



## **“WHO IS MY NEIGHBOUR?” (Lk 10:29)**

Lenten Message of His Eminence, Peter Ebere Cardinal Okpaleke to the Faithful of the Catholic Diocese of Ekwulobia and to all People of Goodwill.

### **GREETINGS**

My dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I welcome you with joy to this year’s season of Lent. Surely, many of you are surprised that Ash Wednesday is here. Christmas was just the other day. It is as if we have not yet come out of the Christmas mood and we are being ushered into the Lenten Period. It is hard to believe that January has rolled by. The New Year seemed like the other day. But this is good. We know that time seems to slow down when one is sick or going through difficulties. If this season of Lent came to you as a surprise, thank God that, despite the troubles of everyday life in Nigeria, you have not been so burdened to breaking point, bogged down and stuck in the mud. You are relatively taking life at your stride. For those who are going through rough and tough patch, we pray for the grace of perseverance and the gift of Good Samaritans to meet you at your points of need.

The reflection I am offering for our guidance in this holy season centers on the question posed by the lawyer in the Gospel of Luke, “who is my neighbour?” I chose this theme for four interrelated reasons. I will explore three of the reasons while the fourth will be mentioned in the next section. In all, my ultimate aim is to direct attention to and invite all to consciously contribute in building up and sustaining communities at the grassroot, beginning with the nuclear families, marked by neighbourliness.

The first reason for this choice of theme is the rapid breakdown in our traditional Igbo cultural values pertaining to community. An example will

suffice. Gone are the days, when it was believed and lived out that a child belongs to the community – *nwa bu nwa oha, o bughị otu onye nwe nwa*. A sense of community is being lost not simply because of the so-called penchant of the Igbo to adopt other people’s cultures. It is rather the case that the contemporary socio-economic and cultural context no longer supports some of the traditional ways of life. What obtains in a village setting where everybody knows every other person cannot apply in a city where most people are strangers to each other. Moreover, economic and technological changes have made it possible to engage in activities that were hitherto impossible in the past such as child trafficking or “yahoo-yahoo.” These changes have to be factored into the new vision of community and relationship that one proposes.

The second reason for raising the question about the neighbour is summed up in the Igbo name, *agha dị n’ụno* – there is war/conflict at home. As we know *ogụ ụno ka ogụ ilo njo, maka na osọ sị n’ilo chụba mmadu, o gbanata n’ụno. Mana o si n’ụno, ebee ka onye ahụ ga-agbaga?* (One would have no place to run to if the epicenter of the conflict is one’s home). Presently, many families, kindreds and communities are engulfed in crises. With the urbanrural divide, the younger generation especially in the urban centers are settling for what they call Committee of Friends (C of F) as alternative kindred while the *umunna* in the village is embroiled in one conflict or the other over land, leadership or disputed sharing formula used in one outing or the other. As Church we are involved. It is the man or woman in the pew who is also in the *umunna* and *umuada*. Whatever affects them affects the Church. They are also the ones to witness to the values of the Kingdom of God in their dealings. We are therefore raising these issues for conscious and conscientious engagement especially in this season of Lent.

The third reason I want to focus on this theme is because the need for Good Samaritans could never have been greater than now. The socio-economic, cultural and political situation in our country has left many people battered like the man who fell into the hands of bandits and was left half dead. There is need for as many good Samaritans as possible. The challenge is enormous. Many people are really hurting badly.

## **LENTEN SEASON: A TIME OF DEEP REFLECTION AND PURPOSEFUL ACTION**

Lent is a special period of preparation for Easter. God so loved the world that He sent His Son, not to condemn it but to save the world through him (Jn 3:17). The Passion and death of Jesus Christ on Good Friday and his resurrection on Easter day are the *raison d'être* for the birth of Jesus at Christmas. Lent is a period of preparation for the commemoration of this highpoint of God's salvific intervention, for us and for our salvation, in Jesus Christ.

