

TWENTY THIRTY FIVE

Speech of His Lordship, Most Rev. Peter Ebere Okpaleke, Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Ekwulobia, at the 51st Convocation ceremony of Bigard Memorial Seminary Enugu on March 19, 2022

Protocol

Rev. and dear Fr. Albert Ikpenwa, the Rector

Rev. and dear Fr. Formators,

Dear Seminarians

Distinguished guests

Preamble

It is with joy that I address you this morning. As already mentioned at Mass, today is a very significant day. We celebrate the solemnity of St. Joseph, the husband of Mary, and the patron of our Diocese, the Catholic Diocese of Ekwulobia (CADEK). Let me call your attention again to the need to imitate the virtues that shine out in the life of St. Joseph. Priests are called to be, like St. Joseph, foster-fathers of the many children who God entrusts to our care. Without biological connection to these children, would you be motivated to give your all and be selflessly dedicated to the good of the people of God? This among other things is what we see in the life of Joseph.

The title of my convocation address is “Twenty Thirty Five – 2035”. Those of you acquainted with George Orwell’s novel, *Nineteen Eighty Four* (1984) would connect easily with the thought and the challenge I want to present to you. In the year 1944, George Orwell, the English novelist, started work on his novel which was published in 1949 under the title *Nineteen Eighty Four* (1984). In this work of social science fiction, he extrapolated from life under the socialist regime as it was experienced in his days into the future of what life under a fully developed totalitarian socialist regime would be like.

George Orwell had satirized socialism in his earlier novel, *Animal Farm*. Manor Farm was owned and managed by Mr. Jones, who used the animals to plough and do other things. He also sold animal produce. From the money realized, he spent on the animals the minimum to keep them healthy and fit to do more work. He kept the rest as profit. Mr. Jones stood for the bourgeois capitalists and the animals stood for the expropriated proletariats. Then, the animals revolted. They chased Mr. Jones out, took over the management of the farm, changed the name to Animal Farm and started organizing the animal

community according to the principle of freedom and equality as enshrined in the new philosophy – Animalism. It turned out that the relationship in Animal Farm soon took a bad turn. Equality of all was modified to read: “All animals are equal, but some are more equal than others.” The consolidation of the power of the pigs, especially Napoleon, not only led to the use of the hound dogs for the enforcement of his dictatorial will but also to the manipulation of the truth.

In *Nineteen Eighty Four*, Orwell continued his analysis of the implication of the manipulation of the truth in a communist society. He painted the image of a society where everyone spied on everyone for the benefit of Big Brother – the communist party. With the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989, it was discovered, that one in every thirty East German was an informant to the secret police and one in every three was under surveillance.¹ In other words, Orwell writing in 1944 projected that by 1984, communist society would be one where truth is manipulated through propaganda and the populace kept in check through active surveillance. This projection was borne out in 1989 with the Fall of the Berlin Wall.

I cannot claim to have an imaginative power close to that of George Orwell. Moreover, his task is simpler than what I have embarked upon. He charted the course of the development of an ideology. This is easier than extrapolating from the socio-cultural, economic and political situation as it is related to Igbo Catholicism in 2022 in preparation for a more vibrant Igbo Catholicism in 2035. However difficult this may be, it is something we cannot avoid. As a Church in Igboland, as a seminary, as seminarians, we must be projecting into the future and extrapolating therefrom, to review and fine-tune what we are doing in the present in preparation for engaging that future. It is this this process, this cybernetic relationship, that is, the circular causal feedback between the present and the future, more than the accuracy of my imagined future that I want to underline.

