

**"BLESSED IS HE WHO DOES NOT TAKE
OFFENCE AT ME" (Matt 11:6)**



**THE CHALLENGE TO CONTRIBUTE TO
THE EMERGENCE OF A SYNODAL CHURCH**

*Message of His Eminence Peter Ebere Cardinal Okpaleke
to the Presbyterium of CADEK on the Occasion of the
New Year Get-Together 2024 on Wednesday January 10, 2024*

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My dear brothers in the Priesthood,

PREAMBLE

Our address is focused on the Synod on Synodality and related issues. This Synod started since October 9, 2021 and attained a milestone with the First Session of the Synodal Assembly held between October 4-26, 2023. The Second Session of the Synodal Assembly is scheduled to take place in October 2024. Before this second session, local Churches and groupings of Churches “are invited to contribute by deepening their reflection on aspects of the Synod as contained in the *Synthesis Report* that are fundamental to the Synod’s theme.” Episcopal Conferences and similar bodies are expected to send the fruit of such reflections to the Synod Secretariat on or before May 15, 2024. We are sure that the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria will request the dioceses to submit their input earlier than the May 15, 2024 deadline. It is therefore pertinent that we take this occasion to set in motion our diocesan machinery to carry out this task in support of the Holy Father’s ministry to the Universal

Church. Before then, let us briefly recall and thank God for various favors and experiences in 2023.

GRATITUDE

We thank God for leading us safely into the new year. Despite the security challenges, especially in this part of the world, we went about our ministries and did not fall into the hands of the merchants of horror. One of us, Rev. Fr. Bernard Oguejiofor, was allowed by God to walk in the valley of darkness. God graciously brought him back safe. Similarly, I can see many of our brothers who came back from overseas and other parts of the country. They traveled thousands of miles. We are grateful to God that they are here. As usual, we will have opportunity to introduce you to the rest of the Presbyterium so that the younger ones will at least know your faces.

Two of our colleagues – Rev. Frs. Adolphus Ezeakor and John Ugochukwu – were called back to the Lord last year. Let us stand and observe a minute silence praying for their eternal rest. May they rest in peace! Amen. We are grateful for their ministry among us and the love and friendship we shared with them. We hope to meet them and all our departed relatives, parishioners, and acquaintances, at the Lord's banquet. We continue to thank our CADEK priests in the Americas who made huge sacrifices to ensure that the remains of Rev. Fr. John Ugochukwu were repatriated for burial among his people.

Last year, two of our brothers were ordained to the priesthood – Rev. Frs. Emmanuel Ohaegbu and Valentine Ejike. This is their first time in our New Year Get-Together.

We welcome them. We felicitate with our six silver jubilarians – Rev. Frs. Henry Nnajofofor, Bernard Oguejiofor, Damian Nwankwo, Pius Ezeigbo, Clement Onyemelukwe and Christopher Ike. We thank God for their life and ministry in our midst and pray for divine blessings on them.

We are grateful to God for members of different religious congregations who are part of our Presbyterium. We have priests of the **Sons of Mary Mother of Mercy Congregation** (Rev. Frs. Richard Anigbogu, Sampson Nwachukwu, George Alugbuo), **Via Christi** (Rev. Fr. Ikenna Okpalaji) **Vincentians** (Rev. Frs. Collins Ezeañuna, Johnpaul Ekwem), **Vocationists** (Rev. Frs. Kingsley Nebo and Charles Akaeme), **Holy Family Fathers and Brothers of the Youth** (Rev. Frs. Emmanuel Tochukwu Igwe, Simon Muogbo), **Pallottine** (Rev. Fr. Paul Ifeji), **Society of our Mother of Peace** (Rev. Frs. John Kearns, Isidore Udoh) and **Spiritans** (Rev. Frs. Emmanuel Ezeibe, Nicholas Mbakwe, Valentine Onyemelukwe, John Sandy, Joseph Ogonna, Godwin Enwerem).

As said above, they are members of our presbyterium although not incardinated into our Diocese. I want to make this clarification for the benefit of all. The one Church of Christ manifests itself in the local Church where the bishop as a successor of the apostles, with all the priests and lay faithful constitute the one People of God in communion with other local churches. Thus, although incardinated into their religious congregations, the religious sharing life in our diocese, belong to our local Church and are part of the Presbyterium. To these our brothers, especially those who

are new in CADEK, we say a warm welcome. Feel at home; imbibe the CADEK spirit! Here we are all firstborn sons and citizens of heaven (Heb 12:23). Do your best for the spread of the faith and the propagation of the Kingdom of God. Soon, you will introduce yourselves so that others can match your faces to the names.

