

**Bearing One Another's Burdens (Gal 6:2): Towards a Befitting
Living – Care for the Poor, the Sick, and the Aged**

2018 Lenten Pastoral Letter
of
His Lordship Most Rev. Paulinus C. Ezeokafor
to
The Faithful of Awka Diocese
and to
All People of Good Will

OPENING REFLECTIONS

Greetings

1. Your Excellency, the Auxiliary Bishop of Awka Most Rev. Jonas Benson Okoye, Monsignors, Fathers, consecrated men and women, the people of God in Awka Diocese, and all people of good will, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. My heart burns with love each time I want to address you, especially as we enter the great moment of forty days of preparation for the greatest feast in our liturgical calendar – Easter. I hope we shall travel this journey together and reap from it a transforming experience of renewal, conversion, and closeness to God.

Lent: A Graceful Moment in the Church

2. The period of Lent remains the most solemn and the most intensive penitential period in the Church's liturgical year. It is no surprise, because during Lent, the Church gets her children ready for the celebration of the greatest mystery of our redemption – the suffering, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. We begin this journey of Lent on Ash Wednesday, with its cardinal practices of Prayer, Fasting, and Almsgiving.

3. The Church on earth is like the storm-tossed boat in the gospel pericopes of Mtt 8:24-27, Mk 4:35-41, and Lk 8:22-25. Right from the time of Christ, the Church's life has never been free from the windstorms and turbulences of the world. Christians have been like lambs in the midst of wolves (cf. Mtt 10:16; Lk 10:3). To stand firm and surmount the tempest and allurements of this world, Christians need to be spiritually vigilant, sober, and awake in prayer, with fasting and almsgiving. Knowing that “the spirit is willing, but the flesh...weak”, Jesus urged his co-workers, the Apostles, to stay awake and pray lest they fall into temptation (Mtt 26:41) and be subsumed by the world. The period of Lent is a graceful moment for this, for all Christians. It is obvious that through prayer, fasting, and almsgiving one gains enormous spiritual strength to combat the devil with all his pomp and works. It is so because through them we draw closer to God who is our strength and help.

Lent: A Time Set Apart to Imbibe and Imitate Christ's Attitude More Closely

4. Our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, not only taught his disciples to pray (Mtt. 6:9-15; Lk 11:1-13), but also lived a concrete and exemplary life of prayer. After his baptism by John at Jordan, and before his public ministry, he chose a quiet place – enabling wilderness environment for some quiet moments to be alone with his Father. From time to time during his public ministry, the weight of the responsibility of his itinerant ministry notwithstanding, Jesus always retreated to some quiet places, like

mountains, deserts, etc., for silent prayer and divine encounter. “In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed” (Mk 1:35); “And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray” (Mtt 14:23); “Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray, and he spent the night in prayer to God” (Lk 6:12). The Church, in her wisdom, as mother and teacher, invites us during Lent, a season that is well punctuated with solemn liturgical exercises and practices, to journey with our Lord in sober reflections and examination on our personal lives and our journey so far as Christians.

5. Thomas a Kempis says, “In silence and solitude, a devout soul maketh progress and learneth the hidden things of the Scriptures.” Silence, solitude, and vigilance enables us to develop an open ear for listening to the “still, small voice” of God speaking to us, to discover, identify and improve on our areas of strength as well as weaknesses. In silence and solitude, we are able to rediscover the essential and deeper meaning and purpose of our lives as human beings and as Christians. It is also a space for nurturing the inner vitality that should animate us on the journey of our lives and faith. More so, in silence and solitude, we cultivate and strengthen our spiritual and moral fibers for overcoming our weaknesses and temptations, as well as being able to rebuke the tempter himself: “Be off...,” “Go away...,” “Go behind me Satan!,” after the example of Jesus (cf. Mtt 4:10; 16:21-23). I would like to encourage each of us to create a setting (space and time) of silence during this period of Lent. Let us not be afraid to be “offline” for some minutes, hours, and even days, in order to cultivate the interior solitude needed to encounter God and so truly encounter one another and ourselves. Let parishes and different religious sodalities consider a more sober Eucharistic celebrations and prayer meetings.

6. Prayer, fasting, and almsgiving strengthen the spirit, disarm the devil. Allied with fasting is mortification of the flesh, that enables us to put to death whatever that is earthly in us and can deprive us of the eternal blessedness of heaven. It also helps us to live as God’s children by seeking and setting our minds on the things that are above (cf. Col 3:1-2). In fact, it helps one to lead a true Christian life.

Lenten season always reminds us that our life, as Christians, is a vocation and a gift from God, and a participation in the paschal mystery – death to sin and life in the grace of God. Significantly, it is in the Church, as an ecclesial community (of the faithful), that we can obtain this grace of God abundantly. Just as a child needs the family to grow up to maturity, so a Christian (clergy, religious or lay faithful) needs the Church to grow in the grace of God as a mature faithful. Therefore, it is essentially necessary to participate actively

and consciously in the Church's Lenten liturgical life and in whatever the Church offers to us during this season, for our sanctification and salvation.

Lent: A Unique Opportunity for Repentance and Conversion

7. At the beginning of his public ministry, the Son of God proclaimed the Good News from his Father thus: "The time has come... and the kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent and believe the Good News" (Mk 1:14-15). Call for conversion of heart and repentance demands urgent and prompt positive response as demonstrated by the people of Nineveh when Jonah preached to them (cf. Jon 3:1-5). We learned from the Scriptures that, as soon as Jonah preached to them, the sinful people of Nineveh accepted the message with one heart, believed in God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least. Then God seeing their efforts to renounce their evil behavior relented and never again inflicted on them the disaster that He had threatened. This prompt response to God's call to repentance, conversion and immediate change of behavior is highly commendable and admirable. The Church calls us especially during this season to borrow a leaf from it.

8. We should heed the words of the psalmist, "O that today you would listen to his voice, harden not your hearts" (Psalm 95:7-8). The Lord's invitation through Prophet Joel re-echoes today in our midst: "tear your heart, not your garments; and turn back to the LORD your God. For he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, overflowing in gracious love" (Joel 2:13).

There was a story of a young man who resorted to robbery owing to various sufferings and disappointments he had encountered in life. On a certain day, having been illumined by the light of God, through a very eloquent and awe-inspiring sermon from a priest, he told his friends and members of his gang that he would abandon his evil ways and follow Jesus, but not before the robbery operation they had planned for the following day. He said that that would be his last. Indeed, the operation was his last because he did not come back alive. He was shot dead by one of the street vigilante squads. He never turned back to God as he planned.

Dear friends, since we do not know whether we shall live to see tomorrow, let us not procrastinate our total "U-turn" from our sinful lives and initiate an immediate, full surrender to God. The time for conversion is *now!* May we, by attending to our Lenten observances and spiritual activities, acquire all the graces of this season, so that on Easter morning, renewed and transformed, we shall rise to newness of life glorifying God.

Pope's Call for a Special Day of Fasting and Prayer

9. We thank the Holy Father Pope Francis for launching a special Day of Prayer and Fasting on Friday 23 February 2018, for Peace for war-torn nations, especially for the Democratic Republic of Congo and for South

Sudan, that are suffering from protracted conflicts. His Holiness invites both non-Catholics and non-Christians to join the Catholics in observing this day “in whatever ways they deem most appropriate.” May we call it a point of duty to join as individuals, families, zones, parishes, and collectively as a diocese.

2017 Pastoral Letter – “Befitting Burial”

10. In my 2017 Pastoral Letter, I reflected on the right attitude our people should have towards the dead, their funerals, and burials, in order not to depart from the teachings of our Lord and Master Jesus Christ. My reflection was specifically motivated by the lavishness and extravagance noticed among our people at funerals. In the letter, I called our people back to the need to value such extravagance for what it was – unnecessary waste that neither helped the dead nor the surviving relatives; but instead, in many instances, impoverished and pauperizes them, such that some who were rich before funeral ceremonies of their relatives became indigent afterwards.

I am happy that many of our people read the Pastoral Letter. I received kind words from many of those who appreciated the thoughts shared therein. I hope we shall also create time to go through the present Letter.