I have chosen to title this speech Twenty Thirty Five. This is thirteen years from now. By this year, even those who are in the 100 Level of their formation in Philosophy would have been ordained and exercised priestly ministry for a year or two. The deacons among you would have exercised ministry as priests for a little more than a decade. What would the situation be like in the society? What would be the face of Christianity in Igboland then? What challenges and prospects would priestly ministry face? How would such projections help one

¹ Laura William, [10 Terrifying Facts about the East German Secret Police - Foundation for Economic Education \(fee.org\)](http://fee.org)

position oneself vis-à-vis the anticipated future? How can the seminary train future priests to be able to face the challenges of this period? How would every seminarian prepare himself to face this adequately? In other words, what are the strengths to build upon, the weaknesses to shore up, the opportunities to harness, and the threats to counter or address to effectively respond to the challenges of ministry in Twenty Thirty Five and ensure a vibrant Igbo Catholicism? I have chosen to focus on Igbo Catholicism because about 99% of you in my audience belong to dioceses in Igboland. My hope is that the 1% not captured in my scope will adapt the thoughts and perspective to their context.

NIGERIA IN 2035?

In 1984, the popular Nigerian musician Sunny Okosun released an album, *Which Way Nigeria* in which he lamented the downward spiral in the country. Those of us who were already adults in 1984, know that compared to the situation today, things were rosy then. Then a dollar exchanged for 76 kobo. Today the exchange rate is a dollar to more than ₦560.00 (five hundred and sixty naira). Put differently, the naira equivalent of one dollar today used to be the approximate equivalent of \$700 in 1985. Let us take another example. In 1985, a litre of Premium Motor Spirit (PMS) sold for 20 kobo (not N20).² That means that to fill up a vehicle with a fuel tank capacity of 60 litres, one needed ₦12 (twelve naira) only. Today, one litre of PMS sells at about ₦200. In other words, 1000 litres of PMS in 1984 amount to 1 litre of PMS in 2022. Yet that was when Sunny Okosun was wondering which way Nigeria was going. In a sense, he is right. It was the missteps of those years – the wrong policy options, the acts of omissions and commissions – coupled with changes in the world socio-economic and political order that landed us where we are now.

What hope does 2035 hold? Although I am not a prophet of doom, I am not optimistic. Things may likely grow from bad to worse although I would like to be proved wrong on this. Whether there will be a Nigeria in 2035 is debatable unless honest and committed effort to redress many anomalies is made. Primary is the question of nationhood. As Olusegun Obasanjo, in the speech to mark his eighty-fifth birthday, said: “if in 2015 Nigeria was seventy-five per cent a country and fifty per cent a nation, today, Nigeria will not be more than fifty per cent a country and twenty-five per cent a nation.... If the drift is not halted, the remaining twenty-five per cent of Nigerian nation will be dissipated in no time

² O.C Ukah, An Empirical Analysis of the Impact of Gradual Withdrawal of Subsidy on Domestic Consumption of Premium Motor Spirit in Nigeria 1977-1999, https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKewiO9O_zlbT2AhWsk_OH_HXIIAWUQFnoECCIQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.ajol.info%2Findex.php%2Fafrev%2Farticle%2Fview%2F41002%2F8442&usg=AOvVaw33183NutSlrjxW4-zi5whJ

and Nigeria will not be a country but countries and will never be possible to be a nation again. That will be a monumental tragedy for Nigeria, Africa, the black race and humanity.”³ With the politicking about restructuring and the strident calls for secession, and the rampant political corruption, one gets the feeling captured in the title of Karl Maier’s book published in 2000: “This House has Fallen. Nigeria in Crisis.”⁴ Similarly, Mr. Peter Obi is said to have depicted the Nigerian situation with the image of a car whose engine has knocked.

In the light of the above, what are the prospects of fixing the “Nigerian vehicle” or rebuilding the “Nigerian house” to become the engine of positive socio-economic and cultural development? How easy and how soon can Nigeria dig herself out of the hole and be on the road to economic prosperity, peace and security? There are few positive indicators that this is going to happen so soon. Ethnic and religious politics, the skewed census and voters’ registration figures and festering corruption have conspired to poison the political process and space. Purposeful leadership and followership remain pipe dreams. Without these and other drivers, socio-economic prosperity cannot kick in. Thus, while we hope that by some special turn of events, there would be peace, security, and prosperity in the land in 2035, we however should prepare for the worse, especially in the light of the global effort to phase out fossil fuel, the main income earner of Nigeria. This means that we better prepare ourselves for a bumpy ride in subsequent years. There may be deepened socio-economic and political crises. What would be the demands of priestly ministry in such a context?

