



## **Features: Ahiara Catholic Diocese, A Time To Heal (A Theological Appeal)**

Jul 12, 2017

**ABUJA, NIGERIA -**

### **Ahiara Catholic Diocese: A Time To Heal (A Theological Appeal)**

By, Fr Stan Chu Ilo, STL, PhD, D.ED.[\[i\]](#)

“Those who love the Church as she should be, rather than embrace her and serve her with hope as she is, are less likely to make any significant contribution to bringing about the birth of the Church as she ought to be in Christ. A true change and reform in the Church and in our Christian lives will require loving the Church as she is today, and working with all the members of the Church and especially those entrusted with the guardian of our souls, to search everyday for the face of God. The path for renewal, enabled by the Holy Spirit, who leads us into light and into the full truth about the things which make for salvation and happiness here and hereafter, can only be found through a humble submission of one’s will to God. Sometimes it will require of us that we let go of the things which we hold so dear.”

--Stan Chu Ilo

## Summary of Discourse

*This short theological reflection is my humble and imperfect effort to give a theological account of what I consider the key issues in the situation in Ahiara Diocese; how the Holy Father's wishes for Ahiara diocese could be realized, and finally I offer a Marian spiritual reflection which could guide the renewal of the priestly and episcopal ministries in Nigeria. I have organized this theological discourse into five broad sections, namely: (i) Lord, why Did you allow this to Happen? (ii) Why did this happen? (iii) A Time to Cry; (iv) A Time to Pray; (v) A Time to Heal.*

“But in what sense is the Church holy if we see that the historical Church, on her long journey through the centuries, has had so many difficulties, problems, dark moments? How can a Church consisting of human beings, of sinners, be holy? Sinful men, sinful women, sinful priests, sinful sisters, sinful bishops, sinful cardinals, a sinful pope be holy?.....The Church is holy because she comes from God, who is holy; he is faithful to her and does not abandon her to the power of death and evil (see Matt 16:18). She is holy because Jesus Christ, the Holy One of God (cf. Mark 1: 24), is indissolubly united to her (see Matt. 28: 20). She is holy because she is guided by the Holy Spirit who purifies, transforms, and renews.”(Pope Francis, General Audience 2 October, 2013).

“The Spirit did not come simply in order to animate an institution that was already fully determined in all its structures. In fact, the Spirit is really ‘the co-instituting principle’ of the church. Accountability to Christ and his Spirit requires both a fidelity to the Apostolic tradition and openness to the witness of the Spirit in the church today, including the spirit-breathed witness of all God’s people reflected in the exercise of the *sensus fidei*. Faithful

obedience to Christ will be manifested in practices of communal discernment that listen for the voice of the spirit speaking through a faith-filled people. When all in the church come to discover the dignity and demands of their baptism and the concrete shape of discipleship in service of the Spirit's promptings, accountability becomes simply another word for *koinonia*, our 'shared communion' in Christ." (Richard, Gaillardetz commenting on Yves Congar's essay on power, authority and obedience in the church, *A Church with Open Doors*, 110).

### **Preliminary Considerations**

"Fr Stan, what is happening in the Catholic Church in your country?" This is the question many people have been posing to me through phone calls, emails and face to face encounter here at DePaul University, Chicago, where I teach, and in the two parishes where I minister on Sundays. The entire global Catholic family has now heard about the situation in Ahiara diocese and everyone is asking the question: 'What is going on?' 'Why is the gentle and merciful Pope Francis taking such a harsh and hard disciplinary measure to suspend any priest of Ahiara diocese who does not apologize to him and pledge obedience to him before July 9, 2017?'"

This Pope is slow to use authoritarian practices or threats in order to enlist obedience. This is a Pope who rarely appeals to papal authority, prerogatives and power in order to build communion and co-operation in the church. He is a Pope of mercy and dialogue, who has proposed that the church adopt pastoral discernment, the logic of integration and the logic of mercy in order to accompany (walk with) God's people into a deeper communion with God, the church, the world and nature.

Sources at the Vatican noted that Pope Francis was visibly sad, deeply troubled and perplexed by the failure of the

delegates he invited from Ahiara to honor his invitation. This is especially painful because the Pope himself had to shelve his other appointments for that day, cutting down his time with Venezuelan bishops—whose country is going through a very difficult political crisis—in order to spend time with the delegates from Ahiara. The Pope had no other option than to invoke the law of the church in order to protect and preserve the treasures which God has given to the church, and the unity of faith and communion.

There has been a 'sacred silence' among the theological community in Nigeria and Africa on this extraordinary papal decree and its bigger implications for the church in Nigeria. I wish to break this theological silence in my own humble effort in his discourse. This is because I believe that theology must give account of the faith of the church, the actual faith of the people and how these come together in shaping the daily choices of the people with regard to realizing the will of God in history. This accountability is the mediating role which theology plays in judging how faith and culture interact in making manifest or blurring the footprints of God in history.

