

PASTORAL LETTER TO THE CLERGY, RELIGIOUS AND LAY FAITHFUL OF AHIARA DIOCESE

My dear Clergy, Religious and lay Faithful of Ahiara Diocese. Peace be with you!

1. Moment of Penitence and Reconciliation

Today, the 14th day of February 2018, is Ash Wednesday. It is a day we express our corporate act of penitence and reconciliation, beseeching God for the grace to use with profit the “favourable time” of preparation for the celebration of Christ’s Passover feast. Penitence is an essential part of the Christian life. This is because none of us can measure up to the tremendous vocation that is ours as Christians. We are in constant need of the mercy and forgiveness of God. We are all in constant and urgent need of reconciliation with God and with one another. It is in this spirit that I address this short Pastoral Letter to you my dear brothers and sisters of Ahiara Diocese.

2. Challenges so far

It is on record that I was appointed the Bishop of Ahiara Diocese on December 7, 2012, by His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI. I accepted the appointment abandoning myself to God’s grace. Some of the priests and lay faithful of Ahiara Diocese gladly accepted my appointment, while others openly manifested their unwillingness to collaborate with me as their Bishop. My Episcopal consecration and installation were delayed. His Holiness Pope Francis took over and confirmed the appointment and pleaded with the clergy and faithful of Ahiara Diocese to accept me as their Bishop. With some, the Pope’s plea fell on deaf ears.

Since the announcement of the appointment, there have been violent reactions and resistance from a group of the Ahiara diocesan clergy, the laity and others. All my efforts to meet with the former Diocesan Administrator and the College of Consultors to plan for the Episcopal Ordination and taking of canonical possession of the Diocese failed. The Metropolitan informed me that his meeting with the Consultors of Ahiara at Owerri did not yield positive fruit. The meeting of all the Bishops in the Province with the Presbyterium of the Diocese failed to secure the needed understanding. A subsequent meeting of the Metropolitan and some of the bishops in the Province with the Diocesan Pastoral Council on Monday, January 14, 2013, also fell short of the objective. The efforts of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Nigeria equally failed.

Taking cognizance of the canonical requirement that I was supposed to receive Episcopal Consecration within three months of the reception of the apostolic letters (cf. can. 379) and take canonical possession of Ahiara Diocese within four months of that same date (cf. can. 382 §2), I humbly requested on February 15, 2013, that the period for my Episcopal Consecration and taking canonical possession of Ahiara Diocese be extended for more weeks to see if the situation on ground would improve. The request was granted. The situation did not improve, but I was eventually consecrated on May 21, 2013, outside the Diocese – at Seat of Wisdom Major Seminary, Ulakwo, Owerri – due to the situation on ground in Ahiara Diocese. I could not take possession of the Diocese of Ahiara till date. It is now five years, two months and one week since

the Papal appointment. The interventions of the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples and the Secretariat of State also did not yield the desired fruit. The details of the peace efforts and the unreasonable, violent reactions of some of the clergy and faithful of Ahiara are still available on the internet.

I was quickly moved from the site of the Episcopal Ordination to Awka, where I have remained till date. In June 2017, the Holy Father graciously invited us to Rome for an encounter with him in person, but the priests and lay persons opposed to my appointment refused to answer the Holy Father – the Vicar of Christ. After our pilgrimage to Rome and encounter with the Holy Father, he once more confirmed my appointment and demanded for a letter of apology from all priests incardinated into Ahiara Diocese at home and abroad. He made it clear that the content of the apology must include the acceptance of myself, whom Pope Benedict XVI has appointed and Pope Francis has confirmed as the Bishop of Ahiara, among other things. Although I am not in position to say the number that complied faithfully with the Pope's demand, what is clear is that some of the priests asked the lay faithful to take over the leadership of the dispute. Till date, the legitimate representatives of the Catholic Church in Ahiara Diocese have no access to the Cathedral, the curia, etc.