In the forty days of Lent, Christians are invited through prayer, fasting and almsgiving, to prepare themselves to receive the salvation won by Jesus Christ. On Ash Wednesday, we are reminded that we are dust and to dust shall we return. This awareness is supposed to spur us to believe the Gospel and to live no longer for ourselves but for him who died and rose again for us (2 Cor 5:15). Fasting and other forms of abstinence help us to develop mastery over ourselves and strengthen our will to always choose the good despite temptations to do the opposite.

The vision of Lent that I cherish so much is that of a journey, a journey with God for the purpose of deepening our knowledge of ourselves and developing greater self-discipline. The forty days of Lent is patterned after the days Jesus spent in preparation for his ministry. After his baptism by John, Jesus went into the desert and spent the whole time in prayer. He fasted for forty days and forty nights (Matt 4:2; Mk 1:12-13; Lk 4:1-13). We may not be able to remove ourselves from the hustle and bustle of everyday life. But we are challenged to create time for desert experience in our busy schedules. This is imperative especially in this period of Lent. This is a time when we consciously remove ourselves from the distractions of everyday life in order to enter into deeper communion with God; a time when we embark on the journey inwards towards self-discovery. It is important to emphasize this in the present day and age when many people have become addicted to social media. Some people cannot stay still for a reasonable period or engage themselves in any reflection without checking their social

media platforms. Others upload any and everything about themselves to their social platform pages. It is as if they have lost the discretion needed to know the difference between what is private and what is public. They feel connected to a virtual community while shutting themselves out from concrete persons with whom they share the same space. There seems to be a relocation of neighborliness to the virtual world. Could this be termed a new form of social organization based on a novel answer to the question who is my neighbour? This is the fourth reason why I chose to reflect on this theme.

### **THE NEIGHBOUR AND THE SEARCH FOR ETERNAL LIFE**

In the Gospel of Luke (10:25-37) we see how the search for eternal life is linked up with the love of God and of neighbour. A lawyer came to Jesus and posed a question to him. “Master, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus asked him what is written in the Law. The lawyer responded by quoting the Shema prayer which Jews recited twice daily: “Listen Israel: Yahweh our God is the one, the only Yahweh. You must love Yahweh your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength” (Deut 6:5). The lawyer also added the injunction to love one’s neighbour as oneself (Lev. 19:18). Seeing that he answered very well, Jesus encouraged him to follow the commandments as he had enunciated and eternal life would be his.

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke agree that the commandments about love of God and love of neighbour are the greatest of the commandments. While the Gospels of Matthew (Matt 22:34-40) and Mark (Mk 12:28-31) stop at highlighting these as the greatest of the commandments, Luke goes further to elaborate on who a neighbour is. Luke achieved this by indicating that the lawyer was anxious to clarify why he raised the question. He therefore pointedly asked: “and who is my neighbour?” If the lawyer were living in an internet age, he might have asked more pointedly whether his neighbour is limited to the netizens who are in his contact list or who are tagged in his Facebook. If he were living in an apartment block, he might also have asked whether the occupants of the other apartments with whom he had little or no contact, should count as his neighbour. Or if he were living in any of our villages, he might also have asked whether his sibling next door with whom he is in court over a piece of

land and with whom he is barely on speaking terms, is his neighbour. Since these different contexts represent the reality on ground today, our reflection on the identity of a neighbour must take the varied realities into consideration.

### ***AGBATAOBI ONYE BU NWANNE YA – NEIGHBOUR AS SIBLING***

In Igbo, *agbataobi* is the word for neighbour. A little reflection on the word *agbataobi* shows that it entails much more than geographical proximity; simply living next door or the next compound to oneself does not make one a neighbour. *Agbataobi* is an invitation to closeness, responsibility, love and care. It is amazing that God guided our forefathers to coin this packed and challenging term to depict the idea of a neighbour. Unfortunately, we just use the word – *agbataobi* – without reflecting on the meaning that God through our forefathers worked into it.

