

“MY PEOPLE PERISH FOR LACK OF KNOWLEDGE” (Hos 4:6)

Address of His Eminence Peter Ebere Cardinal Okpaleke to CADEK seminarians on August 29, 2025 at St. Joseph Cathedral Ekwulobia to celebrate Mass of Admission to Candidacy for Ordination and Conclude the 2025 Reunion

My dear Seminarians,

1. Preamble

As I gave you notice on July 4, 2025, during my meeting with you before your apostolic work, I was not able to be physically present at the Reunion this year. However, we scheduled to meet today, not only to celebrate the Mass of Admission to Candidacy for priestly ordination but also for us to interact and get to know your joys and pains, your challenges and initiatives. It is also an opportunity for me to share some thoughts with you.

In his first meeting with the College of Cardinals on Saturday May 10, 2025, the Holy Father, Pope Leo XIV declared: “I chose to take the name Leo XIV. There are different reasons for this, but mainly because Pope Leo XIII in his historic Encyclical [*Rerum Novarum*](#) addressed the social question in the context of the first great industrial revolution. In our own day, the Church offers to everyone the treasury of her social teaching in response to another industrial revolution and to developments in the field of artificial intelligence that pose new challenges for the defence of human dignity, justice and labour”.

In the spirit of the Holy Father, today, I want to continue a line of reflection I started in my address to you last year at the Reunion. Precisely, I want to draw attention to a few things to help us become more media literate. That is why the title of my address: “My People Perish for Lack of Knowledge” (Hos 4:6).

I know that it is paradoxical to speak of lack of knowledge in this age of information glut or information overload and a lot of opportunity for creativity. One can get so much information and so easily. There are also many opportunities for creative self-expression and content creation. However, that is the point – information does not readily translate into knowledge. One can be swamped by information that one is distracted and loses one’s bearing even in one’s self-expression and content creation. In my opinion, many people in our society are in that category. Many priests and religious have joined the bandwagon. I guess you see what some present in different social media platforms – Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Tik-Tok. I wonder what you think about some of them? – those dancing, those engaging in one frivolity or another; even those praying, preaching or purportedly celebrating mass as content creation. I can imagine that some of you are preparing and packaging themselves in view of making a resounding online debut after priestly ordination. This is not surprising because as we say: *nne ewu na-ata agbara, nwa ya a na-ene ya anya n’onyi*. To such, I can only say: please educate yourself very well on the new media. Be media literate so that you will understand more what and how the new

media works and develop the discipline to help you become a discriminating consumer and critical and balanced in your creative use of it, for evangelization, if you must. I want to emphasize the phrase: “if you must.” Before we get down to the issues let us review some events.

2. Review of some Events

During our orientation on July 4, Monsignor Jerome Madueke was here and addressed you on the Year for Men and Fathers. I know that you have heard that it has pleased the Lord to take him into eternity. We pray for his happy repose. I know that the book he prepared for the celebration of the Year for Men and Fathers has been distributed. I hope that you worked for the success of the Year for Men and Fathers, by imbibing the thoughts and ideas expressed therein and helping others to benefit therefrom. Remember that the book is the fruit of many sleepless nights, long hours of sitting down, researching, writing, deleting and re-writing. The best tribute we can pay to Msgr. Jerome is to take his ideas, his passion for family, human life, evangelization and spiritual formation seriously. Another way is to consciously emulate his work ethic, dedication, spirituality and self-sacrifice for the good of the Church. May the life of Msgr. Jerome challenge you to have singleness of purpose and focus in life. May the soul of Msgr. Jerome and the souls of the faithful departed rest in peace – Amen.

On another note, Fr. Lawrence Nwankwo addressed you, too, during your orientation on July 4. Five days later, he nearly lost his life. We thank God for sparing his life. He informed me that a delegate of seminarians visited him on behalf of all the seminarians. That is very kind of you. May we remember that visiting the sick is a corporal work of mercy. May we do that more often and encourage others, especially members of the Legion of Mary to expand on this apostolate. It brings comfort to the sick and those who have fallen on hard times and makes them feel that they belong to family of God in the parish or outstation.

You were asked to administer an online questionnaire to ascertain from our brothers and sisters, who have returned to Igbo ancestral religion, the possible causes and remedies. 100 seminarians participated in the six weeks apostolic work in 95 parishes. 79 responses were received. This is a very poor response which shows a lack of commitment by the seminarians. Do not blame seminarians from the religious congregation or from other dioceses. Yourself, CADEK seminarians, did not take it seriously because 65 of you, were there in the field. So, let those who did not administer the questionnaire in their place of apostolate write an explanation why they failed in the assigned duty and why this failure should not be understood as insubordination and a lack of commitment if not an outright sabotage of a pastoral initiative. Write also if your failure is because there are no such returnees to the ancestral religion in the community where you worked. Submit your letters to Rev. Fr. John Uzoigwe before the end of today. This is a final test of your sincerity. Know, as I told you last year, you leave footprints in your online activities. We already have the names of those who did not do anything. It is up to you to own up and explain yourself. Thereafter, we shall decide on the next step to take to make you responsible.

