ogbenye, n'ihina alaeze Chineke bu nke unu” (Lk. 6:20).



Lenten Pastoral Letter of His Eminence, Peter Ebere Cardinal Okpaleke to the Faithful of the Catholic Diocese of Ekwulobia and to all People of Goodwill.

1. Greetings

My dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ, I welcome you to the Lenten season of the Jubilee Year 2025, a year also dedicated, in the Catholic Diocese of Ekwulobia, to Men and Fathers. The Jubilee Year as well as the celebration of Men and Fathers add to the uniqueness of this holy season. In Lev. 25:13 the Israelites were instructed: “in this year of jubilee, each of you will return to his ancestral property.” To all of us, it is an invitation to return to our roots – God – “in whom we live, move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). It is a call to ongoing conversion. The Year of Men and Fathers is a journey being made by diocesan family with men and fathers in order to experience from within their shoes, the joys, the pains, the hopes and challenges of being men and fathers. One of those challenges faced by men and fathers, is how to define themselves especially in our contemporary Igbo society in which the popular measure of a man’s worth is the depth and weight of his pocket. This puts many, especially the young ones, under enormous pressure. The rising incidence of addiction and substance abuse – alcohol, marijuana, *mkpuru mmiri*, etc – may not be unconnected to this pressure. They may be unhealthy routes taken by many to escape from the pressure to succeed economically and the accompanying fear of failure. This, as well as the recent crusade against the glamorization of “wealth without sweat” (*ego mbute*) and the Jubilee Year’s invitation to trust God, lie behind my choice of theme for our Lenten meditation.

2. Poverty and Wealth

In what is called the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus addressed his disciples: “blessed are you who are poor: the Kingdom of God is yours” (Lk 6:20) - “**Ngozi na-adiri unu bu ndi ogbenye,**

n’ihina alaeze Chineke bụ nke ụnụ” (Lk. 6:20). I want us to use this verse as guide for a review of our attitudes and sentiments, as individuals and communities, towards poverty and wealth. What does Jesus mean by pronouncing the poor blessed? Does it mean that material poverty is the passport to the kingdom of God? When this is placed side by side with the saying that it will be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter into heaven (Matt 19:24, Mk 10:25, Lk 18:25), one may conclude that Jesus commends poverty and condemns wealth. This is not the case. We will come back to this.

What is clear is that contrary to Jesus’ commendation of poverty, the popular opinion celebrates wealth and sees poverty as a curse. The late Nigerian Highlife musician, Oliver Sunday Akanite, a.k.a Oliver de Coque, has a line in one of his tracks inviting all to reject poverty with the *uriọ* gesture: *onye ọbuna gbapụ uriọ, si ubiam gbafue, ubiam gbafue oo ka ụkpaka*. Another musician Oliver Nayoka, has a track titled, *ubiam ajoka* (poverty is evil). Other popular expressions such as “*ego bụ mma nwoke*” (wealth is the beauty of a man); “*onye nwee ego, o nwe ọmụ okwu, nwee ụmunna*” (if you are wealthy, you get a voice and are recognized in the community, if not, you are a nonentity), *onye nwee ego, ọ zaa aha nna ya,*” etc., reinforce the adulation of wealth and rejection of poverty. This is the root of the social pressure that weigh heavily on people.

It is important to recognize the cultural roots of this social pressure. When I travel to some parts of Nigeria, I marvel at the difference. Life is more laid back. The people are content with little and put up with some inconveniences which would not take much effort to remedy through self-help. It is,

therefore, important to recognize that the drive to succeed and distinguish oneself, which is common among *ndi Igbo*, is implicated in our reflection. This drive is good (Gen 1:28). Our challenge is to mitigate some negative consequences that arise therefrom due to new emphases brought about by socio-historical and cultural changes.

3. Socio-Historical and Cultural Development of the Drive to Succeed

The question about one’s attitude to wealth and poverty is neither abstract nor merely theoretical. It is about what drives one’s life and drives a culture. It is about the definition of success. This has an individual as well as a social component. Society offers a vision which is internalized by its individual members. By revising their views, individuals reshape societal beliefs.

Ndi Igbo have been known to celebrate success. *Nwata kwọchaa aka, o soro okenyi rie nri* (If a child cleans his or her hands, he or she joins the elders at table). This is an indication that there is no rigid social structure. Through dint of hard work and fortune, one could poll vault from the lowest rung in the social ladder (childhood) to the highest (the elderly). This is the source of the boundless energy of the Igbo and the quest for success which is recognized and rewarded through titles.