THE IGBO NATION IN 2035

There are three possible scenarios as regards the Igbo nation in 2035. The first scenario is Igbo nation in a restructured Nigeria. The second is Igbo nation struggling for independence in an unstructured Nigeria. The third is an independent Igbo nation. If Nigeria were to disintegrate, the geo-political configuration that would emerge would depend on whether Nigeria’s dismemberment was through peaceful negotiation or violent campaign. All these depend on whether the Russian-Ukrainian war will not escalate into World War with the threat of a nuclear holocaust. What is clear is that questions are being raised about the legitimacy and the continued existence of Nigeria. Yet, there are vested interests – local as well as international – especially among the political elite, for a cavalier approach to the question. Those who make

³ Olusegun Obasanjo, <https://www.thetrentonline.com/africa-narrative-with-nigeria-situation-olusegun-obasanjos-speech-to-mark-his-85th-birthday-must-read/>

⁴ Karl Maier, *This House has Fallen: Nigeria in Crisis* (New York: Basic Books, 2000, 2002).

peaceful change impossible, make violent change inevitable, to adapt a statement by John F. Kennedy, former President of the United States of America.

We are already living through the consequences of the violence. In the Southeast, “sit-at-home” has been added to the lexicon and people are now forced to spend Mondays indoors. Insurgents have taken over some parts of the country including Igboland. Violence is seeping into and shaping the psyche of our people. Prof. Wole Soyinka in 2015 made the distinction between confraternities and cult groups in an effort to rehabilitate the confraternities in the tertiary institutions of learning like the Pyrates, which he is said to have co-founded.⁵ This notwithstanding, the reality on ground is that the campus confraternities have degenerated into cults that celebrate senseless acts of violence as a way of intimidating others and curating a larger-than-life image. Cultism and what it stands for has percolated to the secondary schools and even among *okada* and *keke* riders. Worse still is the unconfirmed but worrisome news in circulation (even if fake) that ‘men of Religion in the Sanctuary’ are targeted for recruitment and initiation into cult groups.

It may be simplistic to attribute the social ills plaguing our society to the question of Nigeria. This is the sense one gets from some people who think that the establishment of an independent state of Biafra, for example, will solve all problems. This may reduce but cannot dispel the challenge of building up a common Igbo Nation. In my view, the seeming cohesiveness of the Igbo Nation is because of Nigeria. Without the saving grace of a Nigeria over and against which to delineate the Igbo identity, the cleavages and the struggle between, for example, *ndị Ngwa na ndị Ọhụhụ*; *ndị Anambra na ndị Imo*, *ndị Ngwo* and *ndị Udi*, etc, will become more prominent as groups mobilize primordial sentiments in their quest for the acquisition and retention of political power and position. The proliferation of firearms and the easy recourse to brute force rather than negotiation as seen in the struggle for the establishment of an Independent State of Biafra do not augur well for a clear headed and purposive response to the challenges of statehood if the State of Biafra were to be born.

IGBO CHRISTIANITY IN 2035

The face of Christianity is changing not only in Igboland but worldwide. This is expected because faith is in history. What is important is to follow the trajectory of change, to make sense of the changes by exploring their inner rationality and

⁵ Wole Soyinka, “Pirates Confraternity isn’t a Cult – Says Soyinka” [Pirates Confraternity isn’t a cult, says Soyinka - Vanguard News \(vanguardngr.com\)](https://www.vanguardngr.com/2015/07/pirates-confraternity-isnt-a-cult-says-soyinka/)

to position oneself in such a way to remain faithful to what has been received and to more effectively hand this on to future generation.

