

A CUP OF COLD WATER (Matt 10:42)

Homily of His Eminence, Peter Ebere Cardinal Okpaleke on the 13th Sunday of Year A at St. Lawrence Church Tampa, Florida on July 1, 2023

My dear brothers and Sisters,

I am happy to be in your midst and above all for the privilege God has given each and everyone of us to share in the Eucharist and celebrate our oneness as Nigerians in Jesus Christ. I wish you all the best in the new month of July.

I thank Bishop Gregory Parkes for welcoming me warmly into the diocese. My appreciation to the pastor of this Church, Msgr. Mike Muir, and to all of you organizing this event.

My first and last visit to the United States was in 2001. Traveling is not one of my hobbies. But when duty calls, one must go. As the Bishop of my diocese, I have the need to come over and check on the priests of my diocese exercising ministry in the United States; know where they are working, the challenges they face, encourage and support them in their ministry. I have done so in the dioceses of Dallas and Rockville Center and the Archdiocese of New York.

Our diocese is a new one, created three years and four months ago. As a diocese, we want to be truly a family of God, where everyone feels at home as a child of God. As head of this family of God, I feel an obligation to accompany and support all the members of our diocesan family wherever they may be. This is part of why I am here to galvanize the lay faithful from my diocese to form a network of care and support for each other. I have priest appointed as the episcopal vicar for the laity. His duty is to liaise between anyone from the Catholic Diocese of Ekwulobia with the diocese. At times, some people need documents from home. Others may have suggestions or complaints. We feel there is need to have a channel of communication and a network of the CADEK lay faithful. CADEK, by the way is the acronym for Catholic Diocese of Ekwulobia. My senior brother and his wife, Dr. Andrew and CelinaMary Okpaleke, live here in the State. So, they have to be at the forefront of this diocesan project of forming CADEK laity USA. I thank them sincerely. To all of you, gathered from other parts of Nigeria, I am very delighted to be among you. Let us reflect on the readings of today.

A CUP OF COLD WATER

I want to share my thoughts with you on both the challenge and the promise that Jesus presents to us about giving a cup of cold water to one of the little

ones because the little one is a disciple. This is about hospitality or generosity extended to someone, not just because of who he or she is, but because he or she is a disciple – a follower of Jesus Christ.

I find it interesting that Jesus chose a cup of water, and not loaf of bread or cup of milk or piece of meat, as the item to challenge his audience with. Why did he do that? What deeper meaning could one glean from this choice? Potable water is a basic but costly necessity of life. In the arid climate of Middle East, have water to drink could be a matter of life or death. In different cultures, water is offered free of charge; not bought or sold, unlike what we have today. Potable water, precious and priceless though it was and continues to be, was not a commodity. That is why I think Jesus chose it to draw attention to the fact that what counts most is not the economic cost of what is given but the sensitivity, the love and care with which it is given. Like water, love, care, concern are not commodities though they are precious and priceless. Those must stand behind any act of generosity for the act to be truly what it should be. Put differently, love, care and concern should be the wellspring from which one gives. Once we cultivate this wellspring, our generosity will acquire a deeper meaning and spirituality.

The first reading illustrates this. Of her own accord, without any request from Elisha, the woman in the story made a representation to her husband about preparing a little room at the top of their house for Elisha. She reasoned that it would help the holy man of God. He would have a sure place to stop over and rest before continuing his journey. Remember, Elisha did not make any request. She was sensitive and sympathetic. Among the Igbo, there is saying, “*nchete ka!*” – what is primary is that the woman thought about the welfare of Elisha. This is the wellspring of the generous act of providing a resting place for Elisha. This is what Jesus is drawing our attention to. Jesus wants us to dig that wellspring, that disposition that will make us attentive to the needs of others and offer whatever we have – including a cup of cold water – to make life easier for them. With such a disposition, our generosity will be purified of many elements that otherwise can make it unwholesome.

The next question addressed by Jesus is about the recipient of our hospitality or generosity. Ordinarily, friends and family members come to mind. Jesus elevates our generosity to a sacred dimension. He is the recipient of our acts of generosity through his disciples.

