

## **“LORD, TO WHOM SHALL WE GO?” (Jn. 6:67)**

Address by His Lordship Most Rev. Jonas Benson Okoye, the Catholic Bishop of Nnewi Diocese, to the Presbyterium of Nnewi Diocese, on the occasion of their Annual Plenary Meeting and 2022/23 Pastoral Placements, Wednesday 17<sup>th</sup> August at St. Cletus Catholic Church, Nnewi.

### **EXODIUM**

My Lord Bishop, Most Rev. Hilary Paul Odili Okeke, dear Monsignori and Fathers, I remain infinitely grateful to God that we are able to congregate as a result of improved security situation in our dear State, Anambra. The past three years on the global and national scene has been quite frightening. On the global plain, there was the question of COVID-19 and in our country the heightened tension of insecurity. At the beginning, it was the Boko Haram in the North, gradually it creeps into Anambra and eventually Nnewi Diocese became the hot bed.

I remain eternally grateful to our priests in the worst hit areas who have made and are still making the supreme sacrifice for remaining with their flock through thick and thin. In most of such communities, the traditional rulers and the president generals have abandoned their subjects but our priests have remained and opted to die with their flock instead of deserting them.

The political situation in the country is not also helping matters. Those who represent us in the political arena have remained insensitive. The on-going strike by university staff has left our children stranded, disillusioned and confused. There is so much anger from top to bottom. In our parochial settings, resources have dwindled because of desertion by our parishioners and yet we are faced with the challenge of how best to take care of the remnant few who need our attention and concerns. At times, we feel like throwing in the towel ourselves. This has informed the choice of our theme: “Lord, to whom shall we go?” (Jn. 6:67)

### **Situating our Concept**

Our theme was generated from the discuss that emanated from the teaching of Christ in the Gospel of St. John beginning from Jn. 6:51 and following. In His teaching in Capernaum, He said:

“The bread which I will give is my flesh, which is given that the world may have life.” So the Jews argued with

each other, “How,” they said, “can this man give us his flesh to eat”? Jesus said to them: “This is the truth I tell you: unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you cannot possess eternal life within yourselves...After this many of his disciples turned back and not walk with him anymore. Jesus said to the Twelve: “Surely you too do not want to go away?” Simon Peter answered him: “Lord, to whom shall we go?” You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed and we have come to know that you are the Holy One of God.”

The real difficulty of Christianity is two-fold according William Barclay. It demands an act of surrender to Christ, an acceptance of him as the final authority; and it demands a moral standard of the highest level. The disciples were well aware that Jesus had claimed to be the very life and mind of God come down to earth; their difficulty was to accept that as true, with all its implications. But later in their ministries and missions, the Apostles lived out the confession of Peter by the manner they all died.

### **The Priestly Zeal- the All-Important Spirit**

In my ministry as a Priest and now as a Bishop, I must confess that I have had my own share of worries and difficulties but I have had consolation in the affirmation of St. Peter. Since Christ has the words that will lead us to eternal life, to whom then shall we go?. Here is a passage rippled with tragedy. There was a time when men came to Jesus in large numbers. When he was in Jerusalem at the Passover many saw his miracles and believed in his name (Jn. 2:23). So many came to be baptized by his disciples that the numbers were embarrassing (Jn. 4: 1-3). In Samaria great things happened (Jn. 4: 1, 39, 45). In Galilee the crowds flocked after him just the day before (Jn. 6:2). But the tune of things had changed; from now on there was a growing hatred which was going to culminate in the Cross. In spite of all these, when the time came, he had to be crucified.

It is circumstances like these which reveal men’s hearts and show them in their true colours. In these circumstances there were three different attitudes to Jesus according William Barclay.

