

“IF THE SON SETS YOU FREE, YOU WILL INDEED BE FREE” (Jn 8:36)

Speech of His Eminence, Peter Ebere Cardinal Okpaleke, to CADEK Seminarians at the 2024 Reunion on August 20, 2024 at St. Dominic Savio Seminary Akpu

My dear Seminarians,

1. Preamble

I am happy to meet you again. Last year, I was not able to be with you for the Reunion and I promised to make up for it this year by devoting a whole week to you. But as days went by, it became clear to me that, on account of other equally important engagements, I would not be able to spend a day with you, much less a week. We reasoned that, *kama ehi anyi ga-agbanahu anyi, ka anyi mabiri ya odu*. That was why I squeezed out time on July 5, 2024 to meet with you before your apostolic work. At that time, we were planning to hold the Mass of Admission into Candidacy for Holy Orders at the Cathedral sometime in September before you go back to school. But it turned out that through some adjustments, I am able to be here, to welcome you back from apostolic work, as Jesus did to the apostles (Lk 9:10).

May I use this opportunity to appreciate your labours in the Lord’s vineyard. We challenged you to seek out our brothers and sisters who have declared that they have returned to our ancestral religion and find out what could be happening in their lives and what made them opt for that. It is my hope that your experiences during this period opened your eyes to the joys and challenges of pastoral ministry. I will go through your reports and educate myself on your findings.

At the Reunion last year, we reflected on the paradoxical situation of Jesus praising the dishonest steward and drew out the lesson therein. What is that lesson? Or rather the challenge posed? It is the challenge to develop situational awareness and emotional intelligence. It is my hope that since then, you have made some headway in cultivating these skills and competencies.

This year I want to draw your attention to a pressing issue – freedom. I chose to address you on this because we have a portent tool designed, with the capability, among other things, to hijack our minds and put us in chains. What is that tool? Or rather what is that collection of tools? Can any of you guess? Information Communication Technologies (ICT). All these come together in the most

common gadget that we all carry around – the smart phone. Don't get me wrong! ICT has a lot of good uses. But there is need to be aware of the potential dangers and threat to freedom.

2. Possibilities Unfolded by ICT

Many of you grew up in the age of televisions and telephones. This is not the case with us, the older folks. These gadgets were not yet widely in use. It was only in the 1980s, through the rural electrification schemes, that many of the communities were connected to the national grid. Electric power generators were not common. Then *egwu onwa* or tales by the moonlight were the favoured recreation under the starry sky.

I still remember my experience of making a telephone call. I remember it because it was like a dream. Thereafter, I kept marvelling at the fact that I could speak with someone in Lagos, hundreds of miles away. It was like a dream. Similarly, I remember the first time I watched a television. These experiences were, indeed, out of the ordinary. Unfortunately, your generation can no longer have such experiences. These gadgets have been mainstreamed. They have become part and parcel of daily life. They have created new ways of doing things.

Presently, to visit someone without, first of all, calling and giving notice of the visit is frowned at. This is a recent development brought about by the fact that the cell phone has made such communication possible. In those days, to send a message to someone in Lagos about his sick or dead father in the village, someone would take the bus, often the night bus, with the aim of catching him in the house before he stepped out for the day's business. If the person with the message is lucky, he might meet the person being looked for at home and give the message. If unlucky, the person being looked for had travelled for business to another city. What the telephone has effectively done is to eliminate the need for face-to-face contact before a communication event.

Another effect of the telephone can be appreciated in the context of the story by Tony Ubesie in his book *Ukwa Ruo Oge Ya*. I do not know if any of you has read it. This is a story like Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Two young people, Chude and Ngozi loved each other. But there was a feud between their families. They decided to ignore their parents' enmity and to continue their friendship and love. But, there was no way they could meet or talk with each other. Ngozi's father worked in the same place as Chude. He usually wore a hat to work to shield himself from the sun. At work, he hung his hat only to put it on his head on his

way back from work. Then, Ngozi and Chude hit on an ingenious plan. Chude would write a letter to Ngozi. Bring it to the workplace. Slip it into an opening in Ngozi's father's hat when during work hours. At the end of the work hours, Ngozi's father would wear the hat home and hung it. Ngozi would secretly retrieve Chude letter from her father's hat. After reading, she would write reply and hide in her father's hat. This way, the lovers kept in touch with each other, except on weekends. The irony is that they achieved this by converting Ngozi's father to a mail runner. But the cellphone has eliminated such bottlenecks. People can sit in the comfort of their rooms and communicate either by voice or text or even video to someone in any part of the world. Even when in a group, two individuals can communicate something private by text. Put simply, ICT has removed not only the barrier of geography but also of time. This is what is described as the compression of time and space which made possible a new sense of privacy.