“THE LITTLE ONE – THE DISCIPLES OF JESUS”

In the Gospel Jesus promised that anyone who shows hospitality by giving a cup of water to a prophet, a disciple or righteous man because he is a

prophet, disciple or righteous person, has shown the hospitality to Jesus himself. When Jesus said this, he was using a way of speaking which the Jews regularly used. The Jew always felt that to receive a person's envoy or messenger was the same as to receive the person himself. To pay respect to an ambassador was the same as to pay respect to the king who had sent him. To welcome with love the messenger of a friend was the same as to welcome the friend himself.

On behalf of all the ministers of the Church, I thank you all for your love, respect and generosity towards the ministers of the Church and your support of the Church, both here in the United States and back home. I know that some of you are very supportive of their parish communities at home. Thank you once more. Please continue to support us with your love and prayers.

Having said that, the second reading today challenges us to realize that all the baptized have died with Jesus and have also risen with him and therefore are called to a new life. Baptism is such a deep mystery which configures us to Jesus Christ and makes us sons and daughters of God. That is why all the baptized are addressed in 1 Peter 2:9 as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. All the baptized share in the priesthood of Jesus Christ and have a share in the mission of the Church to announce the Good News. In the families, the parents represent Jesus Christ. Parents and grandparents are the bishops, priests, and pastors in their families.

As a member of this family of God with you, I want to draw your attention to two things. First, I have observed that many of our people in diaspora do not take sufficient care of themselves. To pay their bills, execute some projects at home and respond to other requests especially from home, many work long hours. Many live to work instead of working to live. I have heard stories of people dropping in their places of work out of exhaustion. Please, take good care of yourself. Refuse to see yourself as the ATM for some people at home.

The second thing I have observed is that young families rarely have time to spend quality time with their children. This is because of the pressure of work. But remember that giving your kids the latest gadgets will not facilitate your bonding with them. Only your presence and your attention to them can.

Third, like those of us at home, many of you are suffering greatly, even in vicariously because of the situation back home in Nigeria. A grandmother approached me in Dallas and complained that her daughter was literally holding her hostage. She wants to go back to Nigeria. But the daughter keeps talking about the insecurity and would not let her. Who would you side in this situation? The daughter or the mother? Many of you have similar situations. It is quite unfortunate. But we must keep making effort. As we all pray, I will challenge you to review and renew the mode of engagement with

the situation back home. Many of you are successes in your various fields of endeavor. This shows that the problem is not in us as human beings, as Nigerians, as Africans. The problem is with our socio-cultural situation. We need to give our people cups of cold water. How can we do that? Besides remittance to family members, I will suggest that you look for trusted partners back home and see how to contribute and support quality education. Please, put behind the frustration generated by your previous efforts to partner with the government. Find other partners. What is clear is that we cannot afford to be unconcerned. We are the people to develop our place. In my view, quality and contextualized education is the way to go. We are open to further discussion if you have any questions and suggestions. As said, we have a commitment to give our people cups of cold water.

“WHOEVER LOVES FATHER OR MOTHER MORE THAN ME IS NOT WORTHY OF ME”

Finally, let us reflect on Jesus’ statement: “whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me.” This statement is liable to misunderstanding if interpreted literally. Jesus is not in competition with our fathers, mothers, or anybody for that matter for our love. Rather, Jesus wants us to love others, our parents included, as Jesus himself, loves us, that is, unconditionally and with total commitment. Not loving parents more than Jesus is therefore a challenge that we ensure that we love our parents and any other person the way Jesus has taught us and also to make our relationship with Jesus a primary relationship, one that we cannot trade for any other.

It is this relationship with Jesus that will help us despite previous disappointment and exploitation, commit again to giving our people cups of cold water. Such cups of cold water will take something out of us. That is the cross we must carry.

We pray God to help us as we bear this cross and work hard so that we will have a liveable community in Nigeria where people will have the opportunity to unfold to their full potential and contribute to making the world a better place. May we never cease in our prayers and hard work towards this end. Peace be with you.