**i. There was defection.** Some turned back and walked with him no more. They drifted away for various reasons. Some saw clearly where Jesus was

heading. It was not possible to challenge the authorities as he was doing and get away with it. He was heading for 'disaster' and they were getting out in time. They were fair-weather followers. It has been said that the test of an army is how it fights when it is tired. Those who drifted away would have stuck by Jesus so long as his career was on the upward way, but at the first shadow of the Cross they abandoned him.

**ii. There was deterioration.** It is in Judas Iscariot above all that we see this. Jesus must have seen in him a man whom he could use for his purposes. But Judas Iscariot, who might have become the hero, became the villain; he who might have become a saint became a name of shame.

Let me share this terrible story about an artist who was painting the Last Supper. It was a great picture and it took him many years. As a model for the face of Christ, he used a young man with a face of transcendent loveliness and purity. Bit by bit the picture was filled in and one after another the disciples were painted. The day came when he needed a model for Judas Iscariot whose face he had left last. He went out and searched in the lowest haunts of the city and in the dens of vice. At last, he found a man with a face so depraved and vicious that matched his mental concept. When the sittings came at an end, the man said to the artist: "You painted me before," "Surely not," said the artist. "O yes," said the man, "I sat for your Christ." The years had brought terrible deterioration.

The years can be cruel. They can take away our ideals and our enthusiasms; our dreams and our loyalties. They can leave us with a life that has grown smaller and not bigger. They can leave us with a heart that is shriveled instead of one expanded in the love of Christ. There can be loss of loveliness in life. May God save us from all these. We pray that none of priest may fall into such desuetude.

**iii. There was determination.** This is John's version of Peter's great confession at Caesarea Philippi (Mark 8: 27; Matt. 16: 13; Luke 9: 18). It was such a situation as this that called out the loyalty of Peter's heart. To him, the simple fact was that there was just no one else to go to. Jesus alone had the words of life.

Peter's loyalty was based on a personal relationship to Jesus Christ. There were many things he did not understand; he was just as bewildered and puzzled as anyone else. But there was something about Jesus for which he would willingly die. In the last analysis, Christianity is not a philosophy which we accept, nor a

theory to which we give allegiance. It is a personal response to Jesus Christ. It is the allegiance and the love which a man gives because his heart will not allow him to do anything.

My dear Monsignori and Fathers, I am deeply convinced that we like Peter on the day building up to our reception of the sacrament of Holy Orders, we all had this determination to continue to grow in our relationship with Christ our Master but years may have inflicted some injury on our resolutions and commitment. As we are about beginning a New Pastoral Year, may this commitment be renewed and reawakened. I have come to discover in my short stay with you that we have very many great and committed pastors among us; but sadly too, there are some who have drifted and are still drifting away from this unique fraternity. Timothy Cardinal M. Dolan speaking to Seminarians of North American College had this to say: "The major health problem of priests today is not burnout but bed sores." An elderly bishop pointed out to me, "If I could get my priests to put in an eight-hour day, forty-hour week, I'd have the most vibrant, evangelized diocese around. The problem is not priest-shortage but zeal-shortage." This scandal of lazy, listless, lethargic priests can only be corrected with a strong dose of the virtue of zeal.

The Church does not need tired, scared, pampered priests who are only concerned about their time off, their rooms, their cars, their clothes, their comfort, their rights; but priests whose hearts are so on fire with love for Jesus and the salvation of his people that, as St. Paul said, "All is rubbish save my knowledge of Jesus Christ." In the light of the forgoing, I would want us to consider the following as we begin a new pastoral year.

i. **Our Life in common:** Last week, one of our priests wrote me requesting that as the tenure of his Vicar is coming to an end that I should send a particular priest to him. These are his own words: "...The previous parish priest that worked here never had a good relationship with his vicars for the whole six years that he lived here and the people know about this. It was when we came last two years that I organized the send forth of the three priests that he had worked with and himself and also that of the priest that handed him over nine years ago. Please my Lord, my request is based on saving the image of the Church here to tell the parishioners that priests can live together and in peace just as I have lived with Fr.... For two years now." I had to reply him thus: "Good morning Fr., We are all one family in this presbyterium. If we can't live together then something is wrong and we must together work on our lack of fraternity."