The rise of African Indigenous Christianity (AIC) predated and carried the seed of the struggle for independence from the colonial powers. Before Vatican II Council and the talk about inculturation, these forms of Christianity instituted indigenous leadership, valorized the use of local artforms in worship, and addressed indigenous problems such as spirit possession and reincarnation, etc. These notwithstanding, the AICs were seen as need-induced expressions of Christianity. That was why, in those days, there was the expression *e jighi anya oma eje uka ekpere*. In the 1970s, Pentecostal groups of the Holiness tradition gained prominence. There was the Faith Tabernacle, the Scripture Union, etc. These represented an ambiguous relationship to modernity. With a strict dress code in which the men often wore suits under the heat of the sun and the women did not make up, they preached holiness of life and separation from the world. This group targeted young undergraduates.

In the 1980s, the brand of Pentecostalism championed by the Word of Faith Movement that emphasized prosperity gained ascendancy. I remember watching the late Benson Idahosa on a black and white television claiming that he served a millionaire God. Then, it was a shocking assertion. Today, claims are no longer made about God being a millionaire or billionaire but promises of miraculous prosperity are held out for believers through the mediation of supposedly ‘power-full’ men and women of God. In other words, just as there are places called ‘miracle centres’ where students are aided by hook or crook to get excellent results in their WASSCE (West African Senior Secondary Certificate Examination), there are now ‘miracle centres’ where the ‘power-full’ man or woman ‘commands’ God to work miracles. That is why our streets are dotted with posters of young, well-groomed, and expensively attired, supposed men and women of God, advertising themselves as much as their Church or ministries and projecting opulence as divine promise.

I am sure that what is being described is well known to you. Many of you are also aware of the stories of fraud, fakery and manipulation told about these centres. More worrisome are the stories of supposed men and women of God obtaining their alleged spiritual powers from traditional medicine men; stories about traditional ritual objects found buried in such ministries. Such stories call to mind the confusion in Isaac’s mind when he felt Esau’s hands but heard Jacob’s voice. In our case, the name of Jesus is heard but there is a suspicion that one of the deities of traditional religion – udo, ogwugwu, etc – is at work. Whether such stories are true or false is not important. But they impact

negatively on the minds of people and on their views of Christianity. Some conclude that Christianity is a monumental fraud which must be replaced or resisted by all means. Others feel emboldened to re-appropriate Christianity into a core traditional religious worldview. This is what has given rise to what I call 'neo-Christianity' as exemplified in the ministry of such figures as Ephraim Ononye, *alias*, Onye Eze Jesus, "Aka na-asa uchu." While aligning himself to Jesus at least in name, the cosmology behind his practice is decidedly traditional. The deity he claims to be at work is also traditional – the river goddess.

What is traced above, even if sketchily, is how 'neo-Christianity' is the obverse side of Pentecostalism or more precisely the prosperity version of Pentecostalism. In 'neo-Christianity,' the emphasis is on power – '*i bute ike*' – the acquisition of spiritual power. In Pentecostalism, this spiritual power is still linked with the Holy Spirit. But in 'neo-Christianity,' this link is obscured. Implicitly, it is presented as an innate quality of the carrier who ritually manipulates the spirit world to achieve his or her purpose. Thus, the Christian notion of God as personal and sovereign as well as the centrality of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ are eclipsed. What is left is a shell of Christianity. At the core is a demonstration of spiritual power to manipulate reality to the whim and caprice of the power wielder.

This turn, in my opinion, sheds light on the emerging trend of anti-Christian militancy among young people and the resurgence of neo-traditional religious practices. In February, a video clip of a young man from a community in my diocese trended in our diocesan WhatsApp platform. He was proudly burning the bible and uttering blasphemies. Some individuals in some communities in my diocese have instituted a parallel celebration on Sundays – *Uka Eke*, *Uka Ori*, etc. In our communities, many young men and women have gone back to traditional religious practices. In one of the video clips, the adherents of the traditional religious practice were striking the '*ofo*' on the ground while praying for the death of evil doers in the community. Two things struck me from that video. First, that the Christian vision of God who allows both the wheat and the tare to grow together till harvest time (Matt 13:24-43) stands rejected. It seems that the increasing ills in society has necessitated a preference for retribution rather than the Christian ideal of love of enemy and prayer for his or her repentance. Second, the ills presented for divine sanction include what ordinarily cannot be policed by law enforcement agents or prosecuted in the court of law. For example, the earth, *ana*, was asked to strike dead those who stall other people's progress through occult means. This is an indication that the