From Befitting Burial to Befitting Living

11. The last Pastoral Letter provided the backbone for the present, which is a sort of continuation of it. In the present, I will reflect on how we can use our resources to care for the living, especially the weak and the vulnerable among us – the poor, the sick, and the aged, and not waste them burying the dead. The appeal from these weak brothers and sisters of ours makes us responsible towards them – responsibility of care and support. In this regard, these and similar questions worry me: Are we justified in our seeming nonchalant attitude towards this responsibility? Is it justifiable to ignore our care for them, while we spend millions burying the dead? Are we morally culpable ignoring the structures of injustice in our society that keep the vulnerable down, while the rich live in affluence and waste? What role can the Church play in this situation and to what extent can the Church be a moral and spiritual crusader in this regard? These are some of the thoughts that run through my mind as I settle down to reflect on the present Pastoral Letter. I hope and pray that the Holy Spirit can guide me through, so that through it, many hearts may be touched to look at the plight of our weak brothers and sisters in the society and find ways of helping the situation.

CHAPTER ONE

THE SUFFERING NIGERIAN

12. In his Post-Synodal Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa*, Pope St. John Paul II describes Africa as “a Continent where countless human beings — men and women, children and young people — are lying, as it were, on the edge of the road, sick, injured, disabled, marginalized and abandoned. They are in dire need of Good Samaritans who will come to their aid.”¹ These words aptly describe the situation in which we are today in our country Nigeria. Many people suffer from psychological, spiritual, physical, and emotional problems because of our inability, as a people, to value human life appropriately and to offer succour where it is needed. Sometimes, people get into situations of dire need by actions or inactions of others; at some other times, by their own actions and inactions. Whatever be the case, we have inflicted these wounds on ourselves, and to get a cure, we must work collectively as a family, by becoming Good Samaritans to ourselves.

The Poor

13. A report recently published by the National Bureau of Statistics puts the population of Nigerians living below poverty level at about 112 million (67.1 percent of Nigeria’s population of about 167 million).² This is incredible, mindboggling, and completely unacceptable in a country rich in human and natural resources. Nigeria has scientists, technicians, and professionals in different fields of study that meet the world’s best standards. Yet, there is little or nothing to show on the ground for it, in terms of translating these potentials into better quality of life for its citizens.

14. Because of the unwelcoming environment in Nigeria that fails to reward hard work and excellence, many of our best brains migrate to the West where better conditions of service are available. As many of their colleagues back home struggle to get good jobs years after school, some of those abroad get employment in the highest establishments in their respective fields of specialization. This happens simply because the countries in which they live do reward excellence and hard work. While some of our best brains roam our streets jobless, mediocre graduates are often used to fill the available spaces, because of the corruption in the system. Those employed even find it difficult to operate because of so many frustrating irregularities in the labour market, in the public, and private sectors. All these lead to reduction in output and increase in the poverty index.

15. Apart from the human resources, our country is blessed with rich natural resources. As the highest oil-producing nation in Africa, Nigeria has no reason

¹ John Paul II, Post-Synodal Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa*, 14 September 1995, no. 41.

² See Vanguard Newspaper, 12 January 2018; available at <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2016/10/poverty-112m-nigerians-live-poverty-line/>; accessed 12 January 2018.

to have 67.1% of its citizens living below poverty level. Many families live from hand to mouth on daily basis. They struggle from morning to night under the scorching heat of the sun without having much to show for it. While poverty is the lot of many, the few rich continue to rise and enjoy the best of comforts that meet any standard of living in the world. This should be a matter of concern for all of us, if we really have the Spirit of Christ in us, by which He declared his mission for the poor and the oppressed (cf. Lk 4:18).

Poverty and Self-Confidence

16. Poverty has made many to lose their sense of self-worth and self-confidence. This is troubling. Many of the poor people have been beaten by the harsh economic climate to the point of settling for anything, so long as it keeps life going. Hunger, frustration, and hardship can turn a very promising young man or woman into an angry fellow who has little or no value for himself or herself. The way many of them “adore” the rich will immediately tell you how poverty has changed their orientation in life. Because our people tend to value material things very much, they also value those who have riches over and above the poor, as if the rich were human beings “extra” (just the same way we have Panadol extra).

17. This reminds me of one handsome and hardworking man that goes by the name *Oku a kpọrọ onye enweghị ego*. Once called, he responds, *ọ bịaara, ọ bịaghị, a na-eme ihe a na-eme*, meaning that a poor man has little or no influence in the society; that the society can comfortably move on with or without him. By this name, he wants to bring out our society’s devaluation of the poor as if they were nobodies. That was why a poor fellow who had the floor at a meeting was once shouted down with these and similar words when a rich fellow wanted to talk: *nwoke m nodu anị ka mmadu kwuo okwu* (my friend, sit down so that somebody can talk). By implication, the contributions he was making were unreasonable distractions from more important contributions coming from the rich.

These attitudes help to make many poor but intelligent and hardworking men and women recoil to themselves and not join hands in the nation building. They are intimidated by the rich, and therefore, keep quiet on occasions where they should speak out against the manipulations and injustices, especially by the rich, in the society. Because these ills remain unchallenged, the rich easily continue in their inglorious exploitations of the weak to the detriment of the common good.

18. Many of them see the Church as their only hope for survival. Unfortunately, what obtains in the society also influences people’s relationship to one another in the Church. Many of them feel they are not accorded equal respect with the rich in our Churches. What a huge disappointment! Such people end up being broken hearted even in the house of God. This trend was present even in the early Church, so much so that

James cautioned Christians in these words, “Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you lavish attention on the man in fine clothes and say, ‘Here is a seat of honour,’ but say to the poor man ‘You must stand,’ or, ‘Sit at my feet, have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?... If you really keep the royal law stated in Scripture, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself,’ you are doing well. But if you show favouritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors” (Jas 2:2-9). These words are as important today as they were in the early Church. Unless we make the Church welcoming to everyone without discrimination, we cannot boast of being true followers of Christ.

Poverty and Education

19. Due to financial constraints, lack of adequate infrastructure, and social services in our society, many poor families are unable to acquire the requisite basic education that could help them to know their rights and be able to contribute effectively to the nation building. If you travelled round our cities during school hours, you would see children from poor families, hawking food items, water, and other materials, in order to make ends meet. Many a time, the parents are blamed for child abuse and for not allowing them to go to school, even though many of them rely on the return from such sales to keep living and to solve other necessary problems in the family. In this kind of situation, one begins to wonder whether such a blame is morally justified and justifiable, especially when it comes from the government that should have made things better for the masses.

This lack in the basic education also blocks the access of the poor to paid jobs and makes them unable to participate in discussions on issues that pertain to their situation.

The Sick

20. Many individuals and families are in great distress arising from curable and incurable sicknesses. Lack of adequate assistance from relevant government agencies, the Church, relatives, and friends, make them lose hope and die off in anguish. While many of the elderly sick envision their death as imminent and therefore see life as no longer worthwhile, many of our youth who fight sicknesses find little or no reason to continue to endure; children give up easily because they lack the basic tender care that can guarantee them a fulfilled future.

Some of the children suffer from traumas of communal clashes, herdsmen attacks, Boko Haram terrorism, that left their parents and siblings either dead or maimed for life. In a country where the physically fit and able-bodied men and women find it difficult to make both ends meet, what becomes of such dismembered citizens and the orphaned children? Many of them have no other option than to resort to begging in our streets in a bid to survive.

The Elderly

21. Very pitiable is the condition of many of the elderly men and women, especially those without caring children and relatives. Some of them are left at home without proper medical attention and care. Because of the weakness of their bodies, they can no longer do a lot for themselves. Some of them go for days and weeks without bath and even food, while their children are in the cities enjoying themselves with the latest technologies and comfortable houses.

In some cases, the children may employ a young woman or man to take care of their aged parents, without proper supervision of how they get on with them. There was a situation where such an employee usually dropped breakfast for an aged woman about 11am every morning, and never surfaced until the morning of the next day. Because the woman was suffering from incontinence in urine, before the young woman appeared in the morning, she would have been drenched in her own urine.