Last year, we marked the third year of the creation of CADEK as well as my 60th birthday and 10th anniversary of my episcopal ordination. We thank all those who organized it. The senior secondary school section of St. Dominic Savio Seminary Akpu also took the West African Senior Secondary Certificate Examinations (WASSCE) for the first time. Their performance was excellent. We congratulate the staff and students. We appreciate one of the benefactors of the seminary, Chief/Sir Ikenna Okafor, Ide Akwaeze, who built and furnished the Laboratory and ICT Complex through his Foundation. We pray that we will continue as a diocese to give our seminarians the best environment for learning and formation so that they can have the mind of the Church (*sentire cum ecclesia*). As we shall see, formation is one sure way of responding to the ferment of our time to which the Synod on Synodality is trying to discern and for effecting the conversion of structures for mission that is at the heart of the vision of a synodal Church.

BLESSED IS HE WHO DOES NOT TAKE OFFENCE AT ME

The Vatican under the leadership of Pope Francis is often embroiled in controversy. Barely four months after his election, on July 29, 2013, on the flight back from Brazil, the Pope was asked about gay people. His off-the-cuff

response was: “who am I to judge.” This struck a chord which has continued to reverberate to this day as witnessed in the latest Declaration of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith – *Fiducia Supplicans* (FS). Shortly before *Fiducia Supplicans*, there was the response from the Vatican to the question about transgender being godparents. In response to these, our WhatsApp interactive platform has witnessed a variety of opinions and sentiments. I thank all of you who share their thoughts, worries and hopes on that platform. A lot of what I will share is shaped by the comments on that platform and aim at pointing out some directions for us as a local Church.

Right from the time he stepped out of the balcony on March 13, 2013, and the name he chose, Pope Francis, has shown that he has his own style. He has shown himself as one who is not afraid of doing or saying things differently. This runs through his decision to live at the *Domus Sanctae Marthae* rather than at the Papal Palace to the conceptualization and execution of the Synod on Synodality. Ironically, it remained the Synod of **Bishops** but with about 70 lay faithful not as observers but as full members with voting right. This highlighted the twin emphases of synodality – listening to all and journeying together by all. The Synod was looked upon with a lot of suspicion in some quarters. The caption of the document for the Continental Stage of the Synod: “Enlarge the Space of your Tent” (Is 54:2) seemed to confirm the suspicion that the Synod was only a trojan horse for bringing into the tent all the passers-by – the LBGQTQAI+ and other groups – for the banquet of the Lord regardless of whether they have the wedding garment (Matt 22:1-14). Meanwhile, the theological debate continues about absolute moral

principles represented by *Veritatis Splendor* of Pope St. John Paul II and proportionalism as in Pope Francis' *Amoris Laetitia*. The emphasis on radical inclusivity, because the heart of a shepherd never closes the door, gives rise to a suspicion of a conflation of the distinction between sin and the sinner so much so that in the name of accepting the sinner, who is created in the image of God, sin is seen to be accepted without calling for conversion of heart. Yet, it took Jesus' self-invitation to the house of Zacchaeus, a so-called public sinner, for the later to open up to conversion (Lk. 19:1-10). It must also be emphasized that in the case of someone ideologically invested in a way of life, inclusion may yield a result contrary to conversion. That is why Jesus, in the semitic metaphorical way of speaking, challenges us to cut off the arm or pluck off the eyes that causes one to sin (Matt 5:29-32). Yet, in the *Synthesis Report* from the Synod, one does not see approval of any of the hot button issues that some had suspected were the main reason for the synod – women ordination, same sex marriage, and other cultural issues.

It must be acknowledged, however, that there is a lot of disquiet. A priest called me after the publication of *Fiducia Supplicans* with obvious anguish in his voice to ask: “what is happening?” A papal knight wrote a very long WhatsApp message to me calling on the bishops to do something. I remember some of the comments on our platform in response to the post allegedly made by a priest in Texas United States who complained that Pope Francis is making his pastoral ministry difficult. Some bishops openly criticize the Holy Father, if for no other thing, for introducing disturbing ambiguities. Some Cardinals have submitted

theological and moral questions asking for clarification, which is often a subtle way of signaling their dissent. Some Episcopal Conferences have come out clearly to forbid the blessing of same-sex couples as much as same-sex unions, despite the Declaration *Fiducia Supplicans* from the Dicastery for Doctrine of Faith which admittedly was not given as the most authoritative document for faith and moral. But these divergencies and dissent give the impression that instead of being at the forefront of the preservation of the unity of faith, the Petrine office seem to have turned into a source of dissension. I guess you know that the Dicastery for Doctrine and Faith has issued a clarification on *Fiducia Supplicans*.

