

**AS YOU GO, PROCLAIM, ‘THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS AT HAND’
(Matt 10:7)**

Homily of His Eminence, Peter Ebere Cardinal Okpaleke, at St. Ignatius Parish and Holy Name Parish Nashville, for the 11 Sunday in Year B, on June 18, 2023

PREAMBLE

My dear friends, I am happy to share the Lord’s table with you. This is the heart of our faith as Catholics. That Jesus Christ, in obedience to the Father and love for humanity, took flesh in the Blessed Virgin Mary, lived like us, suffered, died, and was raised to life. But before his saving death on the Cross, he gave us himself in the form of bread, the Eucharist, a communion in love and of love, to nourish and strengthen us. Thus, because we have one loaf, all of us, though many are one in Jesus Christ. We are brothers and sisters, children of the same Father – God – and members of the Body of Christ – the Holy Mother Church. This is why it is possible that we, coming from all over Africa, can share the Eucharist with you in acknowledgement of our belonging together in the one family of God. I heard someone jokingly refer to your parish community as the United Nations because people from all parts of the world gather, united in their faith around the Lord’s table, to pray and fellowship. This is wonderful.

As we gather today, we carry the wounds of our continent. I was in Dallas last week. A man walked up to me and introduced himself as coming from Angola. He fled his country in the 80s. He thought that things would normalize soon and he would go back to his country. But, according to him, things have been going from bad to worse. He is stuck here. Another grandmother from Nigeria with tears in her eyes, complained to me that her daughter is literally holding her hostage. They would not allow her go home and be in her home because of insecurity. Another from South Sudan, came up with a request for prayers for his country. We can continue to multiply examples. But all of us are affected by the things happening back home, in our different countries. Those of you out here suffer even more. You live in a society that is organized. This raises the tormenting question: why are things going on differently in Africa? Is anything wrong with us? I can assure you that nothing is wrong with us. But we must work on ourselves, make utmost use of the graces given us by God, to bring about the Africa of our dream. This is the challenge of the readings today. But before then, we pray, in a special way, for all the countries and communities torn apart by war, especially those war that have lasted so long that they are now forgotten. We pray for peace in South Sudan. We pray for our different countries and peoples.

Today is Fathers’ Sunday. We congratulate the Fathers and remind them, as St. Paul tells us in Eph 3:15 that every fatherhood takes its name from God, the

Father. This means that like God, they are expected to embody sacrificial love and care for their families. They are expected to be shadows of God the Father in their families. As Pope Francis reminds us in his Apostolic Letter, *Patris Corde*, given on the 150th Anniversary of the Proclamation of St. Joseph as the Patron of the Universal Church: “Fathers are not born, but made. A man does not become a father simply by bringing a child into the world, but by taking up the responsibility to care for that child. Whenever a man accepts responsibility for the life of another, in some way he becomes a father to that person.” So, let us embrace this noble vocation of accepting responsibility for the life of others. That is the way to be a father. Let us emulate St. Joseph, the model presented to us by the Church.

I want to recommend, to the fathers and also to the mothers, QUALITY PRESENCE. The emphasis is on quality. It is not just being at home, maybe watching television and others are in their rooms playing video games etc. As a carpenter, Joseph most probably worked from home. But many of you have to put in long hours at work to earn money not just for your needs and an extra to remit to your dependents at home, but also for your WANTS. Remember that capitalism thrives by making all consumers through adverts. Have you ever wondered why you are bombarded with adverts all the time? Simply! To increase your appetite. Make you want to buy this product and discard what you had. To buy that, you need money. To get money, you work longer hours. This means less time with your family. Before you know it, you begin to live to work, instead of working to live. No time to attend to yourself or to your family. But I can assure you that your child or children will appreciate the time you spend and play with them more than the latest gadget you buy for them. So, remember, PRESENCE is important. That is why God gave us the Eucharist to be present to us. Dear fathers and, I can also add, mothers, be present to your families. Do so, even if, grandma or grandpa is also there. That way you will be in their lives and pass on the traditional values, the stories and dreams that shaped you back home in Africa. Once more, we congratulate the Fathers.

The readings today draw attention to two basic things. I have decided to articulate them as two questions. I formulate each of the questions in the singular and in the plural. The questions are: Who are you? Who are we? on the one hand. And, what are you called to do? What are we called to do? on the other hand. Let us start with the first.

WHO ARE YOU? WHO ARE WE?

This question can be answered in many ways. One way is to say we are Africans. I want you to keep this answer in mind as we reflect on another way of answering that question.

Last Sunday, we celebrated the Solemnity of the Most Holy Eucharist – the Corpus Christi. We were reminded that we are a Eucharistic People – a people called and nourished by the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. I know that if we, the Christians, and there are many of us in Africa, take seriously our identity as Eucharistic people, the challenges in Africa and indeed all over the world would be addressed from the root. I know that some people have given up on this. The enormity of the problems have made some people despair. But, you do not have to. Remember, all the crises in the world – economic, political, technological, etc. – can be traced back to human beings and the structures they create. If you reshape the human being, their priorities, their dominant visions of life, the way they relate with each other, etc., you reshape the world. So, human formation is basic. That is why Jesus did not focus on overthrowing the Roman occupying forces in Palestine, but preached love. He sought to change the way human beings saw and related to themselves. Let us get back to the readings.