We have spoken of the television and the telephone. But the smartphone has combined these services and many more. This is because of the evolution of technology with an eye on developing one platform with many functionalities. A smartphone has cameras, you can play music, listen to radio stations and watch transmissions from TV stations. There are gaming Apps, and a host of other things. In a sense, one can access a broad range of entertainment as well as education. There are, however, consequences. You can curate your entertainment and be entertained all by yourself. When we were growing up, entertainment was mostly communal – *egwu onwa*, *igba okoso*, *ikpo oga* (for girls) etc. Today, there is a complete privatization of entertainment symbolized by people, including seminarians listening to music through Bluetooth earbuds, while walking on the road.

This privatization is not only with regard to the consumption of content but, more significantly, to content creation. When we were growing up, the TV and radio stations, for the electronic media, and the newspaper and book publishers for the print media, served as gateways through which to circulate any information. These also vetted the content for veracity and had an eye on social norms and values. But what is innovative about social media is that it dispensed with the gateways and the gatekeepers. Any and everybody can create whatever content and push it out there. Because money is made by the number of subscribers to one's channel, the yardstick for content creation was changed from the valuable

to the popular. Whatever could be done to get more people to subscribe to one's channel or platform and project one as social media influencer is allowed.

The final piece in the puzzle is that the advertisement industry is interested and has invested heavily in developing as detailed a profile of each individual consumer as possible. They deploy complex algorithms to keep track of each person's online activities – the websites you visit, the searches you perform, the kind of news you read, etc. In short, just know that your online activities are fed through a computer which keeps analysing these and identifying your tendencies, preferences and pattern of activities for targeted advertising. I guess that if you have visited a website or YouTube about Pope Francis, in the Feeds from Google, for example, you will get such items of news. Similarly, if you have visited a pornographic site, they will keep bombarding you with such sites.

3. The Prison

There is a saying *na nwa nza na-ere oku, o si na ya na-aha mmanu*. All the possibilities that ICT has offered us, despite the good elements, have contributed to people stewing in their own juice. Erich Fromm, the German-American sociologist and psychoanalyst, distinguished two kinds of freedom: 'freedom from' and 'freedom to.' It is apparent that most people enjoy 'freedom from' restrictions imposed by the four walls of a prison, although there are still restrictions imposed by one's socio-economic situation. 'Freedom to' is expressed when the individual acts from an authentic self, when acts are deployed that are purposeful and meaningful and not out of some inner compulsion. In other words, people could be free from external constraints but lack the freedom *to* employ their external freedom purposefully. The enslavement that comes through ICT can be observed in the light of 'freedom to'.

Many people cannot stay without their phones. Even when phones were not allowed in the seminary, some seminarians smuggled phones into the seminary. They knew that if caught, they could be expelled. But the lure of staying in touch with the world clouded their judgement. They could risk their vocation just for the thrill of being connected to the world. This was part of why I argued for seminarians to be allowed to use phones so that those with a propensity for such addiction might get the opportunity to learn this about themselves and possibly work to untangle themselves. So, I will challenge you to keep track of the number of times and the length of time you spend on social media – aimlessly scrolling from one site to another, being awash with so much information without digesting

any. What you will find out may shock you. You may discover that you are already a prisoner of your phone, a phone addict. You get a thrill by picking up your phone or you have an irresistible urge to pick it up once you hear the notification bell.

We have mentioned people addicted to music. They walk around with earbuds listening to music, almost every minute of their waking life. Ironically, when such people must remove the earbud for a while to be given a message, they display some impatience. The interruption calls them back to this world which they had escaped from by closing their ears. One sees that interior silence and mindfulness will be lacking in such people's lives and these are essential for mental health and spiritual growth. Besides, how free are such people who, in a way, depend on these as if on a drug?

We have talked about how powerful algorithms discern a pattern in one's online activities and bombard one with news items and form of entertainment in line with one's predilection. This gives rise to confirmation bias. To use a trite example, it means that if one's favorite team is Man U, the tendency is that the computer would bring news about Man U to the person. In this way, one's biases about Man U would be confirmed rather than challenged. Let us give another example. Someone who is interested in the Pentecostal prosperity preachers would have more of such pastors brought to them without giving them an opportunity to have an alternative view that could challenge their biases.