While praying and reflecting on these issues, the question that came to my mind was: how Jesus was perceived in his time? I remembered the move by John the Baptist. In prison and having heard what Jesus was doing, he sent his disciples to Jesus to ascertain whether he was the one to come or whether they were to expect someone else. For John to ask this question after baptizing Jesus and witnessing his ‘epiphany’ shows that probably, there was a discrepancy between the reports John was getting about Jesus and his Messianic expectation. Jesus did not conform to his expectation of the Messiah. Jesus’ answer tends to support this intuition: “Go back and tell John what you hear and see.” After enumerating his healing miracles, Jesus added: “blessed is anyone who does not take offence at me” – **“Ngọzi na-adiri onye ahụ nke na-enweghi obi abụọ n’ebe m nọ” (Matt. 11: 6)**. Jesus addressed the unspoken emotion behind John’s question.

The message of God's love preached by Jesus was very radical. He upturned everything that the Jews had believed. His table fellowship with gentiles and those regarded as sinners; his insistence on forgiveness to an uncountable number of times; his de-emphasis on temple worship, his claim to precede Abraham and Moses, etc., were judged untenable. Christianity eventually normalized these. In the Middle Ages, the rise of Aristotelianism gave rise to the need to reconceptualize theology. St. Thomas Aquinas and a host of others carried out this innovation, though not without opposition. Modernity fostered a new way of thinking which fueled the Protestant Reformation. It was at the Vatican II Council that some of the emphases of the Reformation – such as the priesthood of the faithful and a robust theology of the lay faithful – were integrated into Catholic Theology. Vatican II Council also provoked a hefty reaction. Some people felt that the Church was selling out to the world. Let us not forget in a hurry that Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre opted for schism instead of accepting Vatican II Council.

The point of all being said is that there have always been tumultuous times of rapid and profound changes, which the Church has to respond to. Such periods occasion profound spiritual and emotional anguish for those sensitive and who feel with the Church. We are in such a time. The Barque of St. Peter is sailing in very rough waters. We should intensify our prayers for the Holy Father and for Holy Mother Church. As we reflect on the issues that are raised, maybe agree to disagree, let us also trust in divine providence. Equally important are the lessons we must take out from what is happening and what these lessons move us to do. I want to emphasize this point – the lessons we have to take out

and the action they recommend – because it is at the heart of this address.

AT THE ROOT OF THE UPHEAVAL

A broader view shows that the upheaval being experienced in the Church is rooted in the socio-cultural changes that is taking place especially in Europe and North America. In the Anglican Communion, we know of the Global Anglican Future Conference (GAFCON) which came into being in 2008, a month before the Lambeth Conference to protest what they perceived as a “false gospel” especially about sexual morality in the Anglican communion. This was after an active homosexual, Gene Robinson was consecrated a bishop in the Episcopalian Church. Similarly, two years ago, it was announced that the Methodist Church Nigeria (MCN) severed ties with the British Conference over the support of the latter for the legalization of same sex marriage.¹

While the Catholic understanding of the Church is different from what obtains in either the Anglican communion or other ecclesial bodies, underlying the challenges is a cultural shift in what is referred to, as the global north. This shift created a cultural rift between the global north and the global south. Let us remember that, in Europe, not so long ago, the Church was the dominant influence. Most Europeans in the 19th century would be as shocked as ourselves at the thought of blessing same-sex couples, for example. Today, the story is different. The culture has shifted. How and what brought

¹ <https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2021/07/03/methodist-church-nigeria-severs-relationship-with-the-british-conference?amp=1> accessed on December 23, 2023.

about the shift? What can we learn therefrom in order to forestall a shift in that direction in our context? As we do this, let us also remember that despite our cultural revulsion arising from the traditional African cultures, there are gay people and people with the sexual preferences we regard as aberrant. I hope that we have not forgotten the story of the presumed female chorister in a Catholic Church in Port Harcourt who was involved in a Keke accident. Only then, was it discovered that she was a man. We therefore need to do more than simply invoke our culture, as if it is enough to guarantee such things not happening to us. We have to learn from what happened to others and actively do more to forestall such developments.