Can. 550 §2 has this to say on community life. "The local Ordinary is to see to it that, where it is possible, some manner of common life in the parochial house be encouraged between the parish priest and the assistants". It is, therefore, no longer optional that a Parish Priest and his younger brother(s) should pray and share meals together at least the dinner. The practice of eating in one's room is prohibited unless when one is very sick or incapacitated.

Parish Priests must learn to assist the young ones assigned to work with them, carrying them along in all things concerning the parish life not excluding finances. I have had opportunity to ask some Vicars about the average Sunday and Morning Mass collections in the parish they assist. Practically, all of them looked at me as if I have asked the right question to the wrong person. The assistant priest must in turn have respect for his elder brother. Can. 548 remains a canon every Vicar should know by heart. Paragraph 3 of that canon reads:

The assistant priest is to report regularly to the parish priest on pastoral initiative, both those planned and those already undertaken. In this way the parish priest and the assistant or assistants can by their joint efforts provide a pastoral care of the parish for which they are together answerable.

ii. **Constant Travels:** The idea of constantly leaving the parish for a protracted period of time outside your annual vacation is unacceptable. The parish or institution entrusted to our care needs availability and proper attention. Do keep me informed if something must take you out of the Diocese for more than a week, a text message will do.

iii. **Participation in Common Exercise:** Our just concluded Annual Retreat was an eye opener. Some people did not attend and some arrived a day, two or three days after. When I invited some to find out why, they told me that they informed the Chancellor. Going forward, the prerogative to grant the permission shall be mine with the understanding that you will attend one in a monastery. The same also applies to our monthly recollections and meetings.

The functions at the Deanery and Regional levels are very crucial in our Diocesan life so also are the roles of the Deans and the Episcopal Vicars. I received reports that some priests and their parishioners did not participate during the study of the synod documents and during the Deanery Eucharistic Congress. That is quite unfortunate.

**iv. Accountability:** I have been able to visit some Parishes on Pastoral Visit and I have had time to study some of the accounts submitted. Please, I do plead that we be more transparent and frugal in our areas of responsibilities; be it parish, school, hospital, and other institutions. If you are in charge of any establishment like those mentioned above, there are certain expenditures you must not make without getting clearance from me such as purchase of vehicles, landed property etc. Our attitude to material goods tells a lot about our conviction in this chosen vocation of ours. The rules already in place should still be respected. The Rectory monthly account should be co-signed with the Vicar. I plead with Vicars not to be rubber stamps in this matter. If you are living alone, the Dean co-signs with you.

**v. Prayer Ministry:** I understand that a certain lay faithful was granted permission to be having prayer meetings at St. John of the Cross Pro-Cathedral, Nnewi under the close supervision and encouragement by the Pastor. I am informed that he has acquired a piece of land elsewhere and some priests go there to celebrate the Holy Mass. If permission was granted in the past for this ministry outside the Parish setting, it is hereby abrogated.

To some of us who are also in prayer ministry and who get themselves involved in producing and marketing all manners of oils, or all sorts of deceptive things, do understand that you are doing the wrong thing.

**vi. Policy on Sexual Abuse of Minors/Vulnerable Adults:** Do make out time to read this document over and over again so as to internalize the contents. Note that every Bishop has an unavoidable responsibility should an unfortunate situation arise.

Our retreat moderator said something about “*gratia inye aka*” in the effort to Safeguard ourselves from getting trapped in any of these sexual abuse scandal. Please do take care that the Rectory is not a place where you bring your sisters, brothers, nieces, nephews to live with you for protracted period of time. They may be all these to you, but not to your brother priests. Worst still is when they begin to act as the ones in charge when you are not there. The Vicar takes the place of the Parish Priest when he is not there (Can. 548 § 2).