3. Social Media Against the Backdrop of the Impact of the Printing Press

I can imagine that many of you are not conversant with the development in the media of mass communication and how the invention of the moveable face type of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg in the 1450s facilitated the Reformation embarked upon by Martin Luther (1483-1546) with the publication of his 95 theses in 1517. Let me give you a quick recap of this history as background for our focus on what amounts to a second Reformation being engineered by the social media. Unfortunately, in my view, the social media-engineered Reformation is set up to use distraction, dissipation and amusement to undermine the faith. It is therefore worrisome that many priests and religious, without awareness of this inner dynamic and in the deluded view of meeting the Youth where they are on social media, end up reinforcing the subversion of the authority of the Christian truth. People now represent Christian images, ideas and tradition through endless content creation, irrespective of the appropriateness or lack thereof, of the new form it is being cast. Let us now trace more carefully this shift which pertains to authority of the truth.

In the missionary journeys of St. Paul, he had to move from point A to point B to propagate the Good News through face-to-face encounter. In each location, he preached to those who came out to listen to him. In this context of oral communication, one has to accommodate oneself to space/geography and time.

With a written document, the relationship between the author and space and time changed. The written document served as bridge between them. Neither the writer nor the readers needed to encounter each other face-to-face. Any messenger could deliver the document to the intended audience who could access the information at their convenience. This is a remarkable improvement on what was possible with orality.

The big change brought about by Gutenberg's invention of the moveable face type of press was that it made possible the printing of materials at a fast rate and at an affordable price. Before the mechanization of printing, if one wished to have another copy of a document or book, one had to engage a copyist to manually copy the material, word for word. Imagine how long it would take to have one additional copy of the bible. It is this time-consuming and expensive process that the printing press addressed. But it came with a social consequence.

Before the invention of the printing press, the slowness and cost of production of any reading material affected the spread of any new idea. New ideas tended to be confined to a locality and thus contained till the originator died or something else happens to reinforce the traditional ideas. This was why the ideas of earlier reformers like John Wycliffe (1330-1384) and Jan Hus (1369-1415) did not gain much traction. Martin Luther exploited the benefits of the new invention. Within one year of the initial posting of the 95 theses on the door of the Church in Wittenberg, it got published as a pamphlet. The pamphlet bridged space and time and reached a wide audience and sowed new ideas into their head.

While the printing press succeeded in multiplying documents that bridged space and time, social media not only compressed space and time but also gave anyone with the requisite tools, the ability to create any content. At the click of a button, an assortment of audio-visual images could be sent in real time to as many people as possible irrespective of their location. The social media also makes it possible for everyone to be a content creator while deactivating the need to conform to what is true. The development of Artificial Intelligence and the use of these, among other things, for fakery shows that social media is beholden to the content creator's fantasy and not to the real or to the true.

The above shows us the points of convergence and divergence between what we have called the first and the second Reformations. Both Reformations brought about a shift in authority through the spread of novel ideas with technologies available at the different times which bridged and compressed space and time, respectively. It is however important to pay attention to the details of the shift in authority.

One of the roots of the word "authority" is the Latin word 'auctor' – originator or promoter. Broadly speaking, authority is about the origins of any ideas or actions, what and who legitimizes something. Before the first Reformation, Scripture as interpreted by the magisterium of the Catholic Church was the authority acknowledged by the overwhelming majority of the people. At the Reformation, authority was reposed on Scripture alone (*sola scriptura*). This effectively translated into Scripture as interpreted by the individual. The individual, nevertheless, was in search of the truth. The journey to the Second Reformation engineered by social media takes one through the enthronement of amusement as content creators hunt for attention and chase their dream of becoming social influencers measured by the number of their followers, likes and subscriptions. Thus, the final authority is the content creator who uses Scripture or any other art form to establish himself or herself as a social influencer capable of pulling online traffic. In other words, content creation in social media is first and foremost a drama, showcasing of creativity, performance before a camera, with the aim of entertaining to catch and hold attention. Any idea so packaged is presented at the marketplace of ideas. I want to leave out, for the meantime, the monetary incentive behind the jostle for the status of social media influencer.

It is against this background that one must evaluate the activities of priests and religious who maintain social-media presence purportedly to meet up with the people, especially the young, where they are. There are categories of such priests and religious. The first are those who think that uploading videos of themselves wearing church vestment, clerical wear or religious habits and performing any activity whatsoever – dancing, hugging children, and any other frivolities – is enough to be seen as marking the Church's presence in cyberspace. Such people remind one of Jorge of Burgos, a character in *The Name of the Rose*, a novel by Umberto Eco, who did everything in his power to ensure that Aristotle's book on comedy was not accessible to any monk because he believed that laughter would destroy Christianity. In the light of what this first group do online, Jorge's perception

would seem to be true. Their online self-projection shows them and the Christianity they claim to present as unserious and vain.