The final point I want to highlight as regards the enslaving possibility that ICT has potentized is about pornography. You are still young people. Your hormones are surging in your bodies and you may not have learnt how to manage yourself well. With your sexual awakening, some of you will find yourselves visiting pornographic sites. I will not be surprised if some are already heavy pornographic users with the corresponding practice of masturbation that goes with it. As said above, ICT has made such pornographic materials easily available while offering the needed secrecy. Some have despaired of ever being free from such enslavement. They have prayed, availed themselves of the sacrament of confession and undertaken some acts of mortification. Yet, they see themselves going back. They can identify with St. Paul's statement and question: "what a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body doomed to death?" He answered: "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom 7:24-25).

4. “IF THE SON SETS YOU FREE, YOU WILL BE FREE INDEED” (Jn 8:36)

Jesus sets us free but not without us. We must do our own part – get the necessary information, gain the requisite insight and make a firm resolve to cooperate with divine grace. That is why I have spent time untangling the varied dynamics and the changes brought about by ICT. This shows that there is nothing inevitable about them. One has to acknowledge that ICT present powerful tools which could be used for good or ill and which affords a high level of privacy. Let me quickly inform you that you leave footprints through your online activities. So, the privacy is indeed apparent not real.

The first step towards reclaiming one’s freedom is to bring back the community. God so loved the world that he sent his only son (Jn 3:16). God created us individually but into families in the world. This shows the primacy of community. God created us as embodied beings in community and it is important to use these as yardstick for appropriating any technology such that virtual communities do not replace but only enhance face-to-face embodied interaction.

Jesus is the way, the truth and the life (Jn 14:6). As seen above, ICT make possible privatized content creation and consumption. People are ready to push any agenda through social media. Pictures of an event are given false titles to project a particular narrative. The possibility of what has been called deepfake – that is, the synthetic media production in which the image of someone, such as Pope Francis, is used to perform actions or make comments as if it is real, deepens the extent of such deception. This requires vigilance and critical distance regarding media consumption. It is not enough to simply see the titles and take them at their face value. One must look critically at whatever is presented in order to ensure being in the truth while evaluating them regarding the type of life they promise.

There is a deeper aspect of the challenge of accepting Jesus as the truth. This is brought out in the first Encyclical letter of Pope St. John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis* which begins with the powerful assertion: “the Redeemer of man, Jesus Christ, is the centre of the universe and of history.” Going further, the Holy Father quoted the Document of Vatican II Council, *Gaudium et Spes* no. 22: “Christ the new Adam, in the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and of his love, **fully reveals man to himself and brings to light his most high calling.**” *Ụzụ amaghị akpụ ogene, nne egbe anya n’ọdụ*. In his humanity, we see our prototype

and by not conforming to the ideals of this age but by being transformed by a renewal of our minds (Rom 12:2), we may approximate the full stature of the fullness of Christ (Eph 4:13).

How can one apply the insight above to one's life especially regarding the challenges of pornography and masturbation identified above? Human sexual awakening is the call to love. Let me quote *Redemptor Hominis* no. 10 again: "Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it." Love defined the life and mission of Jesus Christ. Love is primarily about giving and not taking. It is not only that the pornographic mentality removes love from genital encounter but it is also reduces this deep aspect of the human person to an object for transaction. Awareness of such a shift in mentality can help someone gain insight into the mystery of one's sexuality and the reduction and distortion that the pornographic mentality and the attendant practice of masturbation project. Such awareness must however be accompanied by commitment to such time-tested practices as discipline, prayer and the pursuit of interior silence and mindfulness.

5. Conclusion

My dear seminarians, I do not envy you. You are negotiating the turbulent period of your adolescence surrounded by gadgets that seek to hijack your minds and hearts and render you a more pliant consumer. Do not be afraid. God's grace is enough for you for his power is made perfect in weakness (2 Cor 12:9). But you have to be like athletes, you must train and build up stamina with a clear goal in mind of "winning the wreath that will never wither" (1 Cor 9:25). You are in our prayers so that you make the right choices and put in your best in this struggle.

Your holiday period is a good opportunity for self-observation. In the seminary, things are regimented. What you do when nobody is watching you shows who you really are. My hope is that your life will show constant improvement in self-mastery, self-regulation and a deeper relationship with the Lord and with others in love.

Peace be with you!

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