This short theological reflection is, therefore, my humble and imperfect effort to give a theological account of what I consider the key issues in this situation, how the Holy Father's wishes for Ahiara diocese could be realized, and finally a Marian spiritual reflection which could guide the renewal of the priestly and episcopal ministries in Nigeria. I have organized this theological discourse into five broad sections, namely: (i) Lord, why did you allow this to Happen? (ii) Why did this happen? (iii) A Time to Cry; (iv) A Time to Pray; (v) A Time to Heal.

## **1. Lord, why did you allow this to Happen?**

Many of our people today see the Christian faith in our country as a kind of battle with God; questioning God, lamenting to God, and crying to God. When you hear our people pray and sometimes in my own spiritual life, prayer is a kind of struggle with God, questing for God on one hand, and getting upset with God and asking God, 'why?' I am sure that if you have been hit like me with deaths, disappointments and despair sometimes in your life, you may have fought with God like Jacob did in the desert (Gen 32: 22-32). This is a time to battle with God in Nigeria. Our people are stretched to the limit. As my mentor, Bishop Kukah said recently, Nigerians are unhinged, and I will add that many people are fighting with God internally asking the simple question: Lord, why is this (x..y..z) happening to us? The Gospel message tells us that the best way to find answers to our battles or questions with God is to allow God to be God in our lives; to leave a little crack or opening for the gentle breeze of God to come in to make us whole. God can touch us with God's tender mercy and grace in the most intimate and fragile zones of our lives where we are in need of a divine touch and transcendence. The truth is that God alone can make us go beyond ourselves, our problems, our selfish or joyous attachment to who we are, our culture, clan, ethnicity, nation, race etc. All Christian battles, carried out in faith, will normally end with the victory of God if we adopt the spiritual disposition of saying at all times like the Lord Jesus Christ: Lord, may thy will be done. Not what I want but your will O Lord.

The context of this reflection is the 'fight with God' in Nigeria in a metaphoric sense typified in the current fight in Ahiara diocese. There are so many fights going on in Nigeria. Though we see fights in many other parts of the world, the last few years in Nigeria has seen many fights in the country because we do not understand why the situation in our land is so desperate and dark. I am sure too that many of us including the victors and victims; the saints and sinners in the present situation in Ahiara diocese may be asking the same question of God: Why is this happening? What is this all about? God, why did this happen? Why are we fighting each other? What ultimately do we want in this fight which will lead to the realization of God's will and salvation for all?

If we look into our souls and search the depths of our hearts and the inner chambers of our conscience, we will surely find the answer why this is happening to us. So, my first proposition is that the resolution of the situation in Ahiara diocese will not come about simply by a papal decree or reinforcement of any claims other than that which emerges from our faith and obedience to God whose will is represented even in imperfect ways through our legitimate pastors and superiors. But the appeal has to be made first to God, and then to church authorities in the ordination of all obedience both in the leaders and the led to God.

However, and this must be emphasized as central to our Catholic identity and tradition, the decree from Pope Francis on the Ahiara situation is sorely needed to initiate the definitive step to bringing an end to this imbroglio. But I have one concern: I worry about any obedience secured through the threat of punishment. I pray for a Church that relies less on the threat of punishment and suspension, and more on prayer, patience, and holiness which models moral behavior. The Church should make appeals more to the compelling beauty of the truth/wisdom from God, and from the Gospel to convince the mind, encourage the heart, and enable others to act, and convict and compel the conscience.

I have seen many dioceses and parishes where dialogue, prayer and patience and the force of truth and the compelling testimony of good examples have led Catholics who were opposed to certain fundamental decisions to embrace tough and challenging decisions. We might claim that the Church is not a democracy, but the Church has a lot to learn from democratic institutions, and best practices in leadership and conflict management on how to deal with a lot of issues in our churches without constantly reverting to the threat of punishment or excommunication in order to secure obedience.

The first point to make here is that we need to look at history in order to understand the challenge this situation poses in the Ahiara context. I have heard some people saying that this kind of problem does not happen in Europe and North America. This is true, but the church in the West achieved its own unique cultural and spiritual form and Catholic identity over a long period of gestation lasting more than 19 centuries. The Christian faith in our part of the world is still in its 2nd century of existence. We should be patient with ourselves because we are all learning how to be Christian and experimenting with flagging steps how to achieve a certain unique form of Catholic identity. Because the Christian consciousness is still fermenting in the cultural cellar of our lands, we cannot expect our people to become suddenly as Catholic as this or that people.

We all carry the blessings and baggage of our cultures into the faith which sometimes can prove to be our prison or our palace. We must be allowed to make our own mistakes; to fight our own fights, to fight with God or fight with the pope as a process of coming to a certain level of comfort and spiritual and Christian identity shaped by the 'fear and trembling' that St. Paul spoke about. We church leaders, pastors, and scholars must be gentle with our people. We cannot become fully conformed to the image of Christ overnight. Those who embrace this insight will be slow to judge and in passing sentence, and be spiritually attuned to listening and discerning even in the resistance to God or to authority the echoes of the rumbling of the Spirit. I wish to make a few indications from history in establishing the grounds for my assertion so far with regard to the shaping of Christian consciousness and spiritual practices from the past.

