



BISHOP ONAH, A PEACE-MAKER AND A TRUE PATRIOT

Nov 27, 2020

NSUKKA -

His Excellency, Most Rev. Godfrey Igwebuike Onah, is, by his vocation, a pastor of souls, but at the same time an academic, who specialized in philosophy (philosophical anthropology and the hermeneutics of religion). Before he became the Chief Shepherd of the Catholic Diocese of Nsukka, he was a Priest-professional teacher and an accomplished educational administrator. He has, all his adult life, related with and managed youths. A prolific writer and a talented orator, he has no records either of inciting the youths to violence or even of violence as a solution to any problem. Since his installation as the Catholic Bishop of Nsukka, he has established himself as a true patriot, a peace-maker, a champion of interreligious dialogue, an advocate of freedom of religion and movement and, indeed, a protagonist for the upholding of human rights and dignity in general. Those who know him well, and who are given to criticizing, even pointlessly, do not accuse him of being interested in violence, but rather of being a pacifist. This is why the misguided call for his arrest and prosecution, for inciting the youths of Nsukka to violence by SalihuYakasai, aid to the Governor of Kano State, and the petitions by the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) against him, to the Inspector General of Police, Mohammed Adamu, and the Director General, State Security Services (SSS), Yusuf Magaji Bichi, for giving hateful sermons that led to the attack of innocent Muslims and burning of mosques on 31 October 2020 at Nsukka, cannot be left without being responded to.

In the first place, Bishop Onah has always preached peace, but true peace that is based on justice and fairness,

forgiveness and reconciliation, all founded on and driven by love. Those accusing him as making hate speeches may certainly not have listened to these words of his: "If our enemies succeed in making us hate them, then they have conquered us completely, for Christianity without love of the enemy is empty". In teaching this, he always insists that we should never regard as an enemy any particular person or group of persons, but rather anyone whom the devil uses to distract us from doing the will of God. Again, in the height of the lockdown in the wake of the corona virus pandemic he declared: "Love is more infectious than corona virus. As we maintain physical distance from one another to prevent the spread of COVID-19, may we continue to spread love, which does not necessarily require physical contact to express". He is also totally against the use of violence in all circumstances. Hear his words of advice to students: "Students, whatever happens, show people that you are educated, do not be violent and do not destroy things that are already yours". And then to another group of persons: "Resentment and anger are sinful, they are dangerous and, above all, useless to you". On the current Endsars protests, in his homily on 18th October 2020, incidentally, the same homily on which the unfounded allegations were based, he admonished the youths: "Once you turn violent, your name becomes 'Junior SARS' and you lose the moral high ground on which you are protesting. Youths do not be violent!". How can one then minimally accuse him of inciting violence?

In his homilies and sermons, like the seasoned pastor that he is, he does for sure raise his prophetic voice, loud and clear against societal ills, against marginalization, against discrimination, against glaring acts of injustice, whether by religious or political leaders. He criticizes bad governance and commends the government, Local, State or Federal, as the case may be and as the occasion demands, giving examples, but always being careful, as much as possible, to depersonalize the contents of his speeches, to ensure that no person's dignity is thereby diminished. He has always avoided criticizing any religion as such, but constantly denounces some evil acts perpetrated by many people in the name of religion, any religion at all. He has also always condemned in strong words, the action of groups and associations across the country, who, though they may have reasons to claim to have been marginalized, register their dissatisfaction in an uncivil manner. His greater concern, however, is forgiveness and reconciliation. On the last Independence Day celebration, he advised Nigerians: "As we celebrate the independence of Nigeria, every Nigerian has an option to reconcile with God and with one another and through that be at peace with nature and with one

another, for when the human being is fixed, the nation will be fixed”.

It is difficult to imagine why the homily on 18th October could have been said to be the cause of the regrettable protests that took place about two weeks after it had been delivered, without any reference to the incident that obviously triggered off the disruption of order. Was it his homily that incited the person who attacked the tricycle (keke) operator and almost killed him? That was the only thing that the angry youths were reacting to. The person asking for the Bishop's arrest and the petitioners never made any reference to the attack on the keke operator, but rather preferred to use an unrelated homily, deliberately taken out of its context, and found in it the cause of the unfortunate protest. In addition, it is also wrong and unsavoury in a multi-religious country like ours to view contextualized critical comments made about the government as attacks on one's own religion.

It may interest the reader to know that Bishop Onah helped in a very significant way to see that the protest did not spread or escalate. Though he was not in town when the protest started, he ran into part of it on his way back, personally dispersed some angry youths who were about to harm an innocent citizen and saved at least two whom he perceived were in danger and kept them out of harm's way. He equally reached out immediately to one of the Muslim leaders in the area, with whom he has enjoyed very good relationship, to the State Government, to his priests and to some youth leaders, to see what could be done to ensure that the violent protest did not continue and that those whose lives were endangered by the protest were safe.

It was in this spirit, that by the evening of that fateful Saturday, when the tension was hinged on the rumour that some people had been killed, the Catholic Diocese of Nsukka issued a statement which, among other things noted that hitherto, Nsukka had been a peaceful area, indicated that those wounded were alive and were responding to treatment and appealed to both parties to remain calm and allow the Law enforcement agents to do their work. By Monday, when the full information about what happened was received, the Bishop sent a powerful delegation of his close collaborators to join other delegates from other Christian communities on a solidarity and sympathy visit to the Muslim community in Nsukka. In attendance were very many Muslims from Nsukka and the neighbouring towns and

their leaders, officials of Nsukka Local Government Council and some members of the local community. Everybody was happy with the atmosphere and the outcome of that visit.

In conclusion, anyone familiar with the person and teachings of the Catholic Bishops of Nsukka, Bishop Godfrey Igwebuike Onah, and the respect and friendship he enjoys among persons of other religions, both in the Nsukka area and outside, would agree that attributing to him any form of hate speech or incitement to violence is, to say the least, unfortunate, diversionary and misleading. Those who want to polarize our dear country along religious and ethnic lines, should look elsewhere, as they are not going to find an ally in the life and words of Bishop Onah.