The second group are those who engage in obviously religious activities online. Some record themselves praying, offering word of admonition or preaching. Here, there are differences. Some do these with theatrics and others present things without much substance and depth and in this way betray the possible ego trip behind the venture. There are, however, some social media presences which contribute to the spreading of the Good News of Jesus. This, however, requires discipline, self-possession, deep knowledge and insight and a self-effacing humility. It demands awareness of how social media and its algorithms are set up to encourage and feed on some negative elements of human psyche.

4. My People Perish for Lack of Knowledge (Hos. 4: 6)

The Book of Prophet Malachi 1: 14 – 2:2; 8 – 10 provides us with what is seen as a critique of the priesthood. By their actions, the priests had broken the ancient priestly contract for honest service to God. They had failed not only in worship but also in their educational tasks. Rather than teaching the faith honestly, they had purveyed a false knowledge of religion, thereby causing many people to stumble from the path of true knowledge.

A role model of the didactic responsibilities of the priesthood is provided in Malachi 2: 6 – 7: “The lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and men should seek instruction from his mouth. But the priests had not guarded their legacy of knowledge and had become ignorant, and so they had nothing to pass on to their people who required instruction. “Every priest of God is a priest of truth,” Sir George Adam Smith wrote, “and it is very largely by the Christian ministry’s neglect of their intellectual duties that so much irreligion prevails” (The Book of the Twelve Prophets, II, p. 36). Smith’s comment was written at the end of the 19th century, echoing Malachi’s lament, but little has changed in this 21st century to make the comment any less apt. This is why we are bothered about some seminarians who do not work hard enough to grow in wisdom and stature (Lk 2:52) through God’s grace.

Our people say: *onye amaghị ihe a na-eme, e were ya na-eme ihe a na-eme*. This underlines the importance of diving deeper and being aware of the unstated goals, the inducements and entrapments of any setup. Social media presence is not exempt from such elements. Thus, besides mastering the communication format of this medium, one needs to do some work on oneself to be able to undertake a special ministry in this space.

Let us look briefly at some of the unspoken inducements that social media is set up to bring about. Through monetary inducement for heavy online traffic, the owners of social media platforms ensure that people are motivated to create content. Unlike the traditional TV stations who have reporters and producers on their payroll, owners of social media platforms make every user a potential reporter and producer by making it possible for them to earn money therefrom. To make it competitive, what is earned is tied to the volume of online traffic one generates and sustains. This is the root of the ‘share,’ ‘like’

and 'subscribe' buttons which are markers of volume of online traffic. Beside the monetary inducement, this measurement of volume of online traffic has acquired social consequences. It is the measure of one's social influence such that it has become a social status that people aspire to and give everything to attain. Many people seek this status by creating content that appeal to the baser aspect of human nature. An edifying online presence for the purpose of evangelization must care less about popularity or generating online traffic. It must be focused on the propagation of the Good News of salvation in its integrity, welcome or unwelcome (2 Tim 4:2).

A saying attributed to Oscar Wilde rings true regarding what transpires on social media – the loss of a sense of propriety. According to Wilde, "give a man a mask and he will show his true face." The condition of seeming anonymity that social media offers, makes some people reveal the worst of themselves. This is the trend and an edifying presence on social media requires integrity so that the mask and the face match. It requires also self possession to a reasonable degree.

Because of the seeming anonymity of social media and the bandwagon effect that it induces, there is a progressive blurring of the boundary between the private and public. Some people upload very private aspects of their lives to the internet. In fact, some people seem to be living and reporting to a virtual community at every minute of their waking life. It is as if they live their lives for the virtual audience. They get their validation from the unknown followers on any of their social media platforms. Joining in this craze is no good sign of the requisite maturity needed to evangelize social media. It is rather a case of *dibia a kpɔtara ka ɔ chɔɔ mɔɔ, mana mɔɔ tɔgharja chɔwa dibia*. We are supposed to be salt of the earth and light of the world (Matt 5:13-16). In the light of the temptation to project oneself in the content creation, there is need for humility, a virtue anchored in a deep spirituality that seeks to proclaim Christ crucified (1 Cor 1:23) and him alone.

5. Conclusion

From the above, it takes a lot to maintain a befitting social media presence as a priest or religious and more so to use that presence for evangelization. It requires self-discipline, insight into the inner workings of the media, a wealth of knowledge – socio-cultural, philosophical and theological – and a deep spirituality that helps one to do all for God's sake.

Would I advise seminarians and even priests to get into ministry on the social media? Not at all. I will rather advise you to focus on building yourself up in the most holy faith (Jude 1:20-21). The cyberspace is only one space, although a powerful one, where young people hang out. They can still be encountered out there in other spaces where personal interaction is possible. Visit and engage them in conversation. Identify with them in their joys and pains, their hopes and fears, their aspirations and doubts. In this way, you will find ways of addressing their perplexities and their questions about God and the Church. This is more fruitful than the drama people stage in front of their cameras in the name of evangelization.