Added to this, is this practice of getting this young girl and boy (Mary Leagues, Altar girls, Altar Boys etc) to clean our rooms and the Rectory. Most of the rooms are tiled, and if it is true, I don't think it would take you any time cleaning it once

a week. It is also part of exercise. These young girls and boys coming up to our rooms do not help in the sense of "*gratia inye aka.*" Let their cleaning be limited to Church and its environs. It would also be nice if we begin to think of having common washing machine for the priests in the Rectory.

**vii. Obedience to our Clerical Wears:** I feel so happy when priests are so well dressed up in their clerical soutane and not just Roman collar, with well-polished shoes, so well shaved and decent. I wonder if you have had time to watch these Pentecostal Pastors perform and how they package themselves. Have you taken time to observe the sitting arrangement in their churches and paintings? These should challenge us. Some of our churches and rectories have become so dusty and dilapidating; and the fans appeared to have been installed to help trap dusts.

**viii. Humility as you serve:** In our Christian understanding, there is humility before God, and then there is humility before others- to put others first, to battle egotism, to shun honour and attention, to rejoice when others are preferred over us. This humility, like obedience before God and others, is a tough virtue to cultivate but is nevertheless necessary for a Catholic priest. We need to be more patient with our flock when we reprimand them, it could be difficult at times but we must find a way out. I have painfully heard some priests said: "nobody will tell me how to run my parish." The people of God have also their rights and obligations that must be respected.

**ix. Parish Signposts:** Do ensure that they are well placed with the approved designs so as to direct visitors to the parish.

**x. Sanctions:** Excluding one from the sacraments is a very grievous act that requires the permission of the Bishop.

**xi. Plaques and Portraits:** I beg that you do not present a plague in the form of an award to me. It should belong to the people who have laboured strenuously to support our apostolate. Again, Cathcom has already produced my pictures for the Rectory or some other places; I do not need an additional one to take home. I don't even mind if you don't have one hung in the Rectory or your office. These are some of the things that make it difficult to accept retirement. What would gladden my heart is to learn that you are doing a great job in your duty posts.

**xii. Priests Centre:** About eight of our priests will be moving into our Priests Centre at the beginning of the New Pastoral Year. We are working round the clock to make it functional and give it the best we can afford. A roaster would

be drawn by the President of Nnewi Diocesan Priests' Association so that a Deanery will visit them every month. While going they should prepare food they would share with them and may also give them some pocket money. We should also encourage our Parishioners to visit them and assist the Centre. We are calling for help to assist in building a modest Church to serve the Centre.

xiii. **Remuneration for Priests:** A new monthly remuneration scale was considered in our last emergency Plenary Fathers Meeting and will take effect with the beginning of this Pastoral Year, 2022. The allowances concerns Parish Priests, Parish Vicars, School and Hospital Managers and their assistants, Priests working in other diocesan Institutions and Curia Officials. The new scale will cover personal needs such as fuel, clothing, telephone, minor car repairs, minor medical needs and personal charity. The new remuneration scale is considered according to year of ordination.

Priests from 0 to 9 years	= #50,000.00
Priests from 10 to 19 years	=#52, 500.00
Priest from 20 to 29 years	= #55,000.00
Priests from 30 years and above	= #58,000.00

## **Conclusion**

My dear brother priests, I have come to the end of what I desired to share with you as we are about beginning this Pastoral Year. Do remain steadfast, immovable, and always abounding in the work of the Lord who has called us, knowing that in the Lord our labour will not be in vain (1Cor. 15:58).

My brother priests, I have sincere confidence in you all. You would have noticed that I relate with each and every one of you as priests and men of integrity. A man of integrity is a man of honesty, without guile, a genuine, authentic man, whose interior convictions are externally evident, who outwardly shows in word and deed that he is what he claims to be: a man of sincerity, truth, principle, character, and reliability, whose word can be trusted, and who inspires respect in others. Like St. Peter let us continue to reassure the Lord: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."