3. Refusal to give the Holy Spirit a chance

I addressed you on the day of my Episcopal Consecration. I was well aware of the volatility of the situation and the enormity of the work ahead in terms of healing of memory and reconciliation. These notwithstanding, I assured you that I was at peace. Even now, I am still at peace. I was confident and hopeful. I put my faith in God who knows how to make all things, including our hearts, new (Rev. 21:5).

As my Episcopal motto, "*Veni Sancte Spiritus!*," shows, I want to carry out this ministry under the continuous prompting of the Holy Spirit and see my ministry in terms of helping my fellow Christians become more available to the Holy Spirit.

As the situation developed, what came to my mind was the interaction between the Prophet Amos and Amaziah, the priest of Bethel. Amaziah challenged Amos to take himself off to Judah, his home country, to earn his living there and prophesy there. Like Amos, I kept telling myself that it is the Lord who through the Church, the Body of Christ, took me and sent me on a mission (Amos 7:10-15). As your fellow Nigerian, a Catholic priest of the same Igbo descent with you, and above all your fellow Catholic sharing the same priesthood of Christ with my brother priests of Mbaise descent, I was resolved to give my very best to make this mission a success for the glory of God and His Kingdom. I knew that, in spite of the roughness of the beginnings, better days could be ahead and that the best way to ensure better days ahead was by loving and serving all, irrespective of what had transpired at the beginning.

So, as the problems persisted, I continued to thank God for the opportunity He gave to our Mbaise sons and daughters found almost everywhere working as priests and religious men and women and our lay faithful who carry Catholicism with them wherever they are. Unfortunately, some of these working outside Ahiara Diocese continue to spread a lot of stories and negativity to cause confusion and misunderstanding among our peaceful people. Be that as it may, we stand to learn

from every event. The greatest lesson for me and the Church is our understanding and manner of exercise of ministry as priests and bishops.

I promised you that, with your prayers and support, we shall uphold the legacy left behind by the first Bishop of Ahiara Diocese, Most Rev. Victor Chikwe, of blessed memory, and that I would work hard, day and night and with all my strength, as your Bishop, to make sure that the people of Ahiara take their rightful place in all levels of our life in the Church and society. I wanted us to focus our attention on Jesus Christ so that we would not sink like the Apostle Peter who, walking on the sea, started to sink only when he took his eyes away from Him and focused on himself and the roaring waves (cf. Mt 14:27-30). A group of priests (including some of the priests who taught me “Ecclesiology” and “Missiology” in the seminary) and lay faithful of the Diocese decided not to cooperate. I have remained in Awka Diocese working and praying God to take control of the situation. The situation to the best of my knowledge has not improved.

4. Way Forward

Taking the above into consideration, I am convinced, in conscience that my remaining the Bishop of Ahiara Diocese is no longer beneficial to the Church. I do not think that my apostolate in a diocese where some of the priests and lay faithful are ill disposed to have me in their midst would be effective. Exercising the ministry in a diocese where priests who are supposed to be my immediate and closest collaborators, brothers, friends and sons are at odds with one another, with the laity and with me as their chief shepherd would be disastrous and a threat to salvation of souls – including my own soul.

Therefore, for the good of the Church and the Catholic Diocese of Ahiara in particular, I humbly requested the Holy Father to accept my resignation from the office of the Bishop of Ahiara Diocese. I have taken this step also for the good of all the faithful of Ahiara Diocese, especially those that have remained faithful in a local church being controlled by some priests.

I consider my resignation from the position of Bishop of Ahiara as the only proper option now to facilitate re-evangelisation of the faithful and, most importantly and urgently, the priests of Ahiara Diocese, especially now that the Holy Father and his collaborators in the Roman Curia can already decipher priests who affirmed their loyalty to the Holy Father and those who decided to bow out of the Catholic Church in disobedience.