*Agbataobi* is made up of two words: *agbata* – boundary/border and *obi* – homestead/heart. Igbo is a tonal language. One word with the same spelling but with different tonal sounds results in different meanings. This is the case with *obi*. In combination with *ana* as in *anaobi*, it means homestead. In this combination, *agbataobi* or neighbour stands for someone with whom one's living space shares geographical proximity.

We uncover a new layer of meaning when *obi* in *agbataobi* stands for the heart. *Obi* signifies the interior dimension of the human being, the seat of joy (*obi añurị*, *obi uto*), peace (*obi ijụ oyị*), sorrow (*obi mgbawa*) and the source of goodness (*obi oma*), etc. *Agbata* is a boundary or border. Like a fence that defines and delineates where something ends and another begins, a boundary separates as well as connects or unites entities. It marks identity and also otherness. It differentiates one thing from another. In combination with heart, in *agbataobi*, boundary is not simply geographical. It is that which differentiates and at the same time, connects two or more hearts. This recognizes that human beings, especially those living in close proximity, are connected with one another at a level that avails them of the opportunity to touch, for good or ill, the deep dimension of each other. One's *agbataobi* can

mean life or death because the *agbataobi* is the first line of response and help in time of need, such as sickness, ire outbreak and sundry emergencies.

Beyond this statement of fact, there is an ethical dimension captured in our forefathers' vision of *agbataobi*. They prescribed sibling relationship as yardstick of the relationship of *agbataobi*. *Agbataobi onye bu nwanne ya*. In other words, sibling relationship is the matrix of the *agbataobi* relationship. Sibling relationship is one of a kind, marked by forbearance, unconditional acceptance, and responsibility. This is attested to by such sayings: *iwe nwanne anaghị eru n'okpukpu*, (the hurt of a sibling can never be deep); *ozu sibe isi, enyi ka nwanne a naa* (when push comes to shove, only one's siblings remain steadfast). In the profound wisdom of our ancestors, a wisdom hidden in plain sight, *agbataobi* is not simply someone living close by; *agbataobi* borders the heart, and like a sibling – *nwanne* – invites to intimacy, responsibility, and care. This is the wisdom of our forefathers. Unfortunately, many people do not pay attention to it anymore. This Lenten period is an opportunity to re-evaluate ourselves and recognize *agbataobi* for what it is: an invitation to intimacy, responsibility, love and care.

## **THE GOOD SAMARITAN – THE CHALLENGE OF RECOGNIZING COMMON HUMANITY**

The story of the Good Samaritan is well known. The lawyer knew and supplied the right answers about what he had to do to inherit eternal life – love of God and love of neighbour. He then articulated his perplexity with the question: “who is my neighbour?” He felt that he neither had an infinite affective capacity nor resources to be able to love everybody. There must be a limit and he wanted Jesus to tell him where to put this limit and draw the line. Maybe, he expected Jesus to tell him that only members of his family, his friends, possibly those of his ethnic nationality should count as his neighbours and be entitled to his love. Other people not included in these groups should find someone else to love and take them as neighbours.

Many of us draw the line regarding those entitled to our love and care. We are like the lawyer in this matter. With the line drawn, we divide people into those inside and those outside. Those inside – family members, friends, members of our ethnic nationality, etc – are entitled to our love. We care less

about those outside. The practice of dividing people up into insiders and outsiders and relating with them in those terms has been normalized. But the lawyer in the story in Luke's Gospel felt some scruples as regards this. That was why he asked: "who is my neighbour?" As we set out on our Lenten journey, let us listen again with fresh ears to the surprising answer given by Jesus and the challenges therein.

