

“BE NOT AFRAID!” Matt 10:31

Homily of His Eminence, Peter Ebere Cardinal Okpaleke on the 12th Sunday of Year A, June 21, 2026 to the African Community of Holy Name Catholic Church, Nashville, Tennessee

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. Preamble

I am glad to visit your community again. I shared the Eucharist with you on June 18, 2023. That was three years and three days ago. We thank God, who has kept us alive, and pray for the happy repose of those who were here on that occasion but are now, hopefully with God. May they rest in peace – Amen.

I thank Bishop Mark Spalding for the permission to celebrate with you. I shared some wonderful time with him on Friday. I thank your pastor, Rev. Fr. Theo for his ministry and his sacrifices. I thank all of you for the faith we share.

We thank God for all the Fathers – biological and spiritual – as we celebrate Father’s Sunday. We pray God to help us become fathers after the mind of Christ. We also pray for our different nations in Africa and for the return of peace and security of life and property in regions of the world facing violent conflicts. I remember in a special way the prayer request of a boy of about 9 in New York, for peace in his homeland.

2. “Do not Be Afraid”

The Gospel today tells us what to fear, on the one hand, and what not to fear, on the other hand. It also gives us reasons why we should fear what it presents as worthy of fear and why we should not fear what it says we should not fear. On a deeper level, however, the consoling message of the Gospel is that we are not alone. God is with us. We are infinitely loved by God and are of incalculable value. God directs the world and its history. That is why we should not fear, be worried or allow ourselves to be intimidated by the seeming dominance of evil.

3. My Fears for our Continent

It sounds contradictory that the Gospel is telling us today about not being afraid and I am expressing my fears for our continent. I am afraid because there are some trends in the continent which make it hard for people to trust God and His love and banish fear in their lives.

The first trend, and the only one I will consider because of time, is the emphasis of Popular Christianity, the image of God and the vision of the world which it promotes. What I have called Popular Christianity is a wave in Pentecostalism. I call it Popular Christianity because it has permeated the mainline Churches – Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, etc. What marks it out is the emphasis of its teaching. In this brand of Christianity, life and history are not seen as directed by God. Rather, history is seen as shaped by the struggle between good and evil forces. When people suffer ill health, business setback, a car crash, infertility or a breakdown in marital relationships etc., it is attributed to the interference of evil spirits – witchcraft or what they call African magic. The remedy is to mobilize a higher force to intervene, dislodge and disarm the enemy forces.

The prescribed way of waging this war is through prayer. Where the problem persists, recourse is made to so-called “power-full” man or woman of God, who presumably, can command God to perform a miracle. Technology has made things easy. These so-called ‘power-full’ men and women of God do not need to have television stations, as was the case in the past, to gain a worldwide reach. Now, they maintain a YouTube channel and people follow their programmes from all over the world. Online participation in the programmes is valid. They pray for all. However, if the problem persists, one is invited to attend the crusade physically. I heard a story of a lady, who without the consent of her husband, traveled back to Africa from here, to meet the “man of God” for prayers about her family. Of course, when she came back, the family problem compounded.

What is dangerous in this form of spirituality is that it presumes to know the mind of God. It fails to maintain the reverential fear that the Gospel insists we must have – “fear for the one who can destroy both soul and body in Gehenna.” This reverential fear invites us to recognize that God is qualitatively different from us. God is God, and human beings are human beings. God is almighty. God is the creator, and we are creatures. God’s ways are not our ways, and God’s thoughts are not our thoughts (Is 55:8). God is the lord of history and providentially guides everything according to His purpose.

One area where it is hard for many of us Africans to accept that God providentially directs history is with regard to the mystery of pain and suffering. This is because of the influence of the primal African worldview which has been influenced by modernity. As human beings, we know that one learns more through suffering, deprivation and adversity. In Igbo, we say, *onye ataghị ahụhụ anaghị ama ihe* (wisdom is gained through suffering), *nwa nna ya huru n'anya ka o na-abara mba* (parents discipline the child they love). Yet in our relationship with God, proponents of popular religiosity try to convince people that every suffering, every deprivation, every adversity comes from the evil one and could never have any positive value. People believe them despite the explicit statement of Jesus that anyone who wants to be a follower of His must deny himself or herself and take up his or her cross (Matt 16:24).

Letter to the Hebrews 5: 7-9 reminds us that “Although He (Jesus Christ) was Son, he learnt to obey through suffering: but having been made perfect, he became for all who obey him the source of eternal salvation”.

The evangelist Luke emphasized that “We must all experience many hardships before we enter the kingdom of God – **Anyi niile aghaghị ita ahụhụ tupu anyị abanye n’Alaeze Chineke**” (Acts 14: 22).

The Apostle James (James 1: 2 – 4) exhorts us in the following words: "My brothers, reckon it all joy whenever you become involved in all kinds of testings, for you are well aware that the testing of your faith produces unswerving constancy. And let constancy go on to work out its perfect work that you may become perfect and complete, deficient in nothing."

It is true that Jesus tells us to ask that we shall receive, to seek that we shall find and to knock that it shall be open to us (Matt 7:7-8), in the Garden of Gethsemane, he asked that the cup may pass him by. But he resigned himself to the will of the Father and prayed, “**not my will but yours be done**” (Lk 22:48). It is this resignation to the divine will, this self-abandonment into the hands of God, especially in adversity, and a deployment of human creativity to make the situation better, that popular religiosity destroys by teaching that suffering, pain and

adversity is never from God but from the evil one. Remedy is to cast and bind the offending evil spirits through the power of God.