Let me briefly highlight one line of development that contributed to the cultural shift in Europe. We are conversant with Existentialism. Recall the thoughts of Jean-Paul Sartre for example. He distinguished between two ways of being, *en-soi* (being-in-itself) and *pour-soi* (being-for-itself). For him, the second is the one proper to human beings. For *pour soi*, (being-for-itself) existence precedes essence – that is, one has no predetermined meaning, purpose, definition, etc., except the meaning, purpose or definition that one gives to oneself through the deployment of one's freedom. Therefore, to accept any meaning, truth, or authority external to the individual – the Bible, tradition, truth, natural law, etc – is, for Jean-Paul Sartre, bad faith. Ironically, to accept his philosophical perspective as true, would not count as bad faith. Be that as it may, we see how predetermined meaning, purpose, tradition, natural laws, biblical revelation etc., were simply side-stepped.

We have tried to trace one trajectory of the rise of radical autonomy which cuts the individual off from the community; redirects vision away from transcendent realities to immanent experiences and inner-worldly fulfilment. It is such a mindset that has given rise to the valorization of some life choices, even if these are against what had hitherto been accepted. Many countries have given legal status to such life choices. This is the cultural context, especially in some parts of Europe, in which the Christians – bishops, priests, theologians and the lay faithful – are raised and within which pastoral ministry is exercised. Some people grow up and identify as gay or any of the other descriptions. Some of these are also drawn to the Church. One of us working in the United States shared the story of a boy in his parish. He had known him when he was nine years old. He had been active as an altar server, then as lector and then as religious education teacher. Now he is in college. Recently, he came out as gay. How would you handle such a situation, if you are the pastor taking into consideration their cultural context? This is one way of getting down to the matrix out of which some interests seek to hijack the emphases on listening, journeying together and radical inclusion in a Synodal Church. Unfortunately, *Fiducia Supplicans* by addressing a challenge local to some Churches, through a nuanced interpretation, has raised much dust that threatens to eclipse some salutary emphases in the vision of a Synodal Church. But before that, we have to respond to the upheaval.

RESPONDING TO THE UPHEAVAL

Three important lessons crystallized out for me from the upheaval. First, as indicated above, what is at the root of the upheaval is a rejection of the authority of the Bible and Christian tradition. This is also taking place in our midst.

Our young people are throwing away the authority of the Bible and spreading suspicion about the Church as a foreign tool that aided and abetted colonial exploitation. I remember a video recording of an event in a part of our Diocese. Someone desecrated the Bible. He tore it page by page and burnt them. This rejection of biblical authority may not manifest itself in the campaign for same-sex marriage, but it is at the root of the resurgence of invented traditional religious practices. Above all, and I want you to underline this, it is also at the root of the socio-economic and cultural challenges of endemic corruption, criminality, *ego mbute*, devaluation of life, etc. What are we doing about these and other challenges we have? Are we doing enough? I want us to examine ourselves on this. It is easier to see the speck in other people's eyes. It is easier to say that we are waiting for the Bishops to speak. It is easier to say that we are waiting for the Diocesan Chancery to speak. Let us use the opportunity of seeing the log in other people's eyes to remove the speck in ours through greater commitment and more coordinated pastoral ministry.

The second lesson is the need for ongoing evangelization of culture. This entails intentionally engaging culture producers and influencers and being involved as Church in culture production. We have seen how Jean-Paul Sartre's nihilistic existentialism which arose in response to the disillusionment of the World Wars and similar views seeped into, reshaped the mindscape of the people and hollowed out the external Christian vista. In as much as Africa must not travel the historical path of other parts of the world, their experience imposes on us the duty of timely discernment and engagement of the basic schemes and paradigms that propel