Unfortunately, there seems to be a lack of spiritual and pastoral imagination in our local churches these days. We

want quick solutions to every challenge or what we consider as opposition in the pastoral field. No one wants to think outside the box while our approach to problems are often predictable and manualistic. This is what could explain the neuralgic rush to see every situation which emerges in the life of the church as a crisis which has to be fixed through appeal to obedience to this or that bishop or through an appeal to the Pope. Those who wrote the Canon law of the church or who developed the process of making bishops in the Catholic Church did not take into full consideration our African context. The Canon law of the church is very Eurocentric in its understanding of law and order and the questions of cultural pluralism, diversity, and ethnic and religious identity. Somehow, we Africans are often taking the prescription medicine in the church which was developed for a sickness which we do not have; and our local church leaders seem to be unsuccessful in finding solutions and prescription to our own sickness, like ethnocentrism. Pastoral and spiritual imagination should help us as a Christian people to also identify our own ailments and sicknesses which are not addressed in our church's law, and to work hard in bringing our own issues and cultural and social problems to the fore in the discussion about the future of the Catholic faith in our land.

Those who are familiar with church history will note that in the late 11th and early 12th centuries the Investiture Controversy damaged the Holy Mother Church. This was a crisis as to whether secular kings should appoint and crown bishops or whether local clergy and laity should vote for their bishops. This challenged the papal prerogatives in confirming such appointments. Pope Gregory (1073-1085) who initiated the Gregorian Reform to rid the church of corruption and to restore moral integrity in the life of Christians especially in the life of morally decrepit bishops and priests was forced to excommunicate King Henry IV of Germany and bishops in cahoots with him. King Henry IV had to make a long pilgrimage to Rome, where he personally asked the Pope for pardon and to lift the excommunication. Pope Gregory will later ban the appointment and investiture of bishops by kings and lay people. However, the Investiture Controversy pails into insignificance compared to the crisis which rocked the Catholic Church in the Great Schism of 15th century when there were three popes vying for legitimacy. This situation lingered on for well over 33years when the Council of Constance (1414-1448) deposed the rival popes/anti-popes and recognized Martin V as



the legitimate pope.

What is evident from history is the processes for the appointment of bishops and election of popes in the Roman Catholic Church have never really been clear cut until recently. These processes have undergone different degrees of changes as a result of cultural and political factors, especially in Europe. These changes have been dictated particularly by the kind of relationship between the Pope and local princes and kings. It is for the same reason that the Queen of England as Supreme Governor of the Church of England still appoints the Head of the Anglican Church and technically all bishops within that Communion. The appointment of bishops in Germany, France, Italy, Switzerland, Austria etc have all taken different routes as a result of factors like the French Revolution of the 18th century, or the Risorgimento in Italy in the mid 19th century which led to the fall of the papal states, or the *Kulturkampf* of Bismarck's Germany in the second half of the 19th century. In many cases, the power was wrestled from the Pope by kings.

In Asia, for instance, the appointment of Catholic bishops in Vietnam, Cambodia, and China are all being negotiated today to find a suitable compromise between the exercise of papal prerogative, and respect for local and national cultures, practices and interests. As some theologians have noted, the making of bishops, like other administrative decisions made by the Pope which are not infallible dogmas or doctrinal matters with should assume the particularity and practices of local contexts. It should not be a pyramidal edict without a strong input from the local clergy, religious and laity because those church practices which are not part of the sacred deposit, but relate to how this deposit is transmitted and lived must not become trans-cultural and absolute practices which are to be imposed without regard to the wisdom of local cultural practices which illumine the *sensus fidei* (*Ecclesiology for a Global Church*, 64).

## **(ii) Why Did this Situation Emerge?**

The situation in Ahiara diocese emerged because of three reasons which the leaders of the church in our land and the entire people of God—priests, laity, bishops, and religious—must be conscious of in the restoration of authentic Christianity in a Nigerian church which is in dire need of reform, especially in the life of her priests, bishops, and religious.

The first, this situation shows that there are now new and widening cracks in the process of bishop-making in our country. These cracks should move all those who are involved in the process of bishop-making, starting from the Pope's representative in Nigeria and the bishops who help him in making the selection to ask themselves how they can better refine the process so that choices made of candidates for the bishopric will be less contentious. The Vatican does give episcopal conferences the leeway to come up with local approaches to bishop-making which can address local needs. As Cardinal Oscar of India noted in a recent interview, there is a strong movement in the Catholic Church to involve the non-ordained members of the church in the choice of bishops, and to devolve more powers to episcopal conferences to come up with local guidelines for the process of choosing a bishop. In Canada, where I am familiar with this process, there is a protocol developed by the bishops that a priest who belongs to a diocese should not replace the bishop of the diocese when he dies or retires. This helps to address two main problems, which we find in our church in some settings.