The situation continued for months until a priest discovered it when he went for the communion of the sick and called her children's attention to it. This was utterly awful and incomprehensible. The most painful aspect of it was that, even after their attention was drawn to it, the children did not do anything more than disengaging the woman and employing another, who only made a little improvement on the situation. When the priest urged them to take their mother to the city, in order to take adequate care of her, they refused, arguing that it would be a big burden for them, given the nature of their work. Their elderly mother did not last for a year longer and died. Her children spent millions of Naira to give her the so-called "befitting burial," even when they denied her the right to befitting living.

22. Because of their age and state of health, many of the poor, aged men and women do not have the strength to go about begging for alms. They live on daily basis with constant anxiety about the next day. If they are married and the couple are still alive, their presence to each other gives them some assurances. If they are widowed, their anguish deepens, because their trouble seems to be no other person's business. We must rise up to the occasion, as Christians, to bring meaning into their lives.

Our Collective Failure as a People

23. The situation in which the poor, the sick, and the elderly find themselves in our present society could be traced to the actions and inactions of all of us, as a nation, as Christians, and as their brothers and sisters. If all of us do what is right and just, our society would have been much better, with quality of life improved for every citizen. I would like to point out some of the ways we have contributed to this sorely, troubling situation in our society.

Government Policies and Legislations

24. Due to lack of commitment on the part of the government, its policies and laws in the area of poverty reduction and health care delivery do not contribute much in making life better for the citizens. There is already many existing legislations targeting these areas, yet most of them are not being executed, either because they are unworkable or because the government lacks the political will to do so. In the area of poverty reduction, the government has put so many legislative measures in place. An example is the legislation to empower SME's (Small and Medium Scale Enterprises) through provision of soft loans and other credit facilities, yet many of those concerned do not get them. Sometimes, the sureties or collaterals being sought from the poor people who find it difficult to take three square meals a day baffle me. When they are unable to provide these, no one gives them the facilities. At the end of the day, it is the rich who have access to these credit opportunities.

25. Sometimes, because to the level of corruption in the country, those given the loans do not use them for the intended purposes. Some abscond with it, change their address, or even file papers through a proxy, of having died so that the loan would be written off. These criminal acts also discourage the government from entering fully into these programmes. I know some cases of those given cars by the government on hire purchase to use for commercial taxi and pay off gradually. Some of them relocated and made away with the cars, and could not be traced for years now.

These abuses notwithstanding, the government should not withdraw from reaching out to the poor, but should rather find better ways of making sure these facilities reach the right people. It may be necessary for it to partner with the Church or some NGO's to get to the truly poor who need them and are ready to make use of them appropriately.

26. As regards healthcare, within the National Health Insurance Scheme, for example, the Federal Government of Nigeria targets the different segments of the society, viz., the formal sector, the informal sector, and vulnerable group. Nevertheless, reports show that it is only the formal sector that has achieved some measure of success. All the other two sectors witness epileptic implementation and progress. This makes it difficult for the poor, children, pregnant women, and vulnerable adults to access medical facilities at cheap rates.

Besides, most of the government-owned hospitals are under-equipped and under-staffed, especially at the primary healthcare level. This makes many sick people avoid these facilities because they usually do not have much to offer. The story is not that different at the secondary and tertiary levels, making them unable to handle some critical medical conditions. Little wonder then that the president, many government officials, and the rich seek for medical attention abroad. What is the hope of the poor in this kind of

situation? I would not want to mention the incessant strikes by the doctors and nurses due to lack of payment of salaries that usually cripple activities in most of the government hospitals. All these make the citizens patronise private hospitals, chemists, medicine hawkers, and traditional remedies, in spite of the dangers of quackery and improper regulation.

Again, because of the attendant level of poverty in the land, many cannot pay their hospital bills and therefore resort to the traditional herbs and roots, which are cheaper to get than the orthodox ones. Even though some people are cured through them, many a time, due to their heavy reliance on trial and error, lack of proper analysis of the chemical contents and combinations of the roots and herbs used, improper knowledge of adequate dosage, they can themselves be poisonous to our systems, from which many have died.

Corruption

27. This vice has plagued this country so badly, especially in recent times, causing many of our systems to collapse. Many industries, financial, social, and health institutions, etc, have folded up because of corruption, leading to massive unemployment, poverty, heavy dependence on imported products, with its adverse financial implications, increase in sicknesses and death rate. While some convictions have been made, so many corruption cases are still pending in court. Recently, a former civil servant was arraigned for embezzling billions of Naira from pension fund. Whenever I read or hear about this and other similar cases, I begin to wonder how individuals could make away with such huge sums of money without the connivance of other highly placed government officials, civil servants, or financial institutions. Again, what purpose would individuals use such stolen money for? Have they no consciences? As regards the pension fund, does such a person have any regard for the elderly who contributed the fund in their working days, so that they could fall back to it at retirement? In short, unless we tackle corruption sincerely in his country, we cannot hope for a better tomorrow.

Hunger and Malnutrition

28. Because of the level of poverty at which many of our people operate, they hardly take adequate diet for proper nourishment and fight against diseases and ailments. Some go for more than a day without any major meal, and even when they have one, it could be all carbohydrate, without fruits and vegetables. It is disheartening to see children crying in the hands of their mothers who have practically next to nothing to offer them as food. Many of such children easily become anaemic and develop medical complications that may result to death, if no immediate remedy is available. A similar trend is also seen among poor elderly men and women.

Lack of Proper Sanitation

29. This is usually noticed in the cities and urban centres, due to overpopulation and overcrowding of homes and offices. Besides, lack of proper refuse disposal systems, inability to maintain the existing ones, reckless

dumping of refuses even in the waterways and gutters, complicate matters. Even though in recent times, the government of Anambra State has stepped up measures to tackle these, one still notices some mountains of refuses at certain spots in our cities without proper disposal by the relevant agencies engaged by the government. Those heaps easily become breeding grounds for mosquitoes, bacteria, and other pathogens. What is usually painful is that the citizens often pay for these services without getting commensurate services.

During rainy seasons, puddles, ponds, gutters, and other stagnant waters around homes also provide fertile grounds for breeding many disease-causing bacteria, making people fall sick easily.

Insecurity, Terrorism, and Communal Clashes

30. Jesus Christ was so emphatic on the gains of peace that he said to His Apostles, “Whatever house you enter into, let your first word be, ‘peace to this house’” (Lk 10:5). The letter to the Hebrews enjoins us to “make every effort to live in peace with everyone” (Heb 12:14). This is because, once peace, which is one of the fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:22), is lacking, all forms of skirmishes, conflicts, bickering, and wars take the centre stage. In our country, peace has been under threat by so many terrorist attacks from Boko Haram, which has led to loss of thousands of human lives and wanton destruction of private and government properties. The rising instances of attacks by herdsmen have also left scores of people dead. The last year killing of defenceless and harmless villagers in Nimbo in Uzo-Uwani Local Government Area of Enugu State and the recent massacre of tens of innocent citizens of Guma and Logo Local Government Areas of Benue State are stark instances of the level of insecurity in the country.

As a result, many children are made orphans; many others are maimed making them handicapped, and sometimes perpetually paralyzed. This increases the number of people needing serious medical attention in a country that does not do much to offer its citizens decent and affordable healthcare. It also renders many people homeless, at best cramped in camps by the government, so often without enough food and water and under life-threatening living conditions. Often the number of the internally displaced persons (IDPs) overwhelms the aid agencies. This situation cannot be allowed to continue. We must do something about it.

Ignorance and Lack of Discipline

31. This is one of the major challenges to our people’s health and general wellbeing. Because of lack of proper knowledge of what they need for a healthy living in terms of sanitation and cleanliness, personal hygiene, diet and what not to eat in certain medical conditions or age, when and how to seek for proper medical attention, many fall into avoidable sicknesses very easily. There are so many diseases that come with age. Knowledge of these would

help our people plan on how to take care of themselves medically. Unfortunately, many are ignorant in this regard. Some may know, but poverty and lack of discipline would make them consume any food that is available, provided it satisfies their hunger.

The way people sweep refuses into the gutters and waterways show lack of discipline and sound character. These refuses would eventually block the water ways, cause the water not to move as it should and probably make the flood enter their houses, cause stagnancy of water and eventual breeding of mosquitoes and other disease-causing organisms in their surroundings. Many may not reason along this line and would only think about how doing so makes their work easier.