cultural production and reproduction in our locality. In the light of this, I invite you to reflect on our relationship as priests and as a presbyterium with the comedians, the musicians and other artists in our locality. My mind goes to Massi & Theresa and the little boys, who I learnt are from Nawfija. How can we as a presbyterium harness their artistic talent for deepening the evangelization of our culture. In a similar vein, let me challenge Rev. Frs. Jude Okoli and Bartholomew Nwafor and others who are gifted in various traditional art forms – *mbem* and *egwu ogene*, etc., – to find ways and means of improving and using these art forms and formats for evangelization. I have spotted a seminarian who is good at *egwu ekpiri*. I am also aware of the efforts of some of us, such as Rev. Fr. Charles Mmaduekwe through *Faith in the Street*, to be present and be a voice in cyberspace. That is commendable. We need to do more in this area, either by becoming or working with digital influencers. Maybe, I have not been lucky to find Youtube channels of priests in our locality who offer reflections, who are balanced and inspiring. Those I have watched tend to offer empty assurances much like the Pentecostals. And others send out short wishes that usually end with an assurance of their prayers. The bottom-line of what I am saying is that we must get involved and infuse the eternal wisdom revealed in Jesus Christ in the production and reproduction of our culture adopting the best format for effectiveness.

The third lesson is the need to constantly review our pastoral priorities and practices. On this note, I want to invite you to review the mission and vision statements of our Diocese. It is on the back-cover of our maiden Liturgical Diary/Directory as well as on our website. I want to draw

attention to the affirmation in the mission statement that “we seek to become more truly God’s family; open to encounter and personal relationship with Jesus Christ and with each other.” I want us to have this in mind always. Remember that faith is shallow unless and until one builds up a personal relationship with the Lord. Some people come to Sunday Mass out of a sense of obligation or to fulfil, what they consider, their own part of the bargain for divine protection and blessing. It is for us pastors to find ways and means of making them to taste and see that the Lord is good (Ps 34:8). I want you to have this in mind in your ministry.

On a happy note, I want to echo the announcement of the Holy Father, Pope Francis of the First World Day for Children to take place on May 25-26, 2024. We have set in motion the programme for children “Catch them Young and Keep them for Christ.” I also spoke about the need for such a programme both at Addis Ababa, during the Africa Synodal Continental Assembly and at the meeting of the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life in Rome. We may not claim credit for this initiative at the level of the universal Church, but we have to celebrate it as those who have known its value. The Holy Father has indicated that the day will seek to answer the question “What kind of World do we seek to pass on to children who are growing up?” So, may the PMS Director and the HCA Chaplains prepare and present to me a programme for this event soonest. May the deans also ensure that the audio-visual aid procured by the different parishes are still being used. In addition, I want to encourage children to familiarize themselves with the Bible by memorizing as many chapters and verses of the Pauline writings as possible. To motivate them, there will be prizes

for winners. The competition will be done at the levels of the parish, deanery, region and diocese. Let the Parish Priests, the Deans and the Episcopal Vicars find ways to raise the prize money at the different levels. May also the PMS Director, the Director of Catechesis and the Diocesan Chancellor work out the details of the Memorize and Win Initiative whose grand finale can be fixed around September 30 in commemoration of St. Jerome, who gave us that unforgettable saying that “ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.”

We know that the family is central in our effort at grassroot evangelization. We must therefore pay special attention to the preparation and support of marriages. There will be training of Marriage Instructors following the Handbook on Marriage Preparation Course from the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria (C.B.C.N). The Diocesan Family and Human Life Unit will eventually unveil a diocesan programme for this. Please ensure that you have instructors in your parish or chaplaincy and that they are trained.

CONTRIBUTING TO THE EMERGENCE OF A SYNODAL CHURCH

As stated above, the General Secretariat for the 16th General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops has requested all dioceses to follow up on the work done at the 2023 Assembly of the Synod by deepening the reflection on the Synthesis Document with this question in mind: “HOW can we be a synodal Church on mission?” The emphasis on HOW is in the document. Specifying further the question was formulated thus: “HOW can we enhance the differentiated co-responsibility in the mission of all the members of the

People of God?” As indicated, the outcome of our reflection has to be forwarded to Rome by May 15, 2024.

I therefore request Rev. Fr. Wenceslaus Ofojebe, the Coordinator, Synods, Congresses and Pilgrimages to oversee our effort as a diocese to respond to the request by the Synod Secretariat. You can use the team that worked with you in the listening sessions.

However, our effort is not simply geared towards fulfilling requirements. We want to key into the core vision of a Synodal Church on mission. I, therefore, mandate the Theological Commission to organize a seminar on The Implications of Co-responsibility in a Synodal Church for Pastoral Ministry. I will also recommend a critical study of chapter Six of the 1996 publication of Rev. Fr. Elochukwu Eugene Uzukwu, C.S.Sp., *A Listening Church, Autonomy and Communion in African Churches* and my presentation titled, *The Church in Nigeria and the Spirit of Synodality: Conversion of Structures for Mission* at the Biennial Interactive Session of the CBCN with the Joint Conference of Major Superiors in Nigeria on September 8, 2023.