In the first place, the bishops can no longer choose their successor in the diocese; they may secretly recommend a

priest or two from their diocese to the pool of priests who have been screened for the position of bishop, but they cannot decide who will succeed them in their own diocese. It reduces sycophancy and rivalry among ambitious priests who see the bishopric as destiny. Such ambitious clerics, rather than working hard to succeed their bishops, will be forced to work hard to be successful in their priestly ministry through a committed servant leadership after the mind of Jesus.

In the second place, it removes the internal wars and horse-trading over where a bishop comes from because people will know that a new bishop is being 'sent' to the diocese rather than being 'chosen' from his diocese of origin to serve his home diocese. Thus, when a bishop dies or retires, what concerns the people of God in the diocese and their prayer will not be nocturnal meetings and clannish scheming. What will occupy the people will be to ask the Holy Spirit in prayer to help the church in finding a good priest and pastor from anywhere in the church who will serve them. This will help heal this painful and unholy fight—*give us our own bishop syndrome*—which is dividing the church. The case of Ahiara is not the first, but it is obviously the most protracted in the history of the Roman Catholic Church in Nigeria.

The second reason why this situation emerged is the changing face of the office of the bishop particularly in Igboland. It is also reflected in the way the priesthood is being perceived in our area. We priests and bishops in Igboland need to ask ourselves if we have not become part of the problem in the country rather than solutions if we are eaten up by the same tendencies we find in the world around us: materialism, secularism, nepotism, tribalism, authoritarianism, sexual promiscuity, embezzlement of church funds, lack of decency and honesty in dealings with people, abuse and misuse of spiritual authority among other cankerworms eating deep into the fabric of our ecclesial life. This is a very worrying tendency which the church must confront with honesty, courage, and deep spiritual discernment. But I am particularly interested in looking at why the office of the bishop has become such a big deal in

Igboland that it is generating so much war every time there is a vacant see in our land.

The typical Igbo Catholic bishop acts like those bishops and cardinals whom Pope Francis refers as those with ‘a mentality of princes’; they act sometimes like Medieval bishops, running a highly centralized and top-down command and control chain in which the wishes and desires of the bishop are given free rein without any internal control mechanism. As Pope Francis wrote in the *Joy of the Gospel* (no. 32) “Excessive centralization, rather than proving helpful, complicates the church life and missionary outreach.” In many cases, the diocesan bishop controls all the external and internal finances coming into the diocese; he can impose all kinds of levies on parishes, priests—both at home and abroad; and no one questions his management of the finances of the diocese. This is why I am not aware of any diocese in Igboland where there are publicly audited accounts of finances which are available to priests and laity. How can we expect transparency and accountability of public office holders when ours is steeped in secrecy? If we give accounts to the Nuncio and foreign donors for the money we receive from them, why can’t we give account to our people? But what we have are bishops who are not held accountable by their priests and people. He is a great dispenser of positions and privileges; those who obey and toe the party line are rewarded with positions of ‘power’ in the diocese; while those who may have different opinions than that of bishops are treated as rebels and punished by all forms of exclusionary measures meant to sideline them or put them out of circulation.

What this has done is that the entire diocese revolves around the whims and caprices of one man and the pastoral plans and practices of the diocese are often determined by the bishops without a significant input from the rank and file Catholics. Indeed, it is hard to give a healthy and helpful feedback to bishops in this kind of environment. What obtains is a transactional leadership model rather than a transformational leadership structure where everyone is holding everyone accountable and supporting each other to flourish so as to promote the common good and the

mission of God in the diocese. In this kind of setting, even the advisors to the bishop might be rumbling inside their hearts over certain decisions he makes, but they will be too afraid to say so because they do not wish to lose their position of influence or be punished by the bishop in question. There is little transparency in terms of appointment and minimal consultation in the most decisive pastoral policies and programs undertaken in the diocese even in matters like construction work which lies outside the competence of most bishops. This is a general feature which I see in Igboland today but there are instances where things might be different from this picture, but it will be more an exception than the norm.

Given this scenario, where the bishop controls a lot of power and money, and has at least in practice power to set the direction of a diocese for over 30 or more years, there is a genuine anxiety among priests when a bishop is appointed especially if he is considered a stranger to the people. Automatically, the adrenaline goes up following such an appointment and all kinds of conspiracy theories and false assumptions flood the fearful hearts of many. In addition, if the bishopric is thus perceived at least in the way it is being carried out as such a highly privileged position of authority and influence similar to the positions occupied by politicians, people will covet it for themselves and their kinsmen, reducing the position from a spiritual office of love (according to St Augustine) to a mere political and secular office.

In a sense, the Ahiara situation is not a crisis but an opportunity for the church in Nigeria especially in Igbo land to ask herself why bishop-making has become such a contentious issue in our churches. Has the position of a bishop become such a highly coveted one that it is now a trophy or rather a piece of the church's cake which must be parceled out without due consideration to the mind of the Lord Jesus and the intention of the church in instituting these offices? It is so easy to blame the Ahiara clergy, religious and laity, but the leadership of the Catholic Church in

Nigeria, especially in Igboland must take their own fair share of the blame for making such a decision which has proven contentious, divisive and a heavy burden on the conscience and faith of the people of Mbaise. Starving the people of the sacraments in the diocese has not been a good pastoral strategy in bringing about the kind of spiritual nourishment that can touch the soul and heal the wounds of alienation, isolation, and inner war with one's conscience.