Unhealthy Beliefs and Attitudes

32. Belief systems are usually strong. That is why combating wrong beliefs is usually one of the hardest tasks to undertake. Many of our people have so many superstitious beliefs regarding diseases and sicknesses that have stayed for so long that all efforts to change them seem futile. Due to unhealthy fear of evil spirits, for example, many people attribute any sickness or suffering to “spiritual attack,” and will not easily succumb to taking medication or doing other reasonable and practical things to avoid them. As regards illness, some believe that once one takes medication in such cases, he or she would drop dead.

Consequently, they would resort to going from one prayer house to another, seeking for miraculous cures. In order to retain the worshippers, many self-acclaimed men and women of God, who manage some of the prayer houses, claim they have the cure for all diseases and sicknesses, including AIDS. Those who doubt them would be branded faithless people. Some of them fake some miraculous healings in order to enchant the people and retain their followership. These make many who would have been cured in the hospitals had they sought for medical attention earlier die off. Sometimes, they are rushed to the hospital when the complications have been so severe, making it difficult for the doctors to offer much help.

33. God does heal people of sicknesses, no doubt, but we should not fold our hands and wait for this, when He has given the knowledge to the medical doctors on how best to assist us. We should always do our best in terms of seeking for medical help, just as we should also pray to God to assist us in our sicknesses. He does assist us directly and through the help of the doctors and the medications we take. The Book of Sirach 38:1-15 says, “Treat the doctor with the honour that is his due, in consideration of his service, for he too has been created by the Lord... The Lord brought forth medicinal herbs from the ground, and no one sensible will despise them...” If we shun these gifts and talents He has given to the doctors, we might be snubbing God Himself, and indirectly telling the doctors to hide their talents the same way

the young man in the parable of the talent hid his in the ground and never used it (cf. Mtt 25:14-30)

Many of the fake prophets who parade themselves as men and women of God often exploit the worshippers through accusations of their being possessed by the demons. They could point at their poverty, unsuccessful businesses, or sicknesses as proofs that demons are at work in their household. Sometimes, to drive such demons away, their victim must pay certain amount of money, go without eating anything in the name of dry fasting for weeks, without which things may turn out worse. Because people would want to be freed from such demons, many would quickly comply with the prescriptions without questions.

34. On one occasion, a pregnant woman was subjected to fasting that lasted from 6am to 6pm for three weeks. She became anaemic on account of malnutrition and the child in the womb died before she was rushed to the hospital. She never came back alive. On another occasion, a house help was accused by her mistress of being a witch, taken to a prophetess, who kept beating the girl mercilessly for days, without food to make her confess to being a witch. The girl refused until she eventually died. The prophetess claimed it was her fellow witches that took her life. There are many other instances of these that I would not want to bore you with. Sometimes, some elderly women without children are branded witches by these false prophets, especially when they discover that they have nobody to plead their cause. In some cases, they become victims of ostracism or even lynching by the youth. This is heartrending!

35. I decided to bring these issues before us to encourage us to sincerely show empathy to our suffering children, brothers, and sisters; turn what they suffer into our own personal suffering and thus ask questions about what each of us can *do* about it.

We can start by humbling ourselves before God and acknowledge that we “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). We should beat our chests and pray for God’s mercy and forgiveness, mend our ways and turn over a new leaf. This period of Lent provides a unique occasion for it.

CHAPTER TWO

THE PAINS OF SUFFERING

36. In this second chapter, I would like to examine most of the inner feelings and attitudinal dispositions that usually accompany the nature of the suffering undergone by our brothers and sisters, especially the sick and the elderly, which we tend to ignore or neglect. Yet they are vital to understanding what those weak brothers and sisters of ours pass through on daily basis, so that we, as Christians, imbued with the mind and spirit of Christ, to which I have earlier alluded to, and His concern for His suffering people, could see in their sufferings opportunities for grace and nearness to God.

Reality of Sickness

37. Sickness interrupts the normal rhythm of our daily activities. Sometimes, it does so by slowing it down and at other times, by shutting it down completely, as we lie helpless on our sick bed. It weakens us, interferes with our work, leisure, meetings, prayers, rests, etc, and makes us dependent on the people around us for many things we hitherto did on our own. This way, it also interferes with the lives of the people who are near to us. If they are our colleagues at work, our absence may cause extra workload for them, or make them spend some of the time they would have used for personal engagements attending to us. Some of them may accept it in good faith, while others may complain, especially when the sickness is prolonged or reappears often. Some may even misunderstand us, thinking we feign sickness in order to avoid work, or receive special treatment, even though we are genuine.

Some of these misunderstandings add to the pains and distress of the sick. Although some of them are understandable, some are needless; and the pains and distress associated with some sicknesses can be so excruciating that adding to them this way could be heart-breaking. Some pains could make one start to think of himself or herself as being already in hell fire while on earth. In this kind of condition, many lose the sense of self and the consciousness of their surroundings. Some even lose hope and pray for death, which may or may not come immediately as they expect.

38. For married couples, sickness can bring a significant change in their relationships. Communication may break down completely, work schedule disrupted, and behaviour to each other altered. The healthy wife or husband may turn out to be a very charitable helper to the sick one, or may become his or her worst enemy, as he or she tries to adapt to the changed behaviour, habits, and environment, especially if the sick is in the hospital. The period of sickness may provide an opportunity to have a realistic view of our loved ones, generate respect or hatred for them, as the case may be.

39. In sickness, our relationship with our body also changes. A healthy person may find it very easy to lift a book from the floor of his or her room and place it at another location. However, when his or her arm is paralyzed,

for example, it refuses to obey him or her. There may be the desire and the willingness to lift the book as one used to do, but the arm fails to move. The usual communication between the brain and the arm, by which they understand each other, fails because of the disruption in the normal functioning of the veins, neurons, tissues, and other things needed for proper movement of the arm. Because it is no longer docile, it may appear different from the person's body.

40. For people who cling so much to their power, wealth, and beauty, seeing themselves losing grip on these heightens their anguish. They may not understand how their hitherto control in these areas could pass to others, especially if the sickness is prolonged, or if they feel they will not survive it. Those who do not have responsible children may start calculating the loss they could encounter before and/or after their death; how all they suffered for their entire life could go at an instant. This increases their resentment of their condition.

Many of those suffering from life-long ailments are usually weakened easily, because they seem to compress the whole length of their suffering and future burden into the present. To go through the suffering of these years at once brings intense sorrow and pain that can crush the sick instantaneously. Many never recover from the experience of sickness even years after it has medically gone. They never remain the same. Some change unto good, while some unto evil.

41. A sick person also experiences some deep sense of isolation and loneliness, especially as he or she lies helpless looking at others move about their normal businesses. No other person, except him or her, can understand the extent of his or her feeling, and be able to see the inward suffering involved. Another person may think he or she understands, but really does not. One can only guess or imagine the feeling and the suffering. It can be either exaggerated or underrated. Indeed, no one can feel your own pain and suffering. It belongs to you alone. Others could sympathize or empathize with the sick person, but it only remains an empathy or sympathy, where the empathizer or the sympathizer remains an outsider to the situation of the sufferer.

Sometimes the feeling of isolation and pain become so intense, especially when the sick do not have people around them to reassure them of their identification with their condition. The odds of life are already a heavy burden to bear. How much more the added burden of isolation in sickness. Sometimes, depression may set in when healing is not as soon as expected, and the caregivers unresponsive and uncooperative.

In most cases, however, the person discovers that, even when there are many people surrounding him or her, he or she remains empty. He or she needs something much more than externalities to make him or her fill the void inside. This need is the presence of sincere love and concern, the presence of

our Lord, who comforts us in all our sorrows so that we might comfort others in theirs (2 Cor. 1:4).

42. Many develop low self-esteem during and after their sickness because they could no longer do what they used to do. They may strive to start work, but are advised by the doctor and friends to remain at home and have some bit of rest until they are finally fit. The sick may not understand that the advice is out of love, and may think he or she is being told that he or she is no longer needed. Some would even be replaced at work by new employees just to fill the gap until they are okay. Many find it difficult to comprehend, and carry with them the extra burden of feeling useless, despite all their talents and great achievements.