What is celebrated as success has changed over time as well as the relationship between the community and those accounted as successful. In days gone by, a successful yam farmer got crowned as *di ji*; a successful wrestler was celebrated as *dimgba*. In those days, the community was the

direct beneficiary of the activities at which people excelled. A farmer or hunter excelled by producing more food or providing more game for the community. Through titles of recognition, the community encouraged their efforts, ensured the redistribution of wealth through title taking and reined in through taboos and other purity requirements, the successful people. *Onye chie ọzọ, ọ sọba nsọ ndị ọzọ; onye nze nwere ihe ọ na-ezere.* For example, holders of such titles are expected to be vanguards of truth and morality.

This delicate balance of power between the successful individual and the community broke down over time. This was initiated by the slave trade and culminated in the integration of the Igbo into the global capitalist system. The breakdown entailed the redefinition of what constitutes success as well as the relationship between the successful and the community. The slave trade enabled the acquisition of new symbols of wealth and influence even if, negative influence. The story of Olaudah Equiano, the Igbo boy taken into slavery in 1754 when he was about 11 years old and who lived to write down his childhood recollections of life in his village, gives us an idea of how the change took place.

As described in the 18th century *Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa as Narrated by Himself, the Africa*, “nature is prodigal of her favours, our wants are few and easily supplied.”¹ He continued, “as we are unacquainted with idleness, we have no beggars.” Even then, there were challenges in Igboland. There were kidnappings

¹ <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/15399/15399-h/15399-h.htm> (accessed on January 30, 2025).

and wars which the writer pinned on the traders who brought European goods. According to Olaudah Equiano, “when a trader wants slaves, he applies to a chief for them, and tempts him with his wares. It is not extraordinary, if on this occasion he yields to the temptation with as little firmness, and accepts the price of his fellow creatures’ liberty with as little reluctance as the enlightened merchant.”

What Olaudah Equiano was describing was the early days of capitalist economy in Igboland. Money was not used as today. With the introduction of European goods – mirrors, guns, gunpowder, combs, necklaces, – the medium of exchange had to be something acceptable to the European merchants. Then, the Europeans needed manpower for the plantations. Thus, the valued commodity to be exchanged for the European goods was human beings. Raids were organized to capture slaves and wars instigated for the purpose of capturing human beings to be exchanged for European goods which included guns and other instruments of violence. The Igbo who acquired such instruments of violence consolidated their power at the expense of the community. They could force their will on the community. The result was the gradual reconfiguration of the relationship between the individual and the community.

This reconfiguration continued with the transition from slave trade to trade in palm produce till the emergence of the colonial and post-colonial State. The Nation State became the sovereign authority in any territory. Money as guaranteed by the different Central Banks became the medium of exchange. The result is the implication of the State and its apparatuses in wealth creation, distribution and retention. Capturing the state and its apparatuses, and no longer slaves, thus became the

gateway to stupendous wealth and coercive power. Another route to joining the elite club of powerbrokers is through the acquisition of economic power. This makes it possible for one to sponsor the politicians and thus become the godfather with full access to the state apparatuses. One of the glaring payoffs of such access is that one is shielded from the many everyday inconveniences and annoyances of the Nigerian society. One could ply the roads with siren-blaring-escort vehicles filled with security personnel who, in a “hold-up” either drive against traffic or come down to make the way for their principal. Such people were celebrated by Oliver de Coque as *ndi nwe obodo* in his track “*A na-enwe Obodo Enwe*”. The community is no longer the patron rather it has become the client or the private fiefdom of a few. In the light of the above, the attitude to poverty and wealth is not simply about having enough to eat and take care of one’s bills. It touches on issues of power, influence, security and dignity.

4. People are shaped by their Environment

As I was reflecting on this theme, I conducted a social experiment in an interactive session with children whose average age was about seven. I wanted to find out the vision of success being mediated to them by the society. I asked what they would want to become when they grew up. Many wanted to become doctors, nurses, priests and religious. Interestingly but sadly, none of those given the opportunity to respond mentioned service to others as reason for the career choice. Rather, it was about acquisition of wealth and respect. I probed further and asked why they desired to be rich. A ten-year-old boy gave an answer that first shocked me but then crystallized new insights. He answered: “wealth is the key to everything in life.” When asked to explain, he pointed out that

if you do not have money, you will not go to school or go to the hospital when you are sick or eat when you are hungry, etc. And he is right!

