



“ONYE BỊA MMADỤ NSO, Ọ NỤ ISI EZE YA”

**(IT IS ONLY BY COMING CLOSE TO PEOPLE THAT WE CAN KNOW THEM WELL)
MESSAGE OF HIS LORDSHIP, MOST REV PETER EBERE OKPALEKE, ON THE 55TH
WORLD COMMUNICATIONS DAY CELEBRATION, MAY 16, 2021**

Rev. and dear Msgri., Frs., Bros., Srs., and my dear People of God.

Today is the 55th World Communications Day. In an inspired move, Pope St. Paul VI in 1967 instituted this day to encourage reflection on the opportunities and challenges of the modern means of communication. In those days, in Africa, only the radio and the print media were the means of mass communication. Today, almost every home has a television set; almost every adult has a mobile phone and a large proportion of these have online presence and activities. What a leap! In the 1970s, television houses opened and closed at definite hours. Those who craved for extra hours of entertainment availed themselves of video sets, cassettes, and CDs. Today, cabal networks broadcast round the clock and some channels specialize in different forms of entertainment – sports, Nollywood, Zee World etc. Imagine how much these packaged ideas and visions in different media formats and delivered into the intimate space of the family space shape and reshape the mindscape of the people from their infancy. More recently, social media has made it possible for everyone with a smartphone to publish whatever he or she likes, without any group playing any supervisory role. It is as if Pope St. Paul VI saw the enormous potentials and the dangers in these modern means of communication and made it possible for the Church to engage them.

Information Communication Technologies (ICT) have compressed space and time. Through WhatsApp or other such Apps, people, thousands of miles apart, can chat with each other either by text, voice or video. But it is possible that they rarely take interest in the neighbor next door. There is presently a seeming preference for mediated reality. Immediate presence, seen in the face-to-face encounter and the broad range of information that come therefrom, is being

relegated to the background. There is a saying that people prefer to spend time on Facebook rather than look at real faces or read real books. That is why the Holy Father calls us all to balance up the one-sidedness.

The Holy Father chose as theme for the reflection “Come and See (Jn 1:46)” which is Philip’s invitation to Nathaniel for an encounter with Jesus. In this encounter, Nathaniel voiced out his prejudice about those from Nazareth. Can anything good come of that place? he asked. Probably, he had never been aware of this prejudice which was voiced out in the context of the encounter. Interestingly, it was still in that encounter that the prejudice was dispelled. He became a disciple of the one who comes from the same Nazareth he had disparaged. This is a complete turnaround made possible by his coming, seeing and encountering Jesus at Philip’s invitation.

In line with the thoughts of the Holy Father, I recommend for our reflection, my dear brothers and sisters, the Igbo expression *onye bja mmadu nso, o nu isi eze ya*. “Isi eze” connotes bad breath and can easily put people off. But it is this power of the metaphor to touch the emotive dimension of our beings that I want to harness. With good dental care, one’s breath can be refreshing. But this care must be on-going. If not, one risks one’s breath turning from fresh to foul, often without one’s awareness and to the discomfort of others. From experience too, we know that in each person there is an admixture of the good, the bad and the ugly. It is only by coming close, dispensing, as much as possible, with all mediations, that we can experience the other in his or her beauty or ugliness, joy or pain, contentment or anxiety, etc. From afar or through layers of mediation, we risk have one-sided view. We are also challenged to be vigilant as we make effort to preserve and enhance our freshness and goodness through encounter.

The encounter that comes from person-to-person or heart-to-heart interaction is richer, more nuanced, and more capable of transformation for good. Despite the dominance and ease of technological mediation of reality, we must not lose sight of this fact. We must dare to come out of our comfort zones and come close. This is the first step towards care. Indeed, it is only by coming close that we can absorb the details that constitute the particularity of persons, events, and places. Thus, while harnessing the information, communication technologies for the dissemination of the Good News, the importance of one-

to-one, person-to-person encounter must not be lost sight of. There are still need for those to play the role of Philip, inviting the Nathaniels of this world to encounter Jesus through in-depth encounter of others to shed their prejudices and grow in love. Thus, the so-called old-fashioned way of spreading the Good News on a one-to-one basis, has real value and must be sustained.

Technology can be pressed to our advantage in this effort to encourage deeper level encounter of peoples and with reality. Therefore, the Holy Father encourages all to go out there and bring in fresh content into the social media instead of recycling and manipulating old images and encouraging fake news. This freshness is gained through encounter with the people and their reality. This will enrich all.

My dear brothers and sisters, the Pope's message is easy to read and down to earth. I encourage all to read, digest and implement its recommendations. It is only by encountering people where and as they are that we identify with and show love. The move in openness towards the other is an imperative of love. We pray God to help us do it well and may our use of the modern means of communication be fed by the openness to genuine encounter of the other – Amen.

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