The third reason for this situation is what I had indicated in the previous section that the formation of an authentic Christian mind and culture is far from being realized in our land. We are far from the ideals of the Gospel. The shaping of a true sense of Catholicism through openness to embracing all as being made one is still at a very primary level. This kind of mature faith and new consciousness of the ideals of Catholicism as one family where everyone from every tribe, language and nation is a first born son cannot come about through any papal decree. It will be a marathon rather than a sprint and will take a lot of formation, sacrifice, leadership, spirituality and especially leading people into the deeper mysteries of God in the Eucharist. The Eucharist makes us all one, but we are still held apart through the bonds of tribe or clan, race or gender, rather than through the blood of Christ, and the sanctifying grace of baptism. The enduring gift of Catholicism is the promise of God that through this institution, all of our differences will melt away through the force and grace of God's love which is like the unbroken veil of Christ covering his nakedness upon the Cross.

We Africans and more so in Igboland must confront the demons of ethnocentrism and clannishness; it is worse than racism. Indeed, it is a beautiful gift for us as a people if we harnessed our ethnic and clan-based identities. Sadly, like all human reality which is open to distortion, we have abused the beautiful diversity of ethnicity, language, dialect, clan etc in our land. We have constructed a sense of identity and exclusionary practices which have tainted our

unique identities and which make it impossible in present Nigerian and particularly Igbo context for us to see any commonalities among ourselves. Everything in our land is all about my clan, my people etc. Everyone wants all the positions even in the church to go to the people from their own area, without minding the injustice and harm it may cause to others. We have lost a sense of beauty; a sense of goodness; and a sense of God as Trinity who operates in the diversity of expressions in the unity of love. It is a source of deep pain and anguish to me and a wound in my soul as a Catholic that I am highly respected in many settings outside Nigeria, but among my own people—country or ethnic group—I am simply seen through the narrow lens of ethnicity, state, my family, local government....

For me as an Igbo priest who is very sensitive to the cause of young Igbo youth for Biafra, because they feel that the Nigerian nation has offered them nothing but death, decay, joblessness and despair, I wonder in the light of the situation in Mbaise and the kind of condescending attitude and prejudice we Igbos have about each other, how Ndigbo can have a unified Biafra if Nigeria decides to become a confederal state. If we cannot have a unified Igbo Catholic Church where everyone is accepted and appreciated as being a part of the family, how can people be talking of Biafra? We do have an Igbo problem which has only been made manifest through the situation in Ahiara diocese. To be honest, this has little to do with the Catholic Church or the Pope or even the Christian faith. This is our unsaved natural and nativistic particularism on full display. It is a pity that the amiable Pope Francis has been dragged into this mess which unfortunately he inherited from his predecessor! It is a shame that the names of our revered church divines like Cardinal Arinze and Cardinal Onaiyekan have been smeared in all these!

However, no matter the internal and external conditions which led to this situation in Ahiara diocese, a certain theological conclusion must be made *in the light of scripture, the spiritual and pastoral needs of the Church, and the continuing tradition of the Holy Mother Church. That theological conclusion is that whatever shortcomings one may*

*claim in the process of choosing and consecrating Bishop Okpaleke as the local ordinary of Ahiara, just like the Investiture Crisis in the Later Middle Ages, a time comes when the Head of the Church must step in and make a final and definitive decision. This situation cannot continue this way. What I have been painting so far is a picture to remind everyone that the church is not a perfect institution. We all can identify in our own daily lives how far we all have fallen from the ideal of holiness set for us by the Lord Jesus Christ. At this point then, the debate is now over about the limitations or imperfections in the process. The Pope has listened and consulted broadly; he has sent papal emissaries and prayed over the situation and has made a judgment. That judgment is that all the priests and people of Ahiara diocese must accept Bishop Okpaleke. Everyone should pray for the grace and strength to toe the painful but saving path in this difficult journey. This is the Catholic way which can bring healing, communion and peace because it bears all the four marks of the church: unity, holiness, apostolicity, and catholicity.*

I remember a Protestant colleague of mine who teaches at a university in Canada. She was so frustrated on the debate about gay marriage and the confusion in the United Church of Canada because of the failure to reach a consensus. She said to me, "you Catholics have something which we don't have in the Protestant churches. You have a Pope who is a central authority who at some point makes a judgement call about what you Catholics must hold on to in faith." I replied to her in 'a holy mischief' that she should know that the Head of the United Church of Canada is called a moderator, "you guys can continue to debate because you have a moderator, but the Catholic church has a form, a firm structure, and a magisterium which has, most Catholics believe, a charism of truth." In a very illuminating passage, Swiss theologian, Hans urs von Balthasar, who perhaps is the greatest Catholic theologian of the last century, writes as follows about the office of the Pope, "*Catholics alone possess the advantage of having a true reference point, a center of ecclesiastical unity, willed by Christ himself. If we destroy it, we not only destroy the Church, but we also deprive ecumenism of its only chance for success. This, of course, does not imply that one should elevate the pope above the Church or Christ.*"