Jesus' story is a simple one. A man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho was waylaid, robbed, beaten and left half dead by the wayside. A priest traveling down the same road saw this unfortunate man and passed by on the other side. A Levite also did the same. Then came a Samaritan. He saw the distressed stranger. He did not mind the demand on his time, energy and resources that attending to the 'stranger' entailed. He not only stopped, went over to the man, and administered first aid, but also, lifted him, put him on his ass and moved him to an inn. He made a deposit for the man's upkeep with a promise to defray any extra expenses incurred. The lawyer and all listeners to the story were then invited to answer the question: "which of these three, do you think, proved himself a neighbour to the man who fell into the bandits' hands?" (Lk 10:36)

The immediate take-away from the story is the compassion of the good Samaritan and how the unfortunate man received help from unexpected quarters. We can however harvest more by paying attention to the plot of the story. Above all, we can learn something practical about how to grow in compassion through a change in perspective which Jesus recommended to the lawyer.

In the story of the Good Samaritan, Jesus recognized that the lawyer's question was asked from the position of power and privilege. He presumed that he was the one to show care and concern for others and wanted to know where to stop without endangering his prospect of inheriting eternal life. It did not occur to him that he, the lawyer, could be the one in need of help. In the plot of the story of the Good Samaritan, the one in need of help was someone that the lawyer could easily identify with. He stood in for the lawyer. Jesus therefore changed the starting point or *topos* from that of power to that of weakness and need. For Jesus, the question about who one's neighbour is, who one is obligated to show love to, must be inverted if it is not to remain theoretical. One has to ask it from the perspective of the one at

the receiving end; the one in a position of weakness and need. The question is no longer where one must draw the line regarding those entitled to one love and care. Rather, where would one draw the line regarding who to receive love from in time of need? That is why the punchline of the story is the question about who showed himself a neighbour to the waylaid man.

Jesus' story teaches us a lesson and presents us with challenges at different levels. The lesson is: please pay attention to the position or *topos* from which your questions, reflections, and answers flow. Is it from a position of strength or of weakness; of privilege or of those at the margins? Our people say, *onye o gaziiri, nwe mba* (those favored by fortune often talk carelessly) because they are blissfully unaware of what the less fortunate ones go through. Jesus wants us to develop empathy, the ability to put ourselves in other people's shoes, especially those at the margins, intentionally identify with the less fortunate and take their situation as the starting point of our thoughts, words, and actions. This shift in perspective can help us overcome our blind spots.

Let us go back to the story for another challenge thrown at us by Jesus, especially in this season of Lent, as regards prejudices. The one who offered help was a Samaritan. In the Gospel of John, (4:8-9) we learn that the Jews and the Samaritans did not associate due to events in their history. When Jesus asked the woman for something to drink, she answered: "You are a Jew. How is it that you ask me, a Samaritan, for something to drink?" (Jn 4:8). Why? This history goes back to the period of the monarchy. Solomon was succeeded by his son Rehoboam as king of Israel. However, under Rehoboam, Israel split into the northern and the southern Kingdoms (1 Kgs 12). Omri, the father of Ahab, bought the hill of Samaria and built a city which became the capital of the northern Kingdom (1 Kgs. 16:24). Inhabitants of this new city became known as Samaritans. When the Assyrians conquered the northern Kingdom, they deported many of the inhabitants. They brought in and resettled other people on their land (2 Kgs 17) who intermarried with the inhabitants. Their offspring were referred to as Samaritans and were seen by those of the southern Kingdom as having lost their purity. They were, therefore, held in disdain. I have gone into these historical details to highlight the fact that historical narratives produced prejudices and stoke the fire of conflict and division. This period of Lent can be an opportunity to reexamine some of our negative prejudices about others



and to learn the art of painstaking reconstruction and re-evaluation of history as a way of resolving conflicts in the family, kindred and in the community.

The Samaritan in Jesus' story felt a common humanity with the waylaid man. Despite being despised by the Jews, he did not first check whether the waylaid man was a Jew or not. He was moved by his recognition of the common humanity he shared with others, Jews and Samaritans alike. He, therefore, spent his time, energy, and resources on the welfare of the unfortunate man. This is another challenge Jesus is presenting to us. It is about rising above our pains and hurts to respond to the humanity of others irrespective of circumstances of birth and history.

