

A Homily Preached by Most Rev. Lucius Iwejuru Ugorji, Apostolic Administrator of Ahiara Diocese on 10th October, 2018 at the Opening Mass of the Second Plenary Meeting of the Directors of Social Communication holding in Ahiara Diocese.

My Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ, it gives me tremendous joy to welcome you all to Ahiara Diocese for the second plenary meeting of the Directors of Social Communication for 2018. We feel highly honoured that you chose to hold this meeting in Ahiara Diocese. We heartily invite you to enjoy the warm hospitality of the good people of Ahiara-Mbaise and pardon us for any inconveniences you may experience during the course of this assembly. As you may have observed since your arrival, with the restoration of Episcopal ministry in Ahiara Diocese early this year, this local Church is flourishing again and the faith of the people is booming once more. The joy of the Gospel is vibrating in the hearts of the faithful at every corner of the Diocese. We thank God for the return of peace in this Diocese and pray fervently for its sustainably. May the Church in this Diocese grow ever stronger to the glory of God!

In the first lesson of this Mass from the letter to the Galatians 2: 1-2, 7-14, Paul, prompted by a clear revelation, laid before the original band of disciples the gospel he preached to the Gentiles. He underscores that Jews and Gentiles form one Church. For they are “coheirs” with Jesus. Given that there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female and considering that all are one in Christ Jesus (cf Gal 3:28), circumcision and dietary laws were no longer obligatory. Paul was so convinced of this new freedom in Christ Jesus, that when Peter came to Antioch and would not sit to eat together with Gentiles, Paul reproached him, It’s sobering to recall that the subsequent rapid spread of the Church through the Roman world depended on the recognition of this fact by Peter and the rest.

Our good intentions are sometimes blocked by fear and false motives. To let the Gospel prevail in us, we need the strength of daily prayer and even of daily Eucharist. Luke’s shorter form of the Lord’s Prayer as we heard in today’s gospel (Lk 11: 1-4) may have become a prayer before Holy Communion in the early church: “Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us”. The Lord’s Prayer remains a good preparation for the reception of the Eucharist even today.

In yesterday’s gospel Mary was commended for prayerfully listening to the word of the Lord. As we observe in the Scriptures, Jesus himself combined a very active life with a deep prayer life. His prayerfulness inspired his disciples to want to be people of prayer, like himself, ‘Lord, teach us to pray.’ They recognized that if they were to pray they would need the Lord’s help. Thus they requested: ‘Lord, teach us to pray.’ He taught them the Lord’s Prayer. The Our Father is rightly called the Lord’s Prayer because it is a prayer that Jesus himself has taught. It begins with a focus on God and on God’s purposes, and it then shifts to a focus on human need. There is a pattern there that is valid for all of our prayer. We attend first to God and to whatever God desires and then to our needs before God.

It was perfectly natural for Jesus to pray to his Father, if we understand by prayer being in close contact with God. Sometimes it will be to ask him for help in our lives or in making the right decision, sometimes it will be to thank and praise him, sometimes it will

be to pray on behalf of someone else and sometimes it will just to be quietly in his company. We saw this yesterday with Mary of Bethany sitting quietly at the feet of Jesus listening to him. Since there is a lot of gibbering today in the name of prayer, it might be necessary to stress that a lot of our prayer should be in silent listening, meditation, reflection, “lectio divina”.

We will get much more out of the Lord’s Prayer if we take each petition separately and see each one as a theme about which we can pray, spending time to reflect and praying around each one. When we do that seriously and conscientiously we will see that it is a very challenging prayer. Let us briefly look at two petitions: “Our Father who art in heaven”; and “your kingdom come”. In addressing God as our Father, we are acknowledging that we are children, sons and daughters, of God. But if we are children of the one God, then we are brothers and sisters to each other. Is this what I mean when I utter the words “Our Father”? Am I prepared to see every single person on the face of this earth, irrespective of clan, gender, class, age or creed as my brother or sister? We can begin to see now what teaching his disciples to pray meant to Jesus as well as to them and us.

When we say, “your kingdom come”, we are referring to that world where God’s reign prevails in people’s hearts and minds and relationships in contrast to the in a secularist world in which we live in today; a world that has rebelled against God and turned its back on Him and His word; a post-modern world “come of age” that seeks to determine for itself what is right or wrong, independent of God and His precepts. In the digitalised world of our age, the protagonists and sponsors of modern secularist ideologies use the powerful opinion-shaping instrument of the mass media to spread a permissive culture. Pornography, in an almost infinite variety of forms, is available online to adults and children. Media programmes stressing the acceptability of premarital and extramarital sexual relationships, divorce and remarriage, contraceptive devices, abortion, etc bombard people of our times with increasing regularity. Lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgenders (LGBT) are coming out of the closet and demanding to be recognised by the law and affirmed by the Church. The effects of the permissive culture form a depressive picture: promiscuities, the open promotion of perversions, transmission of obscenities to children in the name of sex education, etc. At the bottom line, it is the family that bears the brunt. It strikes at marriage, breaks families apart. Wives and children are abandoned. Children are confused and despairing of life. All these bring a harvest of broken lives.