In what follows in the piece I propose three spiritual practices to help us in this journey of bringing communion with the true reference point of the Catholic Church, Pope Francis, in his wishes for the Beloved Diocese of Ahiara

### **A Time to Cry: Healing of Wounds and Memories**

Many people have noticed that Pope Francis constantly speaks about the gift of tears. I want to use the report of Cindy Wooden of Catholic News Service in her short essay, "The Theology of Tears: For Pope, Weeping Helps one Find Jesus" to develop this section of my short reflection.<sup>[iii]</sup> When he visited the slums of Nairobi in 2015, Pope Francis said that seeing the suffering of so many people moves one to 'silent tears.'

In January 2015, during his visit to Philippines, the Pope listened to a 14-year-old boy in Manila describe life on the streets as a struggle to find food, to fight the temptation of sniffing glue and to avoid adults looking for the young to exploit and abuse. A 12-year-old girl, rescued from the streets by the same foundation that helped the boy, covered her face with her hand as she wept in front of the pope. But she managed to ask him, "Why did God let this happen to us?" Pope Francis said a real answer was impossible, but the question itself was important and the tears that accompanied the question were even more eloquent than the words. "Certain realities of life," he said, "are seen only with eyes that are cleansed by tears."

In meetings with priests, Pope Francis repeatedly asks if they are able to weep when pleading to God in prayer to help their parishioners. He told priests of the Diocese of Rome in 2014 that the old Missal had a prayer that "began like this: 'Lord, who commanded Moses to strike the rock so that water might gush forth, strike the stone of my heart so that tears...' -- the prayer went more or less like this. It was very beautiful." "Do you weep?" he asked the priests. "Or in this priesthood have we lost our tears?"

In Pope Francis' teaching, tears -- and the suffering that causes them -- also can be a step toward renewed faith and clarity about the love of God. "You see, sometimes in our lives, the glasses we need to see Jesus are tears," he said at a morning Mass early in his papacy. "All of us in our lives have gone through moments of joy, pain, sadness -- we've all experienced these things." "In the darkest moments, did we cry?" he asked his small congregation, which included Vatican police and firefighters. "Have we received that gift of tears that prepares our eyes to see the Lord?"

There are many questions which remain unanswered in this situation and there are many people who have been deeply wounded as a result of this situation—priests, religious and lay members of Christ's faithful in Ahiara diocese; Bishop Okpaleke of Ahiara who is rejected by the people, Pope Francis, Cardinal Onaiyekan, Archbishop Obinna etc. Mother Church is wounded and what has happened is a wound in the heart of the Lord Jesus Christ he watches his church bleeding. During the late Middle Ages, people began to identify the wounds in the church with the internal problems and sinfulness in the church: religious persecution, corruption and abuse of religious authority, the use of force in the service of the Gospel etc. Some of these ailments were among the sins of the church which Pope John Paul II asked for pardon from God in 2000. However, it was Antonio Rosmini who in the late 19th century wrote the influential work, *The Five Wounds of the Holy Church* in which he bemoaned the sins in the church. He particularly insisted that the greatest pain and scandal which has caused the greatest wound in the Catholic Church across the

ages was when Catholic clergy colluded with political leaders to fight for positions and undermine the mission of the church and of the Lord Jesus. Many critics saw him as an ultra-montane who was only trying to promote a highly centralized and powerful papacy, but I think he was more concerned about a unified church that looks more like Jesus Christ than any other thing.

Rosmini was worried that the clergy of his day were careerists, merchants in the Lord's vineyard and politicians who had abandoned the humble service of the Lord and God's people in pursuit of vain glory, money, power and pleasure. He was pained by the divisions among bishops, and the abuse of the liturgy and the interference of politics in the affairs of the church. He inveighed against the clergy in these words, "it is certain that some clergy with 'itching ears' have brought wounds on the church by becoming teachers after their own lusts, not in order to learn what was right to do, but rather, through the study and astuteness of those men, to find excuses for pursuing their own projects." Rosmini continues, when he cried out that God's lay members 'harassed and oppressed with temporal calamities' by their clergy look for 'recourse and healing from the sheltering arm' of the church. He prayed that the church then should become a common mother to the faithful, 'full of love and pity, moved by the wants of the harassed and disorganized peoples', should come to the aid of the people to give them shield, comfort and lead them to green and fresh pastures.

Rosmini's book should serve as a text for retreat for priests and bishops in our country—not only in the Catholic churches but in all churches—because it will remind us all again about how much harm many of us church leaders are causing to God by our false religious practices, shameful politicking, high-handedness in the discharge of our duties, corrupt practices, and failure to rise above the current decadent and dysfunctional value syndrome which afflict our land.

