



“AND THE WORD BECAME FLESH AND DWELT AMONG US” Jn 1:14

2024 Christmas Message of His Eminence Peter Ebere Cardinal Okpaleke to the Faithful of the Catholic Diocese of Ekwulobia and all Men and Women of Good Will

My dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The cool, dry, and hazy ambience created by the harmattan season, the carols and the decorations, remind all that something special is on the horizon. Christmas is here! The season of glad songs has come (Songs 2:8). However, people are hurting badly. There is hunger in the land. A child innocently confided in another child that he gets something to eat once a day. Most parents had adjusted to this formula long ago, choosing to skip meals so that their children would eat. Many can no longer shield their children from the harsh reality. What a pain! The desperation in the land has shown itself in the cases of stampede and the heavy loss of lives at Ibadan, Abuja, Okija in separate events organized to distribute foodstuff to the people.

Food insecurity, made manifest in hunger, is compounded by the problem of insecurity to life. The misfortune of an encounter with gunmen can lead to instant death. The encounter with kidnappers always leaves in its trail unspeakable trauma for the victim and family. It may even end in death. Strangely too, other actors cause slow and painful death while remaining anonymous. These include those who embezzle public funds and thus fail to provide needed services; those who adulterate, especially edible products; and those who sell and use sub-standard parts to repair vehicles and thus expose road users to dangers. There are many other examples of criminal activities through which people make money at the expense of people's lives.

What can Christmas mean in a context like ours? What aspect of the meaning of the mystery of the birth of our Savior can address the darkness that is at the root of these challenges? As we raise these questions, let us remember that even at the first Christmas, Mary and Joseph lived in a world facing its own challenges. It is, indeed, because of, and not despite these challenges, that the Word became Flesh and dwelt among us (Jn 1:14), to lead us to the fullness of the truth about who we really are. Such would hopefully impact the way we see ourselves and act towards ourselves and others.

At Christmas, we celebrate that Jesus, the eternal Word of God, the one who has been with God from the beginning (Jn 1:1) in whom, through whom and for whom all things visible and invisible were created in heaven and on earth, (Col 1:16), at the fullness of time took flesh and was born of a woman (Gal 4:4). We celebrate the mind-blowing event of God's

love for and solidarity with humanity. God, the author of time, became part of time; God pitched His tent with human beings in fulfillment of the prophecy made long ago, Emmanuel – God is with us (Is 7:14, Matt 1:23). God dwelt among us so that we can dwell in God. Jesus is the vine and we are the branches (Jn 15:5). The life of God flows in and through each and everyone of us, notwithstanding our unworthiness, beckoning on us to appropriate this life of grace. Thus, by his coming at Christmas, Jesus elevated our status. He took our human nature at the incarnation so that we can become partakers of the divine nature (2 Pet 1:4). In a deeper sense, he has made us, ‘other Christs’ so much so that whatsoever we do to one another, especially to the least of us, is done to him (Matt 25:40).

In the light of the above, the event of Christmas calls us to go beyond appreciating the inviolable dignity of every human person to actively fostering this dignity in ourselves and in others. An incentive is given to help us transcend to this level of being and operation. Whatsoever we do to each other, whether good or bad, is done to Jesus, whose birth we commemorate. Our everyday activities have immediate eternal significance. Would that the roadside food vendor has this constantly in mind and allow this vision to shape decisions regarding what and how to provide his or her services! Would that the auto-mechanic undertake vehicle repair with the awareness that this is a service to the Lord! Would that public servants see themselves as serving Jesus in the people! Of course, such a consciousness would transform each person and all persons and lead to the renewal of individual and social relationships. It would also make insecurity and hunger/poverty things of the past. This is because, as recognized by our people, *mmadu bu njo ana* – the problems that bedevil our society arise from human selfishness, greed and inordinate quest for power. This is the root of the hardship, helplessness and hopelessness in our land. God gives us enough for our needs even if not for our greed.

At one level, hunger is the result of failure in the systems of production and distribution of goods and services. This is the perspective of political economy. At a deeper level, however, hunger is the outcome of the guiding spirit behind the system of production and distribution. Christmas engages this and all such guiding spirits. Christmas projects divine love and invites one and all to allow themselves to be touched by this tender divine gesture. God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten son (Jn 3:16) and greater love than this no man has than to lay down his life for his friends (Jn 15:13). God who took flesh and was born of the Virgin also gave His flesh as the bread of life. Jesus invites all to come to him. This invitation is with a promise that “no one who comes to me will ever hunger; no one who believes in me will ever thirst” (Jn 6:35). Like the woman at Jacob’s well (Jn 4:15), many will ask to be given this bread so that they do not have to go out daily and work. But Jesus speaks of a spiritual reality; the yawning hole in people’s hearts, the hunger or thirst, which fuels selfishness, greed, and quest for power. He invites us to come so that he fills this hole. This hole needs to be filled. This is because, unless and until this is done, no appreciable progress can be made in addressing the issues of

political economy; we may complain about the greed, the selfishness and power drunkenness of others, only to do worse things at the slightest opportunity.

Jesus fed the hungry crowd as a prelude to his teaching on the Eucharist. But he needed the donation from the young boy of his lunch pack of five small loaves and two fish. In this miracle, he taught us that God needs our creativity, hard work and discipline; our honest and generous contributions of time and talent for the good of others. God multiplies these, and that way, helps humanity put food on the table. Yet Jesus was quite aware that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord (Matt 4:4, Deut 8:3). He, therefore, moved the discourse from earthly food to the Eucharist, the bread, which is the flesh of the Son of Man that gives eternal life to those who believe in him. Belief in him, entails allowing the Word of God to take flesh and be born in our hearts and minds. This is precisely what the Christmas celebration constantly invites to do: allow the Word of God to be born in our hearts and minds and let ourselves be directed by God who dwells within us. The more this is achieved, the more transformed we become, and the more the light and peace of Jesus, the newborn king of the universe, will shine and reshape everything for good.

As we continue to pray for the repose, especially of those who died in the various incidents of stampede in recent times, may we let the newborn king of the universe and prince of peace, into our lives so that we can, one and all, be transformed for good. Happy Christmas and may you be safe as you celebrate.

✠ *Peter Ebere Cardinal Okpaleke*

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