socio-economic and political situation of the country is implicated in the reinvention of traditional religious ideals which are deployed in response. One can therefore conclude that as the situation worsens, resurgence of traditional religious practices would be on the increase.

Finally, let me draw your attention to the religious implication of the IPOB redefinition of Igbo nationalism. Who is *Chukwu Okike Abiama*? Is *Chukwu Okike Abiama* the same as *Chukwu*? I do not think so. The former evokes IPOB and all it stands for as contrasted with *Chukwu* and Christianity implicitly presented as non-indigenous. How would this subtle shift in the use of concept play out in the psyche of the many young people who have embraced it?

IGBO SOCIETY IN 2035

The last vista I want us to focus on is Igbo society in 2035. What would be the possible dominant features of Igbo society, the context of your ministry, in 2035? Reflections in the other sections build up to this. There we have looked at changes in some domains of life. In this section we draw out the implications of these changes and trends on Igbo people taking into consideration the peculiar dynamic introduced by the revolution in ICT (Information and Communications Technologies).

Changes in technology change the material and social environment and ultimately the human beings themselves. Before the advent of writing, our fathers had phenomenal memories. For example, during bereavement, they effortlessly memorized those who condoled with them and what material they came with. They could reel off folklores all night long and recount histories. Presently, this capacity is almost lost. With the advent of writing, people feel no need to push themselves to actively commit things to memory. In like manner, the ICT revolution has changed human beings, seminarians included. I will draw attention to some of these changes.

Time was when there were no televisions and telephones. Every form of entertainment and relaxation was communal and active. People learnt songs and group dances which helped their experience of community. Today, entertainment has become entirely privatized. People move about with earpieces stuck into their ears and listening to music, oblivious of whatever is going on in the physical space they inhabit. People can watch any television channel or play video games anytime, anywhere and with anyone from any corner of the globe in the comfort of their rooms from their smart phones. Gradually a sense of community is being replaced by that of a virtual community. People are more interested in Facebook than in physical faces and books. There is increasing

addiction to the phones and by extension to social media. Communication is more with people in the virtual rather than in the physical space. Virtuality with the quasi-anonymity it offers and the ease of switching from one chat room to another, is being preferred over the hard but rewarding task of encountering and becoming friends with a human being physically present. With the popularity of virtual space, a new but fragile mode of self-validation has emerged as people aspire to hit the 1 million or more followers, subscribers, thumps-up or likes of their Blog, Twitter, Instagram posts. This is gradually turning people into performers, people externally driven – striving to put up show to garner accolades from a virtual community. The result is that many young people today have very fragile identity because their identity largely depends on external sources rather than on their interior belief in themselves. Many people create YouTube Channels where they disseminate whatever (mis)information they feel that would bring them popularity.

Having eliminated the publisher, who in earlier media formats was tasked with ensuring truth and quality and served as gatekeeper to the public space, social media offer people the opportunity of pushing into the public space, materials that should belong to the private sphere. A mother uploaded on her Facebook page pictures of her two toddlers having breakfast. What for? A female religious uploaded to TikTok, clips of herself in her religious habit, dancing and wiggling her waist. What an aberration? We are all aware that people are more interested in capturing and uploading pictures of persons in need than in helping them out. Few years ago, such was not possible because only professional photographers had cameras. Now it is rampant because everyone carries a camera and feeding the social media loop is paramount. How would the situation be like in 2035? Would most people then be interested in addressing concrete situations of need rather than projecting themselves and feeding social media with images? Would it be right to fear a growing self-absorption because of the interaction with ICT and inability to focus attention for any extended period? How would people understand and demarcate between the private and the public? These are questions to direct attention.