The readings today give a background to our call to be Eucharistic people. We are reminded that just as God chose the Israelites from among the nations, in the same way, God has chosen you, God has chosen us – individually and collectively – as God’s people. This choice is personal and is based on love. Not our love for God but God’s love for us. In other words, God chose us unconditionally to be God’s own people; to be in relationship with him. This is the foundation of our Christian life. In the Responsorial Psalm, we are reminded that “we are God’s people, the sheep of his flock” and in the second reading from St. Paul’s letter to the Romans, it is brought again to our attention that Christ died for us even while we were still sinners. This shows us the depth of God’s love; assures us of its unconditionality and invites us to abandon ourselves and flow with this divine love.

Unfortunately, many of us Christians neither reckon with nor feel this deep love of God in our lives. For some, Christianity is reduced to a set of rituals to be followed to please a God who is distant. To others it is a set of moral rules to be followed for fear of eternal damnation. But God is not distant. God is closer to us than our own breath. “In God, we live, move and have our being.” Knowing who we are as Christians entails taking seriously this exciting vision of God’s nearness to you personally in love. Christianity is not primarily about commandments. Yes, there are rules to follow. But what is primary is love. God is love and when we open ourselves to this love, there is an energy in us that makes us live and do

things in the right way. Let us remember the example of Zacchaeus. Through his encounter with Jesus, he experienced the love of God and had the courage and motivation to change his life and live according to the commandments of God. More fundamental in Zacchaeus' encounter with the love and acceptance shown him by Jesus is that it helped him accept and love himself. Remember, he was a short man. Remember he was also a tax collector. He was looked down upon as a corrupt collaborator with the Romans. Jesus showed him love and this helped him to accept himself. This is what divine love can do for you, for our politicians back home, for the warlords, for the lecturer who extorts money from the students, etc. Divine love helps us love ourselves despite our imperfections. When we do that, we can then return God's love and keep the commandments which, by the way, are for our good. Love is the greatest force that changes people for good. That is what we need in our homes, in Africa, in the whole world.

Who are you? Who are we? You are a child of God. We are children of God. You have been chosen specially and personally by God in love. Please do not ever forget this. We are called together in the Church to share this love among ourselves and with the whole of creation.

WHAT ARE YOU CALLED TO DO? WHAT ARE WE CALLED TO DO?

We have already answered the question of what we are called to do. We are called to share the Good News of the wonderful love of God with the whole world. We are called to become witnesses to the wonderful and live giving love of God. We bear witness first and foremost through our lives. God gives us purpose. God's love, like salt, gives flavor to our lives. It shapes the way we think, feel, relate, and respond to people and events. We are called to consciously become witnesses to Christ.

In the Gospel we listened to, Jesus called and sent out his disciples to preach the Good News. Jesus said: "the harvest is abundant. But the laborers are few." I often wonder if what we have today is harvest or rather challenges. The Gospel is challenged by alternate visions of life. The Christian way of life is daily challenged and presented as irrelevant and old-fashioned. I believe that these challenges are meant to become opportunities for all of us, each according to his or her station and situation in life, to bear witness to the transforming power of the Good News. Our Lord sends us into the world to make his teaching known and not to be changed by public opinion through the social media. The media and public opinion should not be allowed to pollute our faith. The social media should rather be an instrument to enable us propagate the true faith unadulterated.

As we continue to bear witness to Christ in the various stations and situations of our lives, I want to draw attention to the family as the first place to sow the seed of the Gospel in people's lives. The importance of the family in the faith formation of individuals cannot be over-emphasized. It is understandable why it is so. The family is the context where people's ability to receive and accept love is shaped. That is why we spoke above about quality presence. Quality presence communicates this love more than expensive gifts. It creates a bond and a network of support.

The family is the domestic church. One's formation in and experience of one's family, shapes one's attitude and colors one's experience of the Church. Please, may parents be aware of the delicate task entrusted to their care. In the Gospel, Jesus gave his disciples the power to drive out unclean spirits, to cure diseases and every illness. I dare to say, exaggerating it a little bit, that God gave parents the power to forestall the situation in which unclean spirits will find a place in the lives of their children or that they will suffer any spiritual or mental illness. God hands over to them a brand new soul. If they mould this new life handed over to them according to the vision of the creator, the unclean spirits will have no place to take control. That is, if the parents do a good job, the individual stands a better chance of developing well and being rooted in God in spite of the contemporary challenges to the Christian vision and way of life. If they do a shoddy job, the consequences are enormous. So, I want parents to take seriously their commission by Jesus to preach the good news in their families; let them take seriously the task of making their families approximate the Kingdom of God – a Kingdom of justice, love, peace, truth and goodness. In other words, may parents seek to make their families communities of love, truth, peace, goodness, and justice. If we train up our children in these values and encourage them to engage in public life with these values, then all facets of public life will change. I have an example to back up my claim. Those of you familiar with Nigerian politics must have heard of Peter Obi. He is not perfect as none of us is. But his greatest asset is living above Mr. board, according to the values of our faith. As governor of my State Anambra, he showed that corruption and personal enrichment of oneself with public fund, does not run in our blood as Africans. Train up your children to have and to live by such strong values. Let them run for public offices. You can also run for such offices and make a difference. That is our hope for Africa.

For all of us, let us accept the responsibility of caring for one another and in this way mirroring the love of God who cares for the flowers in the field and loves us and has identified totally with us in our Lord Jesus Christ, who remains among us in the Holy Eucharist. May we come to the Lord always in the Eucharist and allow ourselves to be energized to embody and demonstrate this love of God in

our everyday lives. And may God who has called us to be his witnesses help us become light of the world and salt of the earth – Amen.

✠ *Peter Ebere Cardinal Okpaleke*

Bishop of Ekwulobia