Furthermore when we pray; “thy kingdom come”, we are yearning for the realisation of God’s kingdom of love, truth, justice and peace, which is countered by the growing culture of selfishness, greed and graft among our people. Many of the elites of our nation, for instance, see their involvement in politics as an opportunity for manipulating oil wealth and obscenely amassing ill-gotten gains at the expense of the masses. According to the World Bank 2010 Report, 80% of the revenues accruing from the nation’s oil wealth benefit only 1% of the population as a result of corruption.

Despite the reported macroeconomic growth in the country, poverty has continued to rise in Nigeria, with almost 77 million people living in absolute poverty with less than \$1 a day. Despite our rich natural resources, Nigeria has taken over from India as the nation with the largest number of extremely poor people as a report by Brooking Institution has

recently revealed. Indeed, many of our people are deeply wounded and degraded by unemployment and poverty, a poverty that generates other social problems: violent and cyber crimes, ethnic and religious strife, terrorism and kidnapping, baby factories and human trafficking that trap many girls in sex slavery. Above all, poverty leads to low self-esteem, frustration and despondency, which seek relief in drugs.

Above and beyond, in a materialistic society such as ours, the realisation of God's kingdom has been misconceived as the coming of abundant material blessings. Driven by materialism, many of our people see religion as a means of achieving material well being. These tend to go to Church, pay their tithes and perform other religious rituals so that God will give them material success, prosperity and financial break through. They are tempted to distort and re-create the image of God as a God who can be bribed, settled and manipulated to do their will, if only the right prayers are said and right rituals performed. This is the corruption of religion, which is one of the major problems facing the country in our times.

The situation is compounded by the emergence of many charlatans, "miracle hawkers" and preachers of the prosperity gospel who masquerade as modern day prophets and prophetesses. These fake ministers dominate our airwaves, website, bill boards and sign posts. Goaded by greed for sordid money, these fake and self-proclaimed ministers mutilate and betray the Gospel of Christ, the Crucified One, reduce God's blessings simply to material prosperity and mislead weak Christians with their spurious dreams, deceptive revelations and false predictions. They exploit the superstitious inclinations of weak Christians, making them believe that they have been "chained" and their progress "blocked" by their close relatives or friends. By such misleading pronouncements, they sow seeds of discord and hatred in many families and communities.

When we say "thy kingdom come" as we recite the Lord's Prayer, we are not just asking God to bring it about while we sit back and wait. We are also committing ourselves to be partners with God in bringing it about. Our co-operation in this work is of vital importance. To be a Christian, to be a disciple of Jesus is essentially to be involved in this task of making the Kingdom a reality. It involves deepening of the faith in the face of many negative forces and the spreading of authentic Christian values through catechesis and promotion of catholic social teaching.

In a digital age, it can be effectively done using the information technology. The power of the media to cover vast territories and reach unquantifiable number of people in a matter of seconds has been recognised everywhere. To raise up change agents for the transformation of our society, electronic programmes for the promotion of human dignity, justice and peace and for countering the scourge of materialism, hedonism and consumerism could be designed and disseminated through the media. In this matter, the Directors of social communication of various dioceses and institutes of Consecrated Life can play a special role.

This is partly why we are happy to see you come together to plan and strategize at the national level because your task as Church communicators is not done in isolation. It is one better done in union with others but more than that, it serves as a link to all other activities going on in particular Churches. Such a work can yield more fruits if it focuses on the pastoral plan of a Local Church and not on frivolities, secular orientations and

sensationalisms. This is one issue that you as Church communicators must be seen to address. On this note, the document of the Pontifical Council of Social Communications released on the 20th anniversary of “*Communio et Progressio*” guides us in appreciating the importance of communication work done in line with the pastoral vision of the Church when it states that, “Catholic media work is not simply one more program alongside all the rest of the church’s activities: social communications have a role to play in every aspect of the church’s mission. Thus, not only should there be a pastoral plan for communications, but communications should be an integral part of every pastoral plan, for it has something to contribute to virtually every other apostolate, ministry and program” (*Aetatis Novae*, No. 17). Thus, the media practitioner must make sure that a pastoral plan is fashioned annually and approved as a guide for his or her ministry in a given Church. Doing this also entails facilitating the activities and messages of the Church at different other levels through acceptable publicity mechanisms and communicative frameworks.

My Lord, my Brothers and Sisters, once again, it is wonderful to have you all here in Ahiara Diocese and we cannot wait to celebrate your presence through interactions and social engagements in this period of the 2nd Plenary Meeting of the Diocesan and Religious Directors of Communication. Our diocese is elated by the warmth you bring and we are confident that you will let the world know that Ahiara is back on its feet once again, booming with faith and religious activities. We pray that the new springtime of joy we are having continues in building up our people and help them recover lost grounds fast. Enjoy a wonderful stay with us and may God grant you successful deliberations during your sessions.