The ICT revolution has also provided outlet for criminal tendencies. Recently, the story was about a ‘do-it-yourself’ money making ritual. Three young boys followed instructions found on Facebook on the ritual and this resulted in the death of a young girl.⁶ The spate of kidnapping both for ransom and more recently for capturing SIM cards are crimes made possible by ICT. Overall, as long as the security arrangements are not robust enough to deter crime,

⁶ [We got tips for money rituals on Facebook, say self-confessed killers of Sofiat | TheCable](#)

criminals will continue to be emboldened. In as much as many people live according to values handed down by religion, a troublesome few would always seek to upset the balance making it imperative that trustworthy security apparatuses be put in place. Technology, however, has aided the work of such agencies while also opening up other challenges. In sum, 2035 is not likely to see a reduction in crime rate in Igboland as long as other socio-cultural, political, economic and technological challenges are not addressed.

IGBO CATHOLICISM IN 2022

A lot can be said about Igbo Catholicism today. In view of the task at hand, I will focus on a few negative elements, and I will concentrate on matters that bother on priests and their ministry.

Priestly availability and readiness to work are on the decrease. During the time of the missionaries, Adazi Parish encompassed the whole of Awka and Ekwulobia Dioceses and part of Okigwe Diocese. There were about two priests working in the parish under very difficult conditions. They were often on *trek*, on foot, bicycle or motorcycle. Imagine the difference in living condition between Europe, where they came from and Africa, where they came to work. They toiled together with local catechists and gathered the Catholic communities that we have. Today, there are more than five hundred priests in Awka and Ekwulobia Dioceses and about three hundred priests exercising ministry in the same area serviced by two missionaries. Because we still see people filling the Church we care less if our Catholics are leaving the Church. Instead, some priests care more about the various league matches. Some cancel *Nkuzi nke okwukwe* (Sunday evening instruction) and Benediction to watch the *La Liga*, for example. Some just do the minimum and show no commitment to evangelization of the people. When appointed chaplains of the lay organizations, they rarely show up. Yet, they have time to attend burials of people unknown to them just for the brown envelop. In sum, these priests feel entitled to their comfort and use the priesthood as stepping stone to their other ambitions.

The ambition of some is to become rich and famous. One way to this is the cultivation of the *persona* of being filled with excess spiritual power. Recall what we said above about “*i bute ike.*” Some priests have indeed become indistinguishable from Pentecostals both in their teaching and other activities. Sadly, some begin in the seminary to prepare for this. Instead of learning the rudiments of Catholic theology and how to appropriate the Church’s rich and

balanced tradition into the Igbo worldview, they digest the often simplistic worldview presented by Pentecostal pastors.

The vocation boom in Igboland has also induced anxiety among some priests and seminarians. Some feel that there are already many priests and fear whether there will still be spaces in the rectories and apostolate for them. Others doubt priestly fraternity. In reaction, they set out to secure themselves. Some establish business ventures without the requisite permission. Others focus more on personal comfort, present and future. All these compromise devotion and availability for priestly ministry.

The last point I want to draw attention to is the negative bias that Catholicism suffers and which we must correct. The bias is of two kinds. The first derives from her long history with both edifying and not so edifying contents as well as a dominant image as a powerful and wealthy institution, hierarchically organized. Because of this, some relate to the Church more as an institution to be patronized for the ritual marking of significant life transitions like birth, wedding and deaths, etc. In this view, the spiritual import of her existence and ministry is glossed over. Among priests, this one-sided bias results in models of ministry focused on the enhancement of the power and prestige of the Church and of the priest, sometimes through the construction of edifices. The second and related bias consigns the Catholic Church in Igboland to the old order which is accounted for as having failed. This is the driving force behind the resurgence of neo-traditional religious practices and popularity of Pentecostalism. The challenge is to re-present the Church as sign and instrument of intimate communion with God and unity of humanity (*Lumen Gentium* 1). Igbo Catholicism in 2035 must contend with projecting and living this essence of the Church.