The young boy’s answer is a sad commentary on our socio-economic system as lacking in social security. In some countries, basic necessities are taken as common good and governments guarantee that all their citizens have access to them through different social programmes – unemployment benefits, health insurance, scholarships, social security at retirement, etc. The extended family used to provide this safety net. But things have changed drastically. This change can be traced to the economic downturn and to the unfounded narrative that cast a cloud of suspicion on any attempt to render assistance as disguised mystical way of stealing people’s destiny. Without any safety net, life is a struggle for survival. Wealth is perceived as key to this survival. The question about attitude to wealth and poverty is thus also about survival.

Be that as it may, what separates the young boy’s position and that of another teenager is only a thin line. The teenager, according to the report I received, voiced his readiness to join any criminal gang provided he would make money and be in the class of the rich. He would be ready to die after at least five years of ‘enjoying’ the wealth. For him, wealth acquisition is, thus, the supreme value for which, he was ready to sacrifice his life. Your guess is as good as mine regarding what value such a person would place on the life of others, if it will further his purpose. This is the sad situation we have found ourselves in. This shift from a perspective on wealth as means to better life to wealth being the goal of life and the

supreme value has dire consequences. It not only denominates everything as a commodity with a price tag but also legitimizes any activity based on the financial inflow therefrom, irrespective of the consequences. The shift manifests itself in a spectrum of actions. It is at the root of every corrupt practice and the breakdown of all social virtues. Presently, employing someone, even from one's family group, has become a great risk. If they do not have access to cash, they might steal materials and quickly bankrupt the venture.

The religious establishment is not exempt from the corrupting influence of this shift in mentality. Contrary to the prescriptions of St. James, (2:1-4), class distinction is made not just at fund raising events but even in the liturgy. What is worse is that religion is used to promote dubious ideas and practices about wealth creation. Of late, *oke ite* and *aweke* have been in the news as well as the rise in crime wave. All these relate to a lot of factors least of which is not the attitude to poverty and wealth in the changed circumstance of a capitalist economy without any safety nets and a socio-cultural environment in which financial wealth is the value and means of survival, influence, security, respect, dignity and power.

5. The Bible on Poverty and Wealth

The Bible is the story of God's relationship with humanity. Its focus is not on the proper attitude to poverty and wealth. But a recommended attitude can be discerned from the vision of life offered by the Bible. The delineation of this recommended biblical attitude however must take into consideration the development in history of God's revelation which culminated in Jesus Christ (Heb 1:1-3). It is therefore not enough to assemble proof texts where poverty or wealth is mentioned in

the Bible. Whatever text must be situated within its own context in the history of salvation and examined in the light of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, who is the fullness of God's revelation (Jn 1:18, 14:9), the "mediator and the sum total of divine revelation."² The eternal significance of Jesus' teaching notwithstanding, it has to be noted that the societal context of his life and teaching differ significantly from the present context. This calls for a committed effort at recontextualization. Finally, we have seen that in our contemporary context, issues about survival, power, influence and security shape people's attitude to poverty and wealth. The biblical views on these, as much as possible, would also be taken into consideration.

In the Jewish culture, as in the Igbo culture, wealth is seen as evidence of right relationship with God. For the Igbo, when there is a disruption of a life of abundance – health, wealth, fertility and longevity – there is the usual affirmation *na o gbaghi aka*. Negative experiences are taken as omen of disruption in the relationship with the spirit world. We see a similar outlook in the book of Deuteronomy 28. Blessings and curses are predicated on covenant faithfulness or lack thereof. This view guided the documentation of history in the books of Samuel and Kings. In these books, one often reads that God punished the Israelites with famine, defeat in war because of their infidelity to the covenant. Put simply, the expectation was that all things being equal, there should be abundance of wealth and integral human wellbeing. The stupendous wealth of King Solomon was accounted as divine blessing. In sum,

² Vatican II Council, Dogmatic Constitution on Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, no 2

wealth is positively valued. Nevertheless, wealth and life of abundance are presented as by-products of obedience to God. Such obedience is thus of a higher value. It is what guarantees wealth and a life of abundance. We see this deepened understanding in Prov. 30:7-9. This is a prayer. “Two things I beg of you, do not grudge me them before I die: keep falsehood and lies far from me, give me neither poverty nor riches, grant me only my share of food, for fear that, surrounded by plenty, I should fall away and say, ‘Yahweh – who is Yahweh?’ or else, in destitution, take to stealing and profane the name of my God.”