This is a time to weep and no longer a time to jostle for position or to defend any claim. I call on God's people in Ahiara, Igboland and the rest of Nigeria to weep. Like the prophets of Old, it is time to tear our hearts and not our garment (Joel 2: 13) and weep for the harm we have caused the Body of Christ and our ordinary Christians who simply want a church that cares about their spiritual and temporal needs and not a church of politicians, clannish bigots, fear mongers, ambitious priests and bishops, and merchants in the Lord's vineyard. Let tears flow from every eye in our Land—bishops and priests, nuns and religious, men and women, rich or poor, young and old—because we are turning God's house into a den of robbers, opportunists, false prophets and teachers while leaving suppurating wounds in the hearts and souls of a people already brutalized by poverty and failed government. Let's mourn for the loss of the sacredness of the church and our institutions, and our infidelity to God, and for tearing the seamless garment of the church which is a warmth of love and failing to give succor to our bruised and long suffering faithful.

#### **(iv) A Time for Healing and for Prayer**

May our tears lead us to fall on our knees in humble obedience to God and ask for mercy from God. Let us pray that the obedience being sought of the people should come as a result of discernment and submission of mind and will rather than being the false obedience given because of the fear of punishment.

The pastoral situation in Mbaise land today requires a lot of delicacy, pastoral discernment and the art of accompaniment following the teaching of Pope Francis. Conversion is a slow process. It is not everyone who will come to obedience even to God's commandments in the same way and at the same time. We should not pass

negative judgments on the clergy and people of Mbaise because what they are fighting for is a false fight which many priests and bishops have fought secretly for their own dioceses and regions. We must embrace the tears of Mbaise Catholics with our own tears for the harm we all have caused by our failure to live fully the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ and our Catholic identity.

I have always said that Bishop Okpaleke is, no doubt, a brave man to accept to enter into the eye of the storm, especially in this kind of atmosphere. Many of us lesser mortals if we found ourselves in similar situation will actually have handed to the Pope our resignation. I believe that there are more to priestly or episcopal ministry than being yoked to any parish or diocese where there is so much toxin and bad blood. Those biblical words still guide me when I face similar situation, 'it is better that one man dies than the whole people.' But God's grace is stronger than our human fears and weaknesses; and God's love and mercy is more faithful than our human imperfections, doubts and desire for self-preservation. I am sure that Bishop Okpaleke is counting on God's grace to help him become part of this healing process. He should be commended and not condemned.

The Nigerian bishops and the Nuncio who are now empowered to implement the Holy Father's canonical judgment must carry out this mandate through dialogue with the people of God in Mbaise Land. They must proceed following what Pope Francis calls in many of his writings and messages, 'a culture of encounter', and 'a revolution of tenderness' characterized by a willingness to listen, openness to mercy rather than punishment, and with hearts of compassion desiring to heal wounds rather than inflicting new wounds or through exclusionary practices and lack of transparency. Majority of Catholics in Mbaise do feel a deep sense of injustice and deep wounds. Whether they have legitimate bases for their feelings is a matter which has been discussed *ad nauseam* in the public eye. But all those involved in implementing the Holy Father's wishes must embrace the feelings of the people like a gentle shepherd

tending a wounded sheep.

However, in order to help the healing process, our bishops especially Bishop Okpaleke must not act as victors or conquerors but as humble and caring pastors who with tenderness, mercy and unfailing love welcomes the hurting and wounded sheepfold of the love with joy and gratitude. I propose that the Administrator of the diocese, should institute immediately upon the receipt of the letters of obedience from the priests, a peace, reconciliation and installation committee to work towards the transition to the next stage in the healing process. *A quick attempt to install Bishop Okpaleke without this peace, reconciliation and installation committee will not be a good pastoral strategy.* This committee should include priests, laity, and religious of Ahiara diocese, as well as prominent and respected Igbo priests, bishops, and theologians. This, I believe, will be a beginning of a process of renewal of the life of the church not only in Ahiara diocese but in Igbo land and the rest of Nigeria. This renewal should begin with prayer and deep communion with the mysteries of our ancient faith, especially increased participation in sacramental life and devotion to Mary and the saints. Through prayer and commitment to the spiritual life, people can easily let go of their claims and pride because they see in the depths of their souls and hear deep in their hearts the voice of God who calls us every day to take the painful but saving road that leads to God. A program of renewal of priestly, religious, and episcopal life in Nigeria can no longer be delayed because the quality of leadership in our churches across the board can be improved if Catholicism will ever be a strong cultural and spiritual force in finding solutions to the many problems which has led our people to fight with God, with one another and with the church.

### **Looking Up to Mary, Mater Dei: Concluding Reflection**

The Catholic diocese of Mbaise is consecrated in a special way to Mary, the Mother of God. I will like to use a Marian

reflection to conclude this piece. I want to draw from my favorite Swiss theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar in what he calls the Marian profile, that is, the life of Mary as the model for our Christian life. The first thing to note here is that Mary did not hold anything to herself. Mary received Jesus from God and did not hold on to Jesus but gave Jesus to the world. She sacrificed her claims to her Son; she did not hold on to any honor or worldly glory or attachments but was totally and wholly available to God to be used as God wanted and in the manner God wanted. She is a model of the ideal missionary; the ideal Catholic faithful who is open to the universal and not enslaved to the particular. I have always said that if the Catholic Church becomes a church governed by the 'son of the soil' syndrome, we all—priests, religious, bishops and nuns—will down tools because the whole goal of God in instituting the church as Catholic (universal) will be defeated. Mary is the model of the Catholicity and missionary character of the church.