TOWARDS A VIBRANT IGBO CATHOLICISM: 2035 AND AFTER

What will be considered vibrant Igbo Catholicism? It is a Church that exists, and is also perceived to exist, primarily to foster intimate personal loving relationship with God and with others, in Christ Jesus, through the power of the Holy Spirit. This is the substance of the description of the Church in the paragraph of *Lumen Gentium* quoted above. The vibrancy of a Church is not necessarily measured by the size of its membership; the value of its assets or its political clout but by how much it serves the Kingdom of God; how much it is a community of witness to God's love. Being disciples, the Church is supposed to be salt of the earth and light of the world (Matt 5:13-16). The metaphors of salt and light highlight the fact that the Church does not exist for herself. She has a

mission to the world which is served most by fostering communion with God such that people no longer live for themselves and by human standards but for Christ who died and was raised to life for them (2 Cor 5:15). The Church is in the service of the Kingdom of God which is asymptotically realized on earth to the extent that people allow themselves and their relationships to be continually transformed and guided by the values of the Kingdom. Put differently, a vibrant Church is one that has invested and continues to invest in building up human beings as temples of the Holy Spirit, those moved by the Spirit in their engagement with life.

The summary sketch of the profile of a vibrant Church given above placed side by side with the socio-cultural, economic and political projection regarding the life-context of priestly ministry in 2035 demands review of our pastoral priorities and strategies and a redoubling of efforts. There is no better place to draw attention to this than the Seminary where the core personnel of the Church are trained.

Igbo Christianity, particularly Igbo Catholicism is faced with daunting challenges. Addressing these challenges involves going back to the core mission of the Church which is sustaining the community of the faithful in their personal relationship with God and with one another, through the celebration of the Word and the sacraments and in their witness to others of God's love and desire for fullness of life for all. This demands of pastoral agents, passion and zeal for God's kingdom. There is need now, more than ever for these agents, especially priests, to be consumed by zeal for God's house (Jn 2:17). This zeal must not however be misguided. A combination of zeal and balance in personality comes from having as the foci of one's life the love of God and commitment to continuous growth and maturity, in other words, ongoing conversion to God. One can then ask: is this being fostered by the seminary formation process? For a response to this important question and how the seminary formation can be made to foster the love of God in the hearts of seminarians, see the book by one of the priests of my diocese, Rev. Fr. Cornelius Okeke with the title *Love has to be the Reason*.⁷

In his Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, Pope St. John Paul II outlined four main foci of the seminary formation: intellectual, spiritual, human, and pastoral. What Fr. Cornelius Okeke underlines thickly is that these four areas must have a unified focus: fostering in the seminarians the love of

⁷ Cornelius Okeke, *Love has to be the reason: Rethinking the formation of African Priests and Religious Today*, (Ibadan: St. Paul, 2019).

God or grounding them in the mystery of a God who is love. What happens often is that this unity is lacking. Seminarians study philosophy and theology without these studies being related to any personal quest for the God who is love. This is why our studies are often shallow because there is not much personal investment. For example, seminarians study Fredrich Nietzsche or Karl Rahner. They memorize some things these authors have written without seeking to understand the underlying questions and basic experiences from which their thoughts flow. Memorization is often for the purpose of passing the examination and not for personal growth. Studying for personal growth demands more. It demands understanding the writers within the generative matrix of their thoughts that one can evaluate and appropriate elements therein for one's personal journey of life and of faith. This is often lacking in the approach of many to studies.