Your guess is as good as mine regarding the reaction of the waylaid man to the fact that his rescuer was a Samaritan. If you were in the man's shoes, what would you do if you woke up and found out that you had been rescued or saved from death by someone you had grown up to look down upon or to exclude? Would you hold on to the narrative that justified your attitude, the exclusion and disdain of this person? Or would you rather feel a debt of gratitude, closeness, and connection? As the one in a position of weakness and need, one is likely to appreciate the help received. The point of Jesus' story is first, to help us feel with those in need in order to harness the emotional resource of helplessness and gratitude at being rescued and second, to allow the emotional resource gained to drive our actions in situations of power and strength. The big question is whether, from a position of power and strength, which the Samaritan enjoyed, would we allow our compassion to move us to make sacrifices for the good of all those being waylaid by our socio-economic, political, and economic system? One way to train oneself to do such is, as seen above, to imaginatively adopt the position of the weak and needy as the starting point of thought, word and action. Lent is a good time to challenge oneself to learn how to harvest the fruit of this shift in perspective.

### **INDIFFERENCE, NOT HATE, IS THE OPPOSITE OF LOVE**

There are two other characters in the story of the good Samaritan – the priest and the Levite. Jesus must have chosen them for the contrast effect with the Samaritan and to buttress his point that the person hitherto considered an outsider, excluded, and disdained could prove himself or herself a neighbour more than those one ordinarily identified with. Above all, these were

religious leaders. These knew the commandments and presumably loved God very much. But they failed to show compassion. We are not told why they did not. It could be out of concern for ritual purity. Be that as it may, let us remember that we are challenged to constantly discern the best course of action in every given circumstance using compassion as our watchword because we are to be as compassionate as our heavenly father is compassionate (Lk 6:36). We must not hide under any cover to avoid the invitation to intimacy, care, and compassion that the other, especially suffering humanity, extends to us. Let us remember that indifference, not hate, is the opposite of love.

### **“GO AND DO THE SAME YOURSELF”**

Jesus ended the story of the Good Samaritan by asking his hearers, “go and do the same yourself.” Indeed, the punchline is the question that came before this injunction. “Which of these three do you think, proved himself a neighbour to the man who fell into the bandits’ hands?” The answer, of course, was “the one who showed pity towards him.” The Samaritan rose above the pain and hurt of being looked down upon because of where he came from, and attended to the wounded because he recognized their common humanity. Jesus therefore told the lawyer and all his listeners: “go and do the same yourself!” (Lk 10:37). This entails seeing everyone as *agbataobi*, one whose otherness invites me to intimacy, responsibility, respect, care and compassion. More specifically, Jesus challenges us to pay attention to the position from which we pose the question of who deserves compassion and love. He invites us to pose the question not from the position of power and strength, but to put ourselves in the shoes of those in need, those who have fallen into the hands of bandits of various sorts in our contemporary context and who have been left half dead. If we find ourselves in the shoes of such – the poor, the sick, the unemployed, the excluded, etc., how would we want to be treated? Surely, not with indifference; but with compassion, respect, and care! Jesus tells us to go and do the same. May God help us to love God and love our neighbour as ourselves so that we may inherit the kingdom of God which Jesus inaugurated in the world.

May this Lenten period be a privileged season for us to appreciate more deeply our common humanity, treat each with respect, responsibility, love, and care. Let us remember the injunction of St. John: “let us love, then,

because he first loved us. Anyone who says, ‘I love God’ and hates his brother, is a liar, since whoever does not love the brother whom he can see cannot love God whom he has not seen” (1 Jn 4:20-21). Demonstration of this love in virtual space cannot substitute for encounter of concrete persons; nor can the challenge of urbanization and new models of habitation set aside this commandment of love and the challenge of being one another’s *agbataobi*. Even the conflicts and crises in families invite us to review our prejudices and grow in awareness of how historical narratives position us vis-à-vis one another. May we work hard, especially in this Lenten season, through the help of God’s Spirit, to be like the Good Samaritan who has shown us that everyone is our neighbour, especially those in need and in difficulties.

May the grace, peace and love of Christ be with you!

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