The Marian principle relates to the source and fruitfulness of the Church, as shown in Mary's complete surrender to God's will and confident hope, her lack of self-will, and her suffering with her Son at every step in the Passion. This is ironic in the sense that fruitfulness is shown to arise from self-surrender: both in the Annunciation and at the foot of Cross, when the substitution takes place between Mary and the beloved apostle John, pointing to the fruitfulness of the Church that will arise both from the virginal aspect and the aspect of the Passion. [\[iii\]](#) Balthasar argues strongly that fruitfulness in the Church will come from weakness and self-surrender. Reflecting on the use of authority in the Church, he writes: 'Power becomes strongest where it no longer encounters any contrary power in the one who mediates it, only the pure will to accept and surrender...Weakness means fruitfulness; and the weakness of the Bride, Church in the face of the peoples is a mystery of her fruit-bearing among them, a mystery that remains invisible to the eyes outside her.' [\[iv\]](#)

Mary's yes, said in total openness to God, points the Church to the total receptivity and openness to God's word

which alone is capable of making her fruitful in her mission. Mary's yes was not only said at the beginning of the Incarnation; it was said throughout the hidden and public ministry of Christ and in the end, at the foot of the Cross. The Church can only be a partner of Christ in the work of redeeming the world by saying yes to Christ through and through.

The fruitfulness of the Church and of Christians will arise from this paradigmatic fruitfulness of Mary based on her archetypal faith as 'immaculate' and the fruitfulness of her womb for the Body and the Head.[\[v\]](#) The Marian principle points definitively to the fact that it is possible for the Church to conform to the Christ-form because the possibility of this transferability has been realized perfectly in Mary.[\[vi\]](#) The Marian Church will be one that is legible, credible, and comprehensible to the world, conformed to the fullness of God's will, and configured totally by the light of divine glory through the principle of love and mercy which alone is credible.

She becomes a Church that is not afraid or hostile to the world, but seeks the inner enrichment of history — and understands the world because she is attuned to the Word made flesh, obedient to the inner form of the Word that helps her to see the world clearly. It is through this total conformity to the form—Jesus Christ, the Light of the World—that the church can bring the healing truth and love which the world needs through her attractive form, and the beautiful way of service to God and neighbor in an unrestricted love. It will be a tragedy then if the Church is wounded by these sins in the world which the Lord instituted the church to help in transforming—clannishness, selfishness, greed, pride of self, nativism, parochialism, resistance to the Holy Spirit, and the pursuit of vain glory. It will be a wound to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate of Mary, Mater Dei if we priests and God's people are lured from the path of fruitfulness because we succumb to the temptations of power and the limitations and fear they bring. Pope Francis wants to see the birth of a Marian church in Ahiara diocese, the rest of Igboland and Nigeria.



May we pray that the priests and people of Ahiara Diocese and the leadership of the Church in Nigeria will, in the spirit of Mary, listen to our amiable Holy Father and enter into a deeper dialogue on how to realize the wishes of God for God's suffering people in Mbaise land.

---

[ii] *The author is a priest of Awgu diocese and a research professor of Catholic Studies and African Catholicism, at the Center for World Catholicism and Intercultural Theology, DePaul University, Chicago, where he presently coordinates the African Catholicism Project, a research project of 56 African Catholic scholars which will lead to the publication of a two volume encyclopedia, **Handbook of Catholicism in Africa**. He serves as a consultant to the theological commission of the Symposium of the Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) and is the President of Canadian Samaritans for Africa, working on women development projects in Uganda, Kenya, Central African Republic, Burkina Faso, and Nigeria.*

[iii] <http://www.catholicnews.com/services/englishnews/2016/theology-of-tears-for-pope-weeping-helps-one-see-jesus.cfm>

[iiii] Space does not allow us to develop the beautiful aspects of fruitfulness developed in some of the writings of Balthasar. For a discussion of the fruitfulness of the Church as arising from the Cross of Christ, at whose foot were Mary and the beloved apostle, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, Epilogue, trans. Edward T. Oakes (San Francisco: Ignatius

Press, 2004), 109-123. See also Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mary for Today*, trans. Robert Nowell (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 61-63.

[\[iv\]](#) Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Razing the Bastions*, 66-67.

[\[v\]](#) Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology II: Spouse of the Word*, 161. See also for how this saying yes to God unfolds the fruits of infallibility to the papacy in a fruitfulness which can only be Christological because it is Marian, in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *New Elucidations*, trans. Mary Theresilde Sekeyy (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 193

[\[vi\]](#) Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: Theological Aesthetics 1 Seeing the Form*, 562.

