



CONGREGATIO
PRO GENTIUM EVANGELIZATIONE

Prot. 2842/14

June 29th, 2014

Feast of Saints Peter and Paul

Dear priests of the Diocese of Ahiara,

Dear People of God of Ahiara Diocese,

1. A year has now passed since the Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, out of deep affection and profound solicitude, appointed His Excellency, Most Reverend Peter Ebere Okpaleke, as your Bishop, who was subsequently confirmed by Pope Francis, and is now patiently waiting to be welcomed with confidence in the Church that was entrusted to his care. He is a priest of your land and a man of God, well prepared intellectually, with good pastoral experience. He is well-known to many of you.
2. The almost ideological and prejudicial opposition to the newly appointed Bishop of some priests, motivated also by individuals outside of the Diocese, has absolutely **NO** credible or justifiable motive. Being a "son of your Diocese" cannot be a primary factor for evaluating the appointment of a Bishop. The Church has other criteria for choosing Pastors: the person's human virtues, his moral and spiritual qualities, his pastoral experience, his capacity for guiding a community of the faithful. This is to say, the Church looks for those qualities in a candidate that show his spiritual and moral worthiness for episcopal office, as well as his suitability for the particular Church for which he is to be appointed.
3. Many Bishops, Priests, Religious, and Faithful were consulted in Nigeria, and Cardinals and Bishops in Rome carefully evaluated the Candidate, whom, in the end, the Holy Father found to be worthy and suitable for the beloved Diocese of Ahiara. And yet, some have claimed for themselves the right to impede him in the exercise of his pastoral ministry in the Diocese. On the other hand, I must acknowledge with appreciation, that many lay Associations of Ahiara, as well as priests, and religious, both male and female, have demonstrated a noble and lofty ecclesial awareness (*sensus Ecclesiae*) in manifesting their communion with, and fidelity to the new Bishop.
4. This letter is intended to call everyone to their proper responsibility.

And here, I address especially the priests, who on the day of their sacerdotal ordination had solemnly, and publicly, declared their obedience to their proper Bishop, to his successors, and to the Holy Father. We are now confronted with a most grave act of disobedience, which is inflicting a wound on ecclesial communion! This letter is a cordial and clear invitation to reflect and to obey. It is now time to end this grave act of disobedience. I would therefore expect an act of sincere and profound repentance, presented in the form of a letter from all of you, signed individually by each of you, asking the Holy Father for forgiveness. I know that Pope Francis is waiting for such a sign of affection!

5. Therefore, following the pastoral direction desired by the Supreme Pontiff - of a Church that opens her arms to all, confiding profoundly in the mercy of Christ, a Church, not of the perfect, but of those who are able to recognize their errors and destitution - I invite everyone, particularly the priests, to seriously meditate on the homily that Pope Francis proclaimed last Holy Thursday (April 17, 2014). We, priests, are particularly called to meditate on the contents of this homily. It is a beautiful meditation, in which the Pope speaks of the "oil of gladness" and the "oil of priestly joy", because of "unity in Christ". The Holy Father asks: Who is the priest? He responds: "The priest is the poorest of men unless Jesus enriches him by his poverty, the most useless of servants unless Jesus calls him his friend, the most ignorant of men unless Jesus patiently teaches him as he did Peter, the frailest of Christians unless the Good Shepherd strengthens him in the midst of the flock". Then he says: "Priestly joy is a joy which is sister to **obedience**".

6. These words are enough to recoup a strong Christological and ecclesiological aptitude and attitude in those who, through their own disobedience, have placed themselves at the margins of the Church.

7. Before concluding, I want to express a word of appreciation for His Eminence, Cardinal John Olorunfemi Onaiyekan, Archbishop of Abuja and Administrator of Ahiara Diocese. Our Holy Father Francis, personally wanting him to be Administrator of Ahiara in his name, notwithstanding his many other obligations, has asked me to openly manifest the Pope's esteem and gratitude for his service in Ahiara, disapproving of those who have attempted to discredit him by writing and contestation.

8. Dear brothers and sisters, with profound affection I send you the blessing of the Holy Father and I trust that you will now welcome soon the new Bishop, *Most Rev. Peter Ebere Okpaleke*, as your new Pastor. Following this, I wish to assure you that the room will be open for the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, in cooperation with your new bishop, to meaningfully address, in a spirit of ecclesial communion, any genuine grievances that may have emerged from this sad episode. In this way, a useful and significant dialogue will continue.

In Christ,

A. Card. Adam
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