In the subtitle of his doctoral work, Rev. Fr. Vincent Ekezuike, a priest of Ekwulobia diocese, insists that there is a *Spirituality of Studies for the Priest*.⁸ I agree totally with him. Every philosophical question, even if posed by an agnostic or an atheist, takes a stand on issues of ultimacy and the ground of reality. The spirituality of studies is therefore not about preaching in the classroom but about making explicit, issues about ultimacy which even trivial comments presuppose. This is where, my dear formators, you have a huge task. Yours is the hard task of helping our seminarians learn to probe beyond the surface and superficialities into the depth and foundations of whatever is presented. In hindsight, I remember and remain grateful to some of our lecturers who gave us the gentle nudge in our seminary days to dive deeper. This part of the formation process is even more demanded today that the ICT revolution inundate people with information and sensory stimulation, encourage superficiality while discouraging rigorous thinking and commitment.

Dear formators, you are privileged to contribute towards a vibrant Igbo Catholicism in 2035 through mentoring. This is a very important aspect of your ministry. First, growing up in this age is very challenging. I dare say that growing up today is more challenging than in years past. Then, life was more laid back and there was greater cohesion. Today, the pace of life is fast and there are multiple and divergent views, ways of life and convictions jostling for attention. Many young people tend to float along. This is where a mentor comes in to show the young person the value of commitment to ideals. A mentor helps the mentee to weigh carefully the multiple opinions seeking attention. Like one

⁸ Vincent Ekezuike, *The Importance of Study (Intellectual Formation) in the Life and Ministry of the Priest: (The Spirituality of Study for the Priest)* Rome, 2001.

who knows the way, a mentor supports the young one as he finds his way in life. In the seminary context, a mentor has the second task of helping the young seminarian realize that life in the seminary is not about taking care not to be caught. It is unfortunate that for many seminarians the formation process is framed negatively – by all means, **do not be caught**. A mentor helps one to see that the formation process is in the service of growth. One may make mistakes, but the tragedy is a mistake that one learns nothing from. With the teeming number of seminarians, I know that the formators will be stretched thin. But do what is possible.

Finally, let me make a few comments about some elements in the seminary system. Holy Scripture is one of the key sources of our faith and the ministry of the Word is an essential pastoral duty. Yet, the exposure of our seminarians to Holy Scripture is limited to the academic approach as represented in higher criticism and the historical critical method. These approaches have no room for faith. But recently, Pope Emeritus, Benedict XVI in his trilogy *Jesus of Nazareth*, has engaged the academic issues and moves beyond them to build a ground for faith in Jesus and the use of the Scriptures for prayer and contemplation. This is a very important and sorely needed journey to make to overcome the tendency of training out priests who take the Sacred Scripture as any other book of history.

In our seminary days, homiletics was not taken seriously. It was only done for a semester. I do not remember learning much. Yet, the ministry of the Word is a very important part of the priest's ministry. Christ feeds his flock through a good homily. Yet, for many Catholics, homily is one of those events at Mass. They do not look forward to being fed, encouraged or challenged on their spiritual journey. Some come back from Mass and then tune in to any of the many TV Channels, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, to be nourished spiritually. For some priests, the homily is a duty often performed perfunctorily, with poor preparation and delivery. How can the seminary help in giving our priests the skills to prepare and deliver better homilies? How can we make our liturgy something that Catholics look forward to for their spiritual nourishment rather than an obligation they fulfill for fear of committing sin?

CONCLUSION

It has indeed been a journey. Our reflection has taken us into different areas of life in society and in the Church. One thing that comes out clearly is that life in 2035 will be challenging. I pray that I am wrong on that count. But even if not, it is better we are prepared. As the saying goes, when the going gets tough, the

tough get going. Now is the time to prepare ourselves for the journey. We must however not give in to activism. We need to do our bit. Yes. But we must remember that is God's Church. It is the Holy Spirit who brings people to God. We must also not grow complacent. God always demands our five loaves of bread to be multiplied for all (Lk 9:16). We must not give in to anxiety either. Let us do our best in hope that ours, who is the God of history and who has promised to be with the Church till the end of the world, will assist us to contribute to the vibrancy of Igbo Catholicism in 2035 and beyond.

✠ Peter Ebere Okpaleke
Bishop of Ekwulobia