The centrality of covenant obedience and the primacy of relationship with Yahweh are sustained in the New Testament. The temptations of Jesus revolve around them (Matt 4:1-10). They were about relationship to self, power, wealth and influence. In the first temptation, Jesus was very hungry. He stood in for all in situations of material need and destitution. The temptation was to use what he had (extraordinary divine powers) to address his biological need. He overcame the temptation by affirming the primacy of God and God’s word. In the second temptation, Jesus refused to be a wonder worker and rejected the presumptuous identification of the human will and wants with the divine will. Instead, he affirmed the authority of the Father and his subservience to His will. Finally, to the promise of receiving power and worldly splendour, Jesus invoked the primacy of God. Only God deserves worship. God is the supreme value.

As said above, the outlook of the New Testament is in continuity with that of the Old Testament. But there are three related and fundamental shifts that crystallized out in some

layers of the Old Testament tradition and became central in the New Testament. First is the development of the notion of the Kingdom of God as a realm of existence that penetrates the earthly realm but transcends it. In the well-known passage of Jn 14:1-3, Jesus invited his followers not to let their hearts be troubled because he was going to prepare a place for them and shall return to take them. This belief in a glorious afterlife was not there in all the books of the Old Testament. In some layers of the Old Testament tradition, the afterlife was conceived as a shadowy existence in Sheol. We see this in the case of Hezekiah. Celebrating his recovery from sickness, the King sang: “for Sheol cannot praise you, nor Death celebrate you; those who go down to the pit can hope no longer in your constancy” (Is 38:18). The gloom and doom of Sheol is painted more graphically in the satire against the King of Babylon. The King was depicted, in death and in Sheol, as lying on a mattress of maggot with a blanket of worms over him (Is 14:11). It is no wonder then that in portions of the Old Testament where the vision of a glorious afterlife was absent, earthly life was the theatre for the reward of righteous living as well as punishment for unrighteous living (Deut. 28). There were no other options. But when a robust vision of an afterlife with, or without God, emerged (Wis 3:1-9) the locus and focus of divine reckoning shifted to eternal happiness or punishment. In the book of Daniel (12:2-3), one reads “of those who are sleeping in the Land of Dust, many will awaken, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting disgrace.” Put simply, in some layers of the Biblical tradition, wealth and abundance of earthly life ceased to be evidence of divine blessing.

The second related shift is that earthly wellbeing no longer served as direct evidence of divine blessing and vice versa. Hope in a better life with God moved people to voluntarily give up their earthly life. This is depicted in the story of the martyrdom of the seven brothers in the Second Book of Maccabees (7:1-23). One of the brothers said: “you may discharge us from this present life, but the King of the world will raise us up, since we die for his laws, to live again for ever” (2 Mac 7:9). In other words, suffering in the present life no longer indicated a misaligned relationship with the divine. Similarly, prosperity and other earthly successes ceased from being unqualified signs of divine approval. The Psalmist spoke of the “prosperity of the wicked” (Ps 73:3). Conversely, the righteous could be led in line with God’s will through the valley of darkness (Ps 23:4, Sir 4:16-19). What is required is trusting and obeying God, and persevering in doing the good.

In sum, the biblical perspective on wealth and poverty cannot be built on a strand of the tradition. This is what has been done by those who preach prosperity, abundance of earthly life, as God’s will for the righteous. They isolate this strand and presume to know the mind of God.

6. Jubilee Year and the Call to Trust

Among other things, the Jubilee Year is a celebration of God’s providential care and an invitation to trust and abandon oneself into God’s hands. On the Jubilee Year, the Israelites were commanded not to sow or harvest (Lev 25:11). How would they feed? You may ask. They are to trust God who promised “to order my blessing to be on you in the sixth year, which will yield you enough produce for three years. You will have the old produce to eat while you are sowing in the eighth

year, and even in the ninth year, you will be eating the old produce, while waiting for the harvest of that year” (Lev. 25:22).

In Psalm (128:2), we read that human beings eat by the labour of their hands. In the Jubilee Year, however, there should be no sowing or reaping. In other words, there should be a cessation of all economic activities. This is to show that people do not eat only by the labour of their hands. Human labour is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for whatever outcome that emerges. Unless the Lord builds a house, in vain do its builders labour (Ps 127:1). God is always involved even in the most mundane of human activities.

By prescribing the suspension of economic activities for one year, the Jubilee Year symbolically underlines God’s role in human life and history. Ordinarily, no one pays attention to the respiratory process unless and until something happens to make inhalation and exhalation difficult. The Jubilee Year is an interruption meant to highlight God’s involvement in all human activities. It is a call to trust God who could give abundance and who could also choose to remain silent in the face of our deprivations and needs. This calls to mind the ordeal of Job and his attitude of total surrender into God’s care. Amid his afflictions, Job was guided by this truth which he formulated as a question: “if we take happiness from God’s hand, must we not take sorrow too?” (Job 2:10).

The theme of the Jubilee Year 2025 is Pilgrims of Hope. We are invited to reflect upon who we are as Christians. One aspect presented to us for our meditation is that we are pilgrims of hope. As pilgrims, we are on a journey – not only

as individuals but also as communities. The journey of life is full of contingencies. There is no guarantee that things will turn out as wished for or expected. The best preparation is resilience. As Christians, we are graced with faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, who has overcome the world (Jn 16:33). We share in his victory and can confidently face any challenge aware that we are more than conquerors in him who loves us (Rom 8:37). In whatever circumstance we find ourselves, we are challenged to exclaim, with Job, , “I know that my redeemer lives” (Jon 19:25) because for those who love God everything works unto good (Rom 8:28). This includes their poverty.

7. “Blessed are you who are Poor, the Kingdom of God is Yours” (Lk 6:20)

Poverty is a relative term. This is the central message of the American singer, Dolly Parton, in *Coat of Many Colours*, which is a true story from her childhood. Her family had no money to buy her a coat and it was getting cold. Then the family received a box of rags of different colours. Her *momma* stitched the rags together and made a coat for her. She was so proud of the coat. But in school, the other children laughed at her. She could not understand them because she was so proud of the coat made by her *momma* with so much love. She also tried to explain to the other children how invaluable the coat was to her. They, in turn did not understand. Then in hindsight, Parton saw that “one is only poor; only if they choose to be. Now I know we had no money; but I was rich as I could be.” Poverty is therefore not simply about lacking money or the good things of life. It is also about one’s attitude. For Parton, the love with which *momma* made the coat of many colours gave it a value far beyond the economic and the aesthetic. We

have thus two value systems. This brings to my mind the line in a popular devotional song, *onye nwere Jesus nwere ihe, o nwere ihe niine kacha mma* (one who has Jesus has the best of everything). This is an Igbo rendition of the famous saying of St. Teresa of Avila – He who has God has everything; he who has everything and not God has nothing).

Let us come back to the passage in St. Luke’s gospel. Read in isolation, this passage gives the impression that St. Luke pronounced a social class – the poor – as blessed. The impression changes if we consider the first audience of this sermon – the disciples – among whom were the materially poor and the rich. We deduce that some in his audience were rich because he not only pronounced woes on them (Lk 6:24) but went on to recommend love, compassion and generosity for all and to all. “Give to everyone who asks you, and do not ask for your property back from someone who takes it” (Lk 6:30). It is also important to note that not only the poor were pronounced blessed but also the hungry, those who are weeping, those hated, driven out, abused and denounced as criminals on account of Jesus. This shows that Jesus’ words were meant as a challenge to all his disciples. They were called to develop an attitude to life that values above all else, the kingdom of God being experienced in Jesus Christ (Lk 17:21). To say the same thing in the language of St. John, Jesus challenged those who have declared for him to enter that eternal life which is growing in intimacy with God and Jesus whom God sent (Jn17:3). Such relationship demands and makes possible a life of love, forgiveness, compassion and generosity towards others.

In sum, the invitation from Jesus to his disciples – all of us – in the beatitude is for a greater appreciation of and commitment to the values of the Kingdom of God. *Onye nwere Jesus nwere ihe niine kacha mma*. It is by this recognition of the supreme value of an intimate relationship with Jesus, commitment to the Kingdom of God and the attitude that these engender, that one would be able to go through the turbulence of life without one's heart being troubled (Jn 14:1). God never promised us a trouble-free life. He is with us in the boats of our lives. It may seem that he is asleep on the stern as we are tossed about in the sea of life. But God is there (Mk 4:37-38). Even if, it pleases God to allow the boat of our life to capsize and for us to drown in the sea of earthly life, we are sure *na onye nwere Jesus nwere ihe niine kacha mma* – having Jesus is the supreme value. Adapting Psalm 20:7, we can say, some trust in their chariots and horses, in their wealth and their connections to the high and mighty in society, but we trust in the God, who through Jesus Christ has offered us his abiding presence (Jn 15:5).