Co-responsibility implies having a laity that is well grounded in faith and who have the spirit of the Church. Such lay faithful do much more than pay, pray and obey. They take responsibility with the priest as those sharing in the common priesthood of Christ in the work of Jesus Christ and in the mission of the Church. We must make provision for the formation of such lay faithful. I therefore direct that a School of Theology and Spirituality be organized for the lay faithful. I entrust this task to Rev. Fr. Charles Mmaduekwe under the supervision of Msgr. Jerome Madueke. I know that you will

encounter some challenges with regard to infrastructure. But they are challenges which can be overcome. Be assured of our assistance as you go about this task.

Let me also report an initiative that has already been taken. I have inaugurated the Vocations Promoters Committee – Catholic Diocese of Ekwulobia (VPC-CADEK). This is aimed at encouraging the lay faithful to be at the forefront of the promotion of vocation to the priesthood in CADEK through prayers, networking and fundraising. Formation is key; it is capital intensive and requires collaboration of all. As priests, care for the seminarians. Pay close attention to them, not to spot mistakes and write damning reports, but to guide them as your brothers. I have also asked members of VPC-CADEK to do the same thing. I have also granted them permission to visit parishes and raise awareness about vocations and the need to support the diocese in this duty. Please give them the support they need to carry out this service in our diocese.

Before my concluding remarks, let me draw attention to the need for us to develop a maintenance culture in our parishes. Effect repairs timely. Pay attention to cleanliness and orderliness. More concretely, I direct that parish priests of the thirty-five dedicated churches in our diocese, invite the Liturgy and Inculturation Commission at least three months to the anniversary of the dedication of their Church for an inspection. I will communicate to the Commission the list of minor repairs I will grant a standing permission to effect. Parishes concerned will be expected to effect those repairs before the anniversary.

CONCLUSION

Rev. and dear Frs., I have a lot to thank God and to thank you for regarding the life of the Church in CADEK. Many of us are doing our best in our various fields of apostolate. The solidarity within our Presbyterium is enviable and we want to keep making it stronger. “It is by your love for one another, that everyone will recognize you as my disciples” (Jn 13:35). May we keep this in mind always. On that note, I will recommend that we think and feel this Presbyterium as our family. Draw my attention or that of the Episcopal Vicar for the Clergy to anyone or anything that needs special attention in the service of the solidarity within the Presbyterium. Consider also bequeathing something in your will towards the welfare of retired priests. We are committed to having a robust arrangement for the care of our retired priests. We have entered into discussion with our priests in diaspora, and all those working in Nigeria who are entitled to pension about the possibility of pooling all these resources together and deploying them for running a world-class retirement facility for priests. On that note, I enjoin on all to explain to your family and friends about the need to support the diocese in taking good care of her retired priests.

Still on solidarity in our Presbyterium, I want the 5th anniversary of our Diocese to be something like a Mass Return Year. I want all our priests to have opportunity to stay together for a period – most probably for the annual retreat. This will make it possible for those at home and those in diaspora to have at least one week of being together, praying together, fraternizing and knowing each other. I leave it to our brother priests in diaspora – those in the Americas and those in Europe – to agree among themselves

about the month and week most convenient. I believe that with a year's notice, one would be able to obtain the necessary permission to travel.

In view of the Mass Return, we need to get the Retreat/Spiritual Year formation Centre, ready for use. A lot has already been done. We want as many persons, families and groups to participate in financing the project. The cost of furnishing a room stands at ₦380,000 (three hundred and eighty thousand naira). We have eighty-eight (88) rooms excluding the common rooms in the first Block. We therefore need a total of about ₦33,440,000.00 (thirty-three million, four hundred and forty thousand naira). Please, we will appreciate it if you can afford to further support the project, or if you can get yourselves as a group or mobilize your family members or friends to come over to Macedonia and help us. The account to pay into is: Catholic Diocese of Ekwulobia Spiritual Year Seminary Project, Zenith Bank, 1017359004.

Once more, I wish you all a wonderful New Year. May God lead us safely through the year and grant us the grace of his abiding presence in our lives.

† Peter Ebere Cardinal Okpaleke

Bishop of Ekwulobia