Depending on the nature of the sickness, the person may come back and be no longer useful in his or her work place. He or she may suffer permanent damage to any of his or her organs or limbs making him or her not suited for the kind of job he or she was doing before.

43. The problem is often compounded when the sick think they are the only ones suffering this way in the world, and that there could not be others in worse conditions. It can be so confusing that the person begins to loathe his life (cf. Job 10:1), and ask “why me of all people?” “Why is my situation different from everyone else’s?” No doubt, each person has his or her own burden, be he or she sick or not. The moment we realise this, the better our acceptance of our situations, and our starting to work, hoping to better them.

Some sick persons who refuse to accept their condition may begin to accuse God of not loving them enough as to allow such to happen to them. They would gradually begin to lose faith in God, miss their prayers, and stop joining in prayers said at their sick bed.

44. Due to rise in prayer houses, commercialization of Christianity by self-acclaimed prophets, seers, men and women of God, there could be an added burden of fingering a brother or sister, neighbour or friend, parents or other relatives as the cause of one’s predicament. Once this is done, their visits or even thought of them become a torment for the sick. He or she may begin from the hospital bed to revenge through “hate prayers” by which he or she may call on the fire of the Holy Ghost to fight his or her battle, use “back to sender” oil, etc. This may snowball into serious breach of peace in families and kindred that can last for years.

45. In situations of sickness, especially chronic ones, people usually visualize death as an imminent reality. Indeed, most of the uncertainties surrounding sickness usually come from people’s fear of death. Some complain of dreaming daily about death, simply because of the fear of death that they harbour. In sickness, many securities we had surrounded ourselves with melt away and we face the reality of losing our grips on many things. It often leads to fear of one’s condition after death.

While some may not be concerned about mending their lives at the time, many Christians, especially Catholics call for priests, for the Sacrament of Penance and Anointing of the sick. These give them hope that, even if they do not make it alive, they can be at peace with God in heaven. Many saints were made on their sick bed, some others at their point of death. The thief that converted while hanging on the cross beside our Lord (Lk 23:43) is a prime example.

The fear of death may make some others to lose all manner of decency and look for any means for recovery, no matter how dangerous it could be to their faith, and provided there is hope of getting better through them. Sometimes, because the sick person may not have full control over his or her affairs, his or her friends and relatives may take him or her to places he or she would rather not go. I have met many people who shed tears after recovery from sickness, when they heard about places they were taken to when they were either too weak or unconscious to notice. These are dangers witnessed in moments of sickness and pain.

Reality of Old Age

46. Among the elderly are the rich and the poor, the well and the sick, the learned and the unlearned, the strong and the weak, the abled and the disabled, the independent and the dependent, those without families and those with families, the hopeful and the despaired, etc. Even though the young could also be classified into the above-named groups, the situation of the young and the elderly are not the same. Their experiences are peculiar occasioned by their age and the way they look at reality, especially the future. Even the healthiest among the elderly is still weak and fragile compared to the young, and their possibility of recovery from misfortune is much more remote than it would be with the young. In their own case, a minor injury or pain might easily trigger off psychological, spiritual, emotional, moral, physical, and social illness that may make them more dependent and disabled in some aspects of their lives.

Indeed, they have special needs that make them require special care and handling. They need tender care and love from the younger generation and health care providers even when they appear to be healthy, so that they can age with dignity. Such caregiving could be medical care, personal care, assistance with daily activities, careful watching, supervision, or companionship.

Increase in the Population of the Elderly

47. The concern world over, especially in the developed countries with improved healthcare delivery system, is the increase in life expectancy, with decrease in fertility rate, and attendant increase in the population of the elderly who need care. Some UN statistics indicate that, by 2050, the global population of persons aged 60 and above will exceed the number of

adolescents and youth aged 10-24 years.³ This concern is heightened by the reduction in the traditional role of women as caregivers, because many women today engage in career and paid jobs outside the home. This trend is gradually emerging in the developing countries, and makes care of the elderly very challenging. Whereas in the developed countries, they have devised a system where the families, the social institutions, and the government share responsibilities in this regard, in the developing countries, like Nigeria, such synergy is not seen, and the elderly are left often without any attention and humane treatment.

Feeling of Redundancy

48. Many elderly people who have been active their whole life find it difficult to adapt to the life of almost inactivity occasioned by ageing. There is usually some feeling of redundancy that they cannot help stopping. According to Raphael Berveley, “The griefs of growing old begin with the first realization that one cannot do, with ease, something that one previously had been able to accomplish without thought; that one will not, now, achieve the fullness of one’s hopes and dreams; that one’s life is not limitless, but finite, and that the time remaining is not great.”⁴

Some of them who were so much treasured and lavished with attention at their prime, but now forgotten, feel the society has cheated them grossly, by using them and then dumping them to die off. Unfulfilled dreams, ambitions, relationships, and expectations could make one grief and feel unaccomplished. He or she may wish that life be reversed or old age postponed to enable him or her contribute more to the society, but the reality is that it is irreversible. Sometimes, he or she may never accept becoming old, and claim to be able to accomplish things he was able to do before the onset of old age. Unfortunately, to his or her astonishment, he or she fails each time he or she attempts. This could breed grief and regret. The person may feel that relinquishing those tasks to the younger generation may be a judgement of incompetence on his or her personality. This may force him or her to do them and to try to impress.

The more he or she tries to impress, the more he or she exposes his or her inability. For example, he or she may claim to be able to read while his or her eyes are already almost gone. He or she mumbles and jumps over words in sentences. If the person does this among decent people, they may spare him or her the embarrassment and encourage him or her. If it were among the imprudent or younger generations, he or she may immediately notice their dissatisfaction with him or her. This may worsen the situation.

³ United Nations, *World Population Ageing 2015: Highlights*; available from http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/ageing/WPA2015_Highlights.pdf.

⁴ Raphael Beverley, *Anatomy of Bereavement: Handbook for Caring Professions* (London: Routledge, 1983), 283.

Biological and Physical Deterioration

49. As people age, their intellectual and learning abilities change. This affects their memory, which could make them remember more of what happened many years ago than they could what happened recently. Some develop dementia, which seriously impairs their reasoning. In general, cognitive and problem-solving abilities become slower with age. Because of the ageing of the brain, people may find it difficult understanding them. For example, they may eat now, only to start blaming people around of starving them for days. Unless the younger generation understand that the elderly are no longer in full control of their cognitive abilities, they may start arguing and blaming them of having bad will.

Ageing also brings with it many other physical and biological changes, including loss and greying of hair; dryness and wrinkling of the body; the weakening and decay of the teeth, leading to their constant repair or even removal; loss of height to posture change; impairment in vision, hearing, and voice production; as well as reduced mobility. The internal organs and muscles will definitely start to weaken in functionality, which may affect other physical activities. Hormonal changes also come with their challenges, which may affect the mood of the elderly. Because of some of these physical impairments, the elderly are usually at the risk of falling and sustaining injuries, which would usually take time to heal. They are also prone to falling ill so often, some of which could be chronic, hence needing closer and tenderer attention and care.

Distant Family

50. Often, the rural-urban migration makes children far removed physically from their ageing parents. I have touched this slightly in the preceding chapter. For some of the children, it is a matter of serious concern. They try their best to come home often to see them, or take them along with them, especially when their health deteriorates. They realize that it is time for them to pay their parents back for their love and concern to them, and to show them Christian love. For some others, it does not matter. They feel their ageing parents can always find support from neighbours and friends, without realising the difference it makes to the elderly seeing their children assist them or visit them to show love and concern. Many of these ageing men and women feel embittered, especially given what they sacrificed in their prime to make sure they give the best to their children.

51. One elderly woman, who felt deeply distressed by the attitude of her wealthy son who lived in the city and rarely came home to visit her, lamented and told me stories of what she suffered during the pregnancy of this son of hers. According to her, of all her children, he was the one that gave her the worst discomfort during pregnancy. She was not yet converted to Christianity at the time, and had to go to a priest of Igbo traditional religion who told her that he was an evil child that portended bad omen for the family. The priest told her that she needed to abort the child to save herself and her family.