5. My Love for Ahiara Diocese

On my own part, I am not conscious of any fault I have committed against the people of Ahiara Diocese with regard to the situation in Ahiara Diocese. I pray God to forgive me if He finds me responsible in any way. Even now, I hold no malice against any individual person in Ahiara Diocese. It is clear to me that God has allowed me to go through this way for His glory, my salvation and salvation of others. In these years, I have loved and prayed profoundly for the Diocese. I will continue to show affection and esteem for the Diocese. The Diocese of Ahiara shall remain always in my heart. I am certain that Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, will continue to show His love and care for the Diocese. May He bandage the wounded and lead all to greener pastures, so that God will be all in all.

6. Gratitude

I use this opportunity to thank the Holy Father for the affection, the encouragement and support he has shown me all these years. He has remained my source of encouragement, security and point of reference all these years of sorrow and torment. My gratitude goes to the Officials of the Roman Curia, the Nuncios and their collaborators that have sacrificed a lot in handling this matter. I also thank the members of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria that have remained close to me. In a special way, I remain indebted to the Archbishop of Abuja and Apostolic Administrator of Ahiara, His Eminence John Cardinal Onaiyekan, for his fatherly care. I appreciate the sacrifices of the President of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria – His Grace Ignatius Kaigama, the Metropolitan Archbishop of Owerri – Most Rev. Anthony J. V. Obinna, the Bishops of Owerri Province and the Bishop of Awka Diocese who have sheltered me all these years. He has remained a father and a brother. In a special way, I thank the priests and the many lay faithful of Ahiara – *nde Eze*, Knights of the Church and their Ladies – who have stood with the Holy Father and the hierarchy of the Church in Nigeria and had ceaselessly prayed for an end to the disagreement and manifested their solidarity with me. Please continue to be shining examples of discipleship in love. Your solidarity with and closeness to me shall not be in vain. May the Lord remain your strength!

7. Call to Repentance

I wish also to use this moment of grace to invite those who have remained in permanent opposition to have an authentic "*sensus Ecclesiae*" (*i.e.* staying with the Church in love), to renew the spiritual bond and to refrain from being guided by ideologies, motivations and ideas that neither belong to Christ nor to the Church. As St. Paul tells us, we should test and not stifle the Spirit (1 Thess 5:19). There are canons of discernment that have been worked out by our fathers and mothers in the faith. At the centre of these is obedience of faith. Obedience, Samuel told Saul, is better than sacrifice and to heed is better than the fat of rams (1 Sam 15:22). It involves trust that God is leading the Church, and requires giving up one's will and preferences after exercising responsibility by joining in the discernment process. Obedience invites us to learn to say with Jesus Christ, "not my will but yours be done" (Lk 22:42). I invite you to draw near to Our Lord Jesus Christ who willed Peter and his successors as visible principles of communion. The Church is not just like any other human society in which one lives and acts according to merely human criteria. I invite any dissenting priests to re-examine their initial motivations for becoming priests in the Catholic Church. Repentance and reconciliation are very urgent!

8. Best Wishes

As St. Paul admonished, let us always be joyful, pray constantly and give thanks for all things in the knowledge that this is God's will for us in Christ Jesus (1 Thess 5:12-18). We give thanks to God for events of these years, painful and confusing though they may be, by taking seriously the lessons learnt and keeping ourselves open to the healing touch of God. After all is said and done, we are brothers and sisters in Christ; sons and daughters of the same Father; we have one Lord, one faith, one baptism (Eph 4:5); we are one family – the family of God.

We pray that the Church in Ahiara Diocese takes her proper spiritual place in Christ, in her fidelity to the Universal Church and the Pope. We pray and entrust the Diocese of Ahiara to the maternal protection of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church and Queen of Nigeria.

Please continue to pray that the gifts of the Holy Spirit, may, as we prayed in the Golden Sequence of Pentecost Sunday, “wash our sinful stains away, refresh from heaven our barren clay, our wounds and bruises heal. To Your sweet yoke our stiff necks bow, warm with Your fire our hearts of ice, our wandering feet recall. Grant to Your faithful, dearest Lord, whose only hope is Your sure word, the sevenfold gifts of grace”.

God bless you!

Given at Awka on this 14th day of February 2018
Ash Wednesday

+ Peter Ebere Okpaleke
Bishop of Ahiara