8. Conclusion

As we come to the end of our reflection, I invite you, my dear brothers and sisters, to reaffirm your trust in God. Times are very tough. Many families find it hard to feed. Yet, a few people, some with unknown sources of wealth, assault the sensitivity of others through their conspicuous consumption and display of power and influence. Remember the counsel of Ps 49:16, that none of these have eternal value. Do not grow bitter or resentful. Rather, manifest your trust in God by your attitude of love, compassion and generosity. *Onye nwere Jesus nwere ihe niine kacha mma*. The Church was the safety net for the people before governments in the so-called developed

nations woke up to that responsibility. In our own land, the communal way of life provided this safety net. But this is breaking down very fast. The vacuous idea that people can steal the destiny of others through gifts offered to them, has become a disincentive to offer support to others. This notwithstanding, all are called to embody and manifest the generosity of God. Almsgiving emphasized during this holy season is to remind us of what should be our trademark as Christians.

To men and fathers who feel crushed under the weight of the social pressure and expectation that wealth is the highest good, may you dump this unnecessary load now. Say with Jesus, get behind me Satan for this is depraved human thought (Mk 8:33). God is the highest good. *Onye nwere Jesus nwere ihe niine kacha mma*. It is when our hearts are anchored on Jesus and the values he represents – love, truth, justice, peace – that our society will be healed and trust restored between human beings. Idolizing wealth, that is, making the acquisition of wealth the highest value, subverts all values. It dethrones the social virtues – honesty, hard work, accountability, etc., to positions of less importance. Yet, it is these social virtues that enhance healthy societal living and success in life. Thus, this idolization is the root cause of the crises in the *igba boi* apprentice system and other wealth creation and redistribution schemes. Any business or cottage industry, which by creating employment lifts people out of poverty, is likely to fail unless the owner is personally involved and ready for a running battle, especially with some employees, who often focus on appropriating resources of the establishment instead of building it up and ensuring the flow of their income. Thus, we have a vicious cycle. Idolizing wealth acquisition, in the long

run, makes everyone poorer – the entrepreneur who would have invested and reaped return on his or her investment and the *boi* or worker who would have from the seed money of his ‘settlement’ started off in life or from his remuneration given his or her children a better education for a firmer foothold in life. Examples can be multiplied. There is, therefore, need for reorientation of values. This is what I am inviting us to do, in this letter.

To all, especially the young, I recommend that our Lenten fast should be fasting from our phones and social media. This is not only about reducing screen time but also, and more importantly, taking back our power. Social media is a powerful tool being used to hijack people’s minds. In this media format, the distinction between fact and fiction is blurred. Social media contents are therefore consumed with the critical filters disabled. People exploit this. *Onye amaghị ihe a na-eme, e were ya mee ihe a na-eme*. With the help of technology (deepfake, voice-over, etc), people package reality, a make-believe, or fake news and circulate to market themselves, an idea or vision. One of the dominant string of themes is that poverty is a curse to be escaped at all costs, even at the cost of one’s life. The converse is that wealth is the way to salvation. This is a lie from the pit of hell. Salvation is from Jesus Christ. Indeed, it is by embracing the salvation won by Jesus that we can share in his victory over self and have the right hierarchy of values that can re-engineer sustainable wealth creation and distribution in Igboland. Our cover picture says it all. St. Martin of Tours cut his cloak and shared it with a beggar on a cold day. In the night, he dreamt that Jesus was clothed with that half of his cloak. In the morning, his cloak was fully restored. This reminds us that what we do to the least

of our brothers is done to Jesus (Matt 25:40). It is only when we become sensitive to the impact of our actions on others by making the support and empowerment of the least among us the yardstick of measurement, that we can restore the social virtues – honesty, hardwork, accountability, trustworthiness, etc. These social virtues are pointers to a healthy attitude to poverty and wealth – being poor in spirit (Matt 5:3). And, once these social virtues are in place, the drive for excellence that the Igbo are known for, will shine out more brightly in other areas not directly connected with money making. This drive will also operate more efficiently for the benefit of all.

In the holy season of Lent, as we prepare for the event of our salvation in Jesus Christ, who in obedience to the Father and love of humanity gave his life on the cross, may we pray for the graces we need as individuals and communities to follow in his footsteps and share in his victory.

Peace be with you!

+ Peter Ebere Cardinal Okpaleke
Bishop of Ekwulobia

Given at the Chancery, Catholic Diocese of Ekwulobia on February 22, 2025, on the Feast of the Chair of St. Peter the Apostle.