She accepted the medication given to her, but her conscience never allowed her to take it. She continued with the suffering until she was eventually delivered of the child. She cried as she told me the story. According to her, it did not stop at that, he was always sick in his tender years, and her sickness made her penniless, because she spent all she had to keep him alive. What was she receiving in return for all these sufferings? Neglect and inattention from her son. He was living big in the cities and only came home occasionally to see her briefly. She said she expected the son to reciprocate her love. She was really not a happy woman.

52. In fact, once such intergenerational reciprocity is lacking, the old are often the victims. If we neglect them, they would feel they have been cheated out. Some young people even tell them that their age has passed, that they should allow them to enjoy their own time. This is implied in the name the youth of these days give to their parents, like “*okongwu*” and “*okongwuress*.” All these actions hinder their reaching ego integrity, by which they accept all their successes and failure in the past as their own.

53. Our reflection so far would make us understand that, because of the difficult situations in which the poor, the sick, and the elderly usually find themselves, the wealthy, the healthy and the young have relative power over them. The way we exercise this power proves our closeness or otherwise to our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, who, though he was God, humbled Himself, served us and died for us, in order to save us. Unless we follow this path that He has shown us, we cannot boast of bearing true witness to Him.

CHAPTER THREE

CARING FOR THE POOR, THE SICK, AND THE ELDERLY: OUR ABIDING RESPONSIBILITY

54. The care and support we can offer to one another in moments of suffering have many dimensions. It could be spiritual, practical, financial, personal, emotional, or moral. These dimensions reflect the different areas of need of our weak brothers and sisters. A situation of need may warrant attention in all or some of these dimensions. Today we may be the givers of support and care. Tomorrow we may become the receivers. Today we may be among those who deny others of care and support they need in their weak and painful moments. Tomorrow we may be the ones abandoned without care and support.

55. The first thing that is fundamentally important for a Christian, either as the sufferer or the giver of care and support, is having a proper understanding of suffering from the Christian perspective. If we do not have this understanding, we may not be able to cope with the dangers or temptations associated with poverty, or the pains occasioned by sickness and ageing. This is why, in this chapter, first, I will offer some insights into a proper understanding of suffering, drawing from the treasure of Judaeo-Christian tradition and spiritual experience of suffering. Second, I will make some proposals for concrete actions that would involve each of us as individuals, and the cooperation of all of us as members of one human family.

Christian Understanding of Suffering

56. Suffering is not just a Christian, but a human, phenomenon. The pain accompanying poverty, illness, ageing disturbs our relationship without our body, with the world, with our fellow human beings, and even with God. The way we understand and deal with the pain influences these relationships in significant ways. Suffering evokes questions as to its existence in the first place, and its meaning. Answers to these questions condition our attitude towards it.

57. Once a Christian does not have a correct perspective on, and a realistic assessment of, suffering, he or she cannot have a welcome attitude or disposition towards it, or even a more coherent commitment towards making his or her situation better. Understanding suffering from the Christian perspective is not the same as condoning suffering, denial of it, passivity, or stoppage of the struggle against it. It rather entails an acceptance of the reality of suffering and human weakness, as negative experiences that we cannot banish entirely from this life. Pope Emeritus, Benedict XVI, puts it this way: “We can try to limit suffering, to fight against it, but we cannot eliminate it.”⁵ It is a consequence of Original Sin that we must not allow to hold us down,

⁵ Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter, On Christian Hope, *Spe Salvi*, 30 November 2007, no. 37.

or to deprive us of our dignity, but should be turned into a springboard for developing humanity. As St Paul says, “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies” (2 Cor 4:8-10).

It is therefore by not giving in to suffering that we become conquerors. When we become conquerors in our sufferings, opportunities for holiness, self-realisation and fulfilment increase for us. The Scripture says, “Happy the man who remains steadfast under trial, for having passed that test he will receive for his prize the gift of life promised to those who love God” (Jam 1:12). This means that remaining steadfast proves and grows our love for God. Conversely, to give in is to become a loser.

Uniting Our Sufferings with Christ’s Passion

58. How can we remain steadfast and thereby become conquerors in the midst of our sufferings of poverty, illness, and old age? We can become conquerors by first uniting our suffering with the sufferings of Christ, in which human suffering culminates and is redeemed. He suffered for us out of love; out of love, we can also unite our sufferings to His. This might sound idealistic, but it is not. The point is that Christ, our saviour, wrought our salvation by His obedience to the Father through suffering. In His Passion, he showed us that suffering could be meritorious and be a means of glorification.

To unite our sufferings with the sufferings of Christ entails accepting our sufferings as a participation in our own way in His suffering, as a way of carrying our own crosses in the footsteps of our Master and saviour (cf. Mtt 16:24). We must follow Him through the small and narrow way that leads to life (cf. Mtt 1:14). It is only by suffering with Him that we can be glorified with Him (Rom 8:17). Just as His suffering brought redemption to humanity, ours can as well lead us to glory, to holiness and sanctification, and to closer union with Him. He never leaves us alone in our moments of suffering; rather, He accompanies and assists us, for as the Scriptures attest, “since He Himself passed through the test of suffering, He is able to help those who are meeting their test now” (Heb. 2:18).

59. One of the means of uniting our sufferings to that of Christ is prayer, particularly at the celebration of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. In my own experiences of suffering, I have always had a tremendous solace and strength by commending these experiences to God during the celebration of the Mass. In those moments, I have come to a deeper realisation that my sufferings are gifts which the Lord also wants me to offer to him. It is not only money, bread or wine that we can offer on the Lord’s altar. Our sufferings of poverty, sickness, and the pains of old age are also gifts that could be offered at Mass. Don’t let your sufferings be wasted. Bring them to the Lord in prayer, especially in the celebration of the Mass. The Lord uses them for our own good

and the good of so many who are in need of his consolation and strength. Therefore, I recommend that during these days of Lent and in our moments of suffering, we should make an act of offering of those sufferings to the Lord.

60. We can also unite our sufferings with Christ's passion through silence. I have talked about it at the beginning of this Letter. It is related to the first, since it is also a form of prayer. There are experiences of suffering that could be so overwhelming that we find ourselves not able to follow our normal routine of prayer, or to attend the Eucharistic celebration that I have just referred to. Finding a setting of silence, especially before the Blessed Sacrament and simply *being there*, in all our finitude and brokenness, fills us with peace and strength, even in the face of the suffering. In those moments, we simply *let* ourselves into the hands of the living and present God, and allow him to impart his serene light and peace in our minds and hearts. There even, it is possible that we hear what the Lord wants us to do in response to our suffering. Did not our Lord himself say, "Come to me all you who labour and are overburdened, and I will give you rest" (Mtt 11:28). I wish we could rediscover the act of staying quietly in the Lord's presence, especially in the noisy and fast-moving world of today.

Fruit of Suffering

61. Suffering bears enormous fruit in the hearts and lives of believers. Once Christians unite their sufferings to that of Christ, they immediately realize that the life they live no longer belongs to them but to Christ Himself, who loved us and died for us (cf. Gal 2:20). This way, the power of Christ begins to act through our suffering. This is the only time our suffering can bring us internal joy, and we can confidently say with St. Paul, "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church" (Col 1:24). With this joy in our hearts, we can comfortably endure suffering in the hope of the eventual glory. According to 1 Peter 4:13, we need this joy in our hearts so long as we unite our sufferings to that of Christ, so that we "may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed" (1 Peter 4:13).

62. St. Paul outlines other gains of suffering in his letter to the Romans: "Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us" (Rom 5:1-5). This is a challenge for Christians.