Back home, one often hears this statement, “suffering is not my portion.” Since such suffering has its origin in the kingdom of the evil spirits, one must live in fear of an “attack” (and that is the exact word used) from these evil spirits and their human agents. A fainting spell, a headache, a stomach upset, or the screeching of an insect at night is interpreted as an “attack,” against which the Holy Ghost is launched, as if a missile, in loud shouts of “Holy Ghooooost – Fire!!!” As you can see, instead of banishing fear, this brand of Christianity fosters it.

It is in the interest of the so-called power-full men and women of God to keep people in this fear since it brings them clients. Curiously too, the entertainment industry – Nollywood, for example – is interested in story-lines that reflect people’s sensitivities. This ensures a ready market for their product. With Artificial Intelligence, they can easily add cinematographic effects that imaginatively portray reality as a battlefield in which objects are made to disappear and materialize at a word of command. Let us not forget that many people do not distinguish between reality and works of imagination from the entertainment industry. One prominent actor back home was almost prevented from receiving Holy Communion by an Usher or Church warden, who presumed that he could not be a Catholic, because he usually played roles of a chief priest of the ancestral religion in Nollywood films.

As has been seen, popular Christianity with the support of Nollywood, presents the world as a dangerous place where evil spirits arbitrarily interfere with nature. A car crash is said to be “sent” by an envious uncle or aunt. Nothing is said about the road-worthiness of the vehicle, the state of mind of the driver, the condition of the road, etc. With this mindset, fortifying oneself spiritually take centre-stage. This may be why people spend so much time in spiritual exercises – vigils, fasting, etc. – without seeing any connection between the challenges they face and their actions and omissions both as individuals and communities.

4. Rediscovering the God of Love and Lord of History

Dear brothers and sisters, as you can see, popular Christianity is not about building up a personal and loving relationship with God. It is about securing a powerful ally in the fight against evil spirits. All the spiritual exercises – prayers, fasting, charity, etc. – are often geared towards servicing this alliance. They are not efforts to become intimate with God by being transformed by the love of God and spreading this love in the world. It is true that all over the world, Christians do not always live out what they profess. But the popular Christianity described above legitimizes such a dichotomy. God is seen as an impersonal force that can be mobilized through gestures and ritual activities. Religiosity is about servicing the “Iron Dome” to defend oneself against the missiles from the evil spirits. One could be doing this without being transformed into a loving person. This is why our people’s lives are compartmentalized. People step into the Church as if in one compartment. They participate in all the rituals, they sing, dance, and pray. Thereafter, they close the door and enter another compartment for everyday life. Here, life is about survival. People will subvert the law, embezzle public funds, hijack public institutions to weaken and make these institutions serve their needs, mobilize primordial ethnic sentiments to get what they want, adulterate products for personal gain. The list is endless.

Indeed, it has become difficult to be upright and do what is right in some societies in Africa. I know of a civil servant who was persecuted by fellow Christians because he was not comfortable extorting money from those he was supposed to serve. His colleagues felt he was blocking their way, and they fought him with false allegations. This was exactly the situation of Jeremiah. When he was called as a prophet, he became God’s mouthpiece. His former friends not only deserted him, but they also actively plotted for his downfall. Jeremiah withstood them because, as he proclaimed, “**the Lord is with me** as a mighty champion.” He knew that the opposition he faced was from fellow human beings. He did not see them as agents of evil spirits. He knew that they opposed him because his way of life challenged theirs. He remained steadfast because he knew that God was with him. God is not an external force to be mobilized to fight one’s wars. God is with us and fights with us to bring about the good. God loves us and wants us to share that love with others, despite opposition. This is the way to

break down the compartments talked about above and rediscover the God of love, who is also, Lord of history.

5. Emmanuel – God is with Us. We are Never Alone

At Christmas, we celebrate that God is with Us – Emmanuel. At the end of the earthly life of God, who took human form and was born of the Blessed Virgin Mary, he promised to remain with the Church and with us, till the end of time (Matt 28:20). This awareness is supposed to guide our everyday life. God is with us: “In God we live, in God we move, in God we have our being.” This is how St. Paul presents our relationship with God (Acts 17:28). Through the prophet Isaiah, (49:16), God tells us: “Look, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands!” God is our loving Father. He is with us always. We are never alone. We are invited to rediscover and develop a childlike trust in God.

God can allow hardship, suffering, adversity to befall his children. In such situations, we may be tempted to despair, to grow bitter or to focus on our inadequacies. Though He may seem to be silent at such times, He cares deeply about us. In times when things do not work out as expected and we are tempted to allow fear and despair to take hold in our lives, remember the profound statement of faith made by St. Paul: “we know that in all things, God works for the good of those who love him” (Rom 8:28).

6. Jesus is with Us in the Boats of our Lives - Conclusion

Let me end this reflection with the story of Jesus and his disciples (Matthew 8:23-27 ; Mark 4:35-41). They were crossing the Sea of Galilee when they met a violent storm. Jesus was in the boat but asleep on the stern. The disciples were afraid and woke him up with these words: “Do you not care? We are perishing.” Jesus rebuked the wind, and the sea became calm again. We are often like the disciples. We have Jesus in the boats of our lives. In the face of difficulties, we react with fear. Today, we are invited to be aware of Jesus’ presence, always, even when he seems to be sleeping.

In the face of any tribulation, let us learn from St. Paul in Colossians 1:24. He said, “I am happy to suffer because in my body, I am

completing whatever remains of Christ's suffering for His Body the Church." No suffering is meaningless or empty except those not offered up to God. Let us go back to the ancient practice of the Church, let us see the suffering and adversity, God allows to befall us, as part of the divine purpose; let us offer them up to God by striving to change what we can, and accepting what we cannot. In this way, we work out our salvation and grow in intimacy with God.

May the awareness of God's presence, His love and care bring us peace, joy, and security. May it help us to understand the challenges facing our people and do all in our power, by His Grace, to contribute to positive change. Peace be with you!