63. Suffering also helps to evoke human compassion and love in the hearts of people towards the sufferers, and even in the hearts of the sufferers themselves towards one another. In other words, it gives people the opportunity to practice Christian charity and grow in holiness. If my wife, husband, child, mother, father, brother, sister, neighbour, or friend is suffering, I should know that my being near to him or her is a privilege that God has given to me to see Christ in, and be "Christ" to, him or her. I should

look beyond the pains and see Christ groaning on the cross and crying, “I thirst.” Just like Christ, the poor, the sick and the elderly are thirsting for care, for contact, and for love. The more we offer them these, the more we advance in virtue. In line with this, Pope St. John Paul II who, in his sickness, showed us how liberating suffering could be, maintains that “suffering is present in the world in order to release love, in order to give birth to works of love towards neighbour, in order to transform the whole of human civilization into a ‘civilization of love.’ In this love, the salvific meaning of suffering is completely accomplished and reaches its definitive dimension.”⁶

64. While the ignorant despise such opportunities, the saints that we venerate today saw them and used them to reach heaven. Among the recently canonized saints, Mother Teresa of Calcutta comes to my mind. Just like many saints, she saw Christ in the poorest of the poor, and endured their sufferings with them. She created out time to be with them and to appreciate them, because she was convinced that “Loneliness and the feeling of being unwanted is the most terrible poverty.” “Each of them,” she says, “is Jesus in disguise.” The works of charity she did among the rejected of the society made her better every day in her spiritual journey to God. She believes that the world has enough to take care of the poor, and states, “When a poor person dies of hunger, it has not happened because God did not take care of him or her. It has happened because neither you nor I wanted to give that person what he or she needed.”⁷

We are all called to utilize the opportunities for holiness in our suffering neighbours to make the world better. This does not mean that we should help others for the simple reason of advancing in holiness, but with the same selfless love with which Christ loved us. It is only when our love is selfless that it becomes genuine and can lead to our own sanctification.

Where is God in Our Suffering?

65. People in serious bodily pain and sickness, the poor who have no hope for daily bread and the homeless elderly men and women are usually confronted with the place of God in their suffering. For some, it raises a question about His existence, His love, and care as to allow them to go through such ills, and His seeming silence at those moments. Some even reach the point of hating God. Even among strong Christians, these questions arise.

66. Most of these and similar questions could be addressed by a simple gaze on the cross, on which our God hangs in great pains. Seeing Him as a fellow sufferer may ease our sorrows and calm our fears about the place of our predicament in our journey to God.

Thus, we should not allow our suffering to become an occasion to abandon our relationship with God. Even though Jesus felt at certain difficult moments

⁶ John Paul II, Apostolic Letter, *Salvifici Doloris*, 11 February 1984, no. 30. Hereafter, SD.

⁷ Mother Teresa of Calcutta, cited in Jim Lewis, *Invisible Heroes: Footsteps of the Cross* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2010), 12.

of His life the disappointments that accompany suffering, He remained in constant communion and prayer with the Father. When the impending suffering was heavy on Him, He pleaded, “Father, take this cup away from me;” but again, in these words, “It is not my will, but yours,” he showed His submissiveness to the will of His Father. Furthermore, even when He cried, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mtt 27:46), while bearing our sins on the cross (cf. I Pet. 2:24), and feeling the isolation related to our turning away from God, He never surrendered to death, but committed His Spirit to the Father: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”

67. The attitude of a Christian, therefore, at those moments when his or her strength fails, should be that of surrender to God, in imitation of our Lord and Master, in whose suffering we share. Pope St. John Paul II admits that even though suffering is “particularly *essential to the nature of man,*” and therefore cannot be avoided, it “seems to belong to man’s transcendence: it is one of those points in which man is in a certain sense ‘destined’ to go beyond himself, and he is called to this in a mysterious way.”⁸ This transcendence entails moving beyond the self, our weaknesses and suffering, towards God. We must not allow these limitations of our human nature to swallow us or hinder our ascent to God.

The Witness of Martyrs

68. If we reflect on the witness of life borne by the Apostles and martyrs, their heroism in the face of suffering and death, we could readily see the manifestation of the victorious power of suffering. Their steadfastness is amazing. The dangers, tortures, incarcerations, maiming, and the general inhumanity of the enemies of the cross of Christ never made them give up their faith. Their unwaveringness led to the conversion of even the hardest of hearts.

69. This special witness had its roots in the Old Testament. The exemplary courage of Eleazar, for example, who stood firm in his Jewish religious faith, in the midst of torture and suffering, from King Antiochus, is worthy of mention. As an exemplary icon of the faith for the aged, the ninety-year old Jewish champion of the faith refused to eat swine’s flesh in defiance to King Antiochus, but in obedience to the commandments of God. Even when his friends pleaded with him to pretend to have eaten it, so that his life may be spared, he remained resolute and stated bravely, “Such pretence is not worthy of our time of life... for many of the young might suppose that Eleazar in his ninetieth year had gone over to an alien religion, and through my pretence, for the sake of living a brief moment longer, they would be led astray because of me, while I defile and disgrace my old age” (2 Mac 6:24-28). Before his death, he prayed, “It is clear to the Lord in his holy knowledge that, though I might have been saved from death, I am enduring terrible suffering in my

⁸ John Paul II, SD, no. 2.

body under this beating, but in my soul I am glad to suffer these things because I fear him” (2 Mac 6:30).

The same witness to the Jewish faith was also manifested by the heroism of the seven brothers who were martyred with their mother by the king. Just like Eleazar, they decided to obey God and die than forsake Him and be spared: “For we are ready to die rather than transgress the laws of our ancestors” (2 Mac 7:2), said one of the brothers. Even when their tongues, hands, and feet were cut off, and they were skinned alive, none of them uttered a blasphemy against God. They remained steadfast. Encouraging his sons to stand firm, the mother said, “I do not know how you came into being in my womb. It was not I who gave you life and breath, nor I who set in order the elements within each of you. Therefore the Creator of the world, who shaped the beginning of man and devised the origin of all things, will in his mercy give life and breath back to you again, since you now forget yourselves for the sake of his laws” (2 Mac 7:22-23). The seven brothers and their mother underwent terrible torture and death for the sake of their faith in God.

70. Christian martyrs are also shining examples for us in our moments of suffering and trials. They suffered together with Christ, and their steadfastness was amazing. Instead of weakening their faith, they got the strength to move on, and through it, many were drawn to God. St. Stephen was the first to lead the way in this glorious road through suffering and death. When he was dragged outside the city by the Jews to be stoned to death, he offered no resistance, but prayed to God in imitation of his Master and saviour, Jesus Christ, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” (Act 7:59). Before he died, he prayed God to forgive his torturers (Act 7:60).

Tertullian was drawn to the faith in AD 180 by the bravery of Scillitan martyrs in the face of suffering and death. Their courage moved Tertullian into a search for that hidden truth that sustained them, for, according to him, “No one would have been willing to be killed unless he was in possession of the truth.”⁹ In his letter to Scapula, Tertullian argues, “Every man who witnesses this great endurance is struck with some misgiving and is set on fire to look into it, to find what its cause is; and when he has learnt the truth, he instantly follows it himself as well.”¹⁰

St. Polycarp, an old man and bishop of Smyrna, forcefully rejected the pressure from the civil authorities to renounce Christ, because he believed that, by his suffering, he would attain the glory that his Master had attained. In AD 155, before his martyrdom, he told his torturers, “I have served him for eighty-six years and he has done me no wrong; how can I blaspheme my Saviour and Emperor.”¹¹ When he was tied to the stake for execution, he offered a very touching prayer to God, praising and blessing Him for giving

⁹ Tertullian, *Scorpiacae*, 8.

¹⁰ Ibid., *Ad Scapulam*, 5.

¹¹ *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 9.

him this wonderful opportunity to be counted among the saints through suffering.¹²

The words of St. Ignatius of Antioch, in his letter to the Romans, on his way to Rome for martyrdom, summarizes the motivation of the martyrs, which I have drawn attention to in this reflection. He urged them not to do anything that would prevent his passing through the road of suffering, because, according to him, through such a death he would “be an imitator” of God’s passion.¹³ These great martyrs and uncountable others, including the Ugandan martyrs, our brothers, sisters, and relatives, who put their lives on the line for the Christian faith, discovered the salvific meaning of suffering and were convincingly aware that in it “*is concealed a particular power that draws a person interiorly close to Christ, a special grace... [such that] when this body is gravely ill, totally incapacitated, and the person is almost incapable of living and acting, all the more do interior maturity and spiritual greatness become evident, constituting a touching lesson to those who are healthy and normal.*”¹⁴

Illness and Poverty as Punishments from God?

71. Very often, our people see their pitiable conditions as direct punishments from God for one thing or another. While some attribute it to their personal sins, others trace the cause to communal sins, or that of their ancestors. Even though there are theological and moral grounds to connect sin with punishment or suffering, suffering is not always a consequence of sin on the part of the sufferer. Suffering remains a mystery the cause and purpose of which often lies beyond our intellectual grasp.

72. In the Old Testament, the case of the innocent and God-fearing Job proves this point. Even though his three friends visited him, spent seven days with him, and empathised with him on his sick bed, weeping aloud and tearing their robes (Job 2:12-13), Job never welcomed their suggestion that his sickness and calamities were caused by his sins. In the end, God vindicated Job – that his suffering was not because of any guilt, but was rather a test of his faith in God. Condemning the narrative of his friends, God said to one of them, Eliphaz, “I am angry with you and your two friends, because you have not spoken the truth about me” (Job 42:7).

73. In the New Testament, Jesus’ healing of the man born blind was also an occasion to correct the traditional Jewish insistence on necessary connection between sickness and sin. According to Jn 9:1–12, seeing the man born blind, Jesus’ disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus replied, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned... but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.” The cause of the blindness could, therefore, not be traced to the guilt of sin

¹² Ibid., 14.

¹³ Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Romans*, 6.

¹⁴ John Paul II, SD, 26.

committed by either the man or his parents. He did not suffer it as a test of his faith, but to show the glory of God among His people.

Jesus Himself was not only an innocent sufferer, but also a voluntary one. By his own suffering, he showed us that answers to the question of human suffering do not lie solely in His teaching but most importantly in His own life and death on the cross for sins he never committed.

Let us now turn to considering some concrete ways or actions through which we can exercise loving responsibility towards our brothers and sisters that are most in need.

Loving with Deeds: Our Care and Support

74. In proclaiming His messianic mission in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus said, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim God’s year of favour” (Lk 4:18). His messianic activities bear testimony to His commitment to fulfilling this mission among us. He was close to those suffering physically, psychologically, emotionally, spiritually, materially, socially, and morally, and offered help to them. Many came to believe in Him because He was sensitive and sympathetic to their plights. He healed the sick, cast out demons, fed the hungry, consoled the sorrowful, and raised the dead. He not only cared for the suffering humanity through this means but also suffered with us.

75. This is the charge He gives to the Church – to love and care for, and suffer with the suffering humanity, in order to offer them a better life. Pope St. John Paul II asserts that, since suffering seems “almost *inseparable from man’s earthly existence*,” and the Church having been “borne of the mystery of Redemption in the Cross of Christ, the Church has *to try to meet* man in a special way on the path of his suffering. In this meeting man ‘becomes the way for the Church,’ and this way is one of the most important ones.”¹⁵ His institution of the World Day of the Sick since 1992 (coinciding each year with the commemoration of Our Lady of Lourdes on 11 February) bears eloquent testimony to the Pope’s unwavering concern for sufferers in general and the sick in particular. This is also the case with Pope Francis, who established in 2017 the World Day of the Poor, to be held on 19 November each year.

76. The Second Vatican Council proclaims this truth in another way when it says, “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.”¹⁶ Church does and should do this in a variety of ways.

¹⁵ Ibid., 3.

¹⁶ Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church in the World of Today, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 1.

Universal Love of God as Motivation

77. The unbounded love of God for all humanity irrespective of our attitude towards Him, typified in the sacrificial love of Christ, the head of the Church, should be the principal motivating force for the engagement with acts of charity by the members of the Church. Any other motive contrary to this is questionable. St. Paul maintains that our love has its origin in God through the Spirit of God that has been poured into our souls (Rom 5:5). That is why the Church has no other option than to walk the way of the new commandment He gave us, to love one another even as He has loved us (cf. Jn 13:34). It is a love that has no measure; that does not count losses; that gives the self without reservation.

78. The nature of God's love should also inspire in the Church the non-discriminatory love (without boundaries). Christ suffered for the whole humanity without exception. Therefore, we should go beyond boundaries to help people in pain, for there is nothing more demeaning than to stand aloof in the midst of the sufferings of people as if what is happening does not concern us. The Parable of the Good Samaritan (Cf. Lk 10:25-37) shows us how this love should break all barriers. The Samaritans and the Jews were not in good terms, but it was from among the Samaritans that the Jewish sufferer, who was beaten to a pulp by thieves and left half-dead, found a good and loving neighbour who cared for him. The Samaritan arrived the scene, and was moved with compassion, stopped, and took care of him. He showed love to him as a neighbour. He made himself available to this wounded man, without which he could have died most regrettably helpless, having been ignored by the Levite and the priest that arrived the scene of the crime earlier.

The actions or inactions of the priest and the Levite seem to suggest they were unconnected to the victim in his plight. This should never be associated with the Church in any form. Christ our head never displayed such nonchalance towards sufferers. He rather lifted them from their pain amidst the risks of misunderstanding, rejection, and death from His own people.

79. Hence the aptness of Pope Francis' words, "The thing the church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity. I see the church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else. Heal the wounds, heal the wounds... And you have to start from the ground up."¹⁷

Whatsoever You Do to These, That You Do Unto Me (cf. Mtt 25:31-46)

80. In the above Gospel pericope, Jesus defines true discipleship as care for the needy. He identifies six corporeal works of mercy by which we touch the lives of our needy brothers and sisters in a positive way – the sick, the hungry,

¹⁷ "A Big Heart Open to God: An Interview with Pope Francis," *America Magazine*, 30 September 2013.

the thirsty, the incarcerated, the homeless, and the naked. He taught us that whatsoever act of charity rendered (or neglect of it) to any of these is done to Him. Thus, He shows His identification with sufferers, and the need for us to see His face in them.

The story of the encounter between St. Martin of Tours and a beggar has some important lessons for us in this regard. As a young soldier and a catechumen, Martin encountered a beggar in the French city of Amiens. The beggar had no clothes on him in a very cold weather. Martin removed his cloak. With his sword, he cut it in half, and gave one part to the beggar and dressed himself in the other. That night, Martin had a vision in which Christ appeared to him and spoke to him, “Martin, a mere catechumen has clothed me.” In other words, Jesus told Martin that it was He that Martin helped in that poor beggar. We Christians should do our best to be one with Christ this way – through caring and supporting the weak, viz., the poor, the sick, and the elderly.

Respecting the Dignity of the Care Receiver

81. Suffering does not reduce in any way our dignity as humans created in the image and likeness of God. Therefore, we have no reason to treat our sick brothers and sisters, the poor, and the elderly with less respect, simply because of their condition. If we feel it is proper to despise them today given their condition, it may be our turn tomorrow. To shun a poor man addressing a gathering simply because he is poor is a manifestation of our shallowness in our understanding of who God is for us. It is the Church’s strong belief in the dignity of the human person and the sacredness of human life that underlies its opposition to all forms of wilful abortion and euthanasia, no matter the physical condition of the living foetus or the suffering person.

A man or woman without limbs, for example, is no less a human being than any other. Our external conditions or possessions are not what make us humans. Sometimes, they become unhealthy accumulations that weigh us down. The fountain of human dignity is far much deeper than our eyes could see, or the external circumstances could detect.

82. Indeed, while helping and caring for others, we must respect them and value them properly. To rob them of their personhood in the name of helping them makes a mess of our assistance and charity to them. Moreover, we should not make those in need look as if they have no initiative of their own, because of their condition. In caring, we must recognise them as free agents, help them to appreciate their lofty qualities and independence as much as possible. Our presence as helpers should uplift their spirits, offer them self-confidence, and reassure them of God’s ever-abiding love for them.

Sometimes, we think we know best how they should behave in order to receive maximum care. As a result, we tend to force them into our own understanding of reality. Surprisingly, we are often mistaken in our calculations. People whom we help must not share the same view of life with us. They must not

even have the same faith with us or belong to the same Christian denomination. We simply help them because we belong to the same human race, because they are humans created by God in His image and likeness. It is this type of understanding that can spur the government to provide basic amenities without discrimination of tribe, religion, or race, and fight poverty and corruption without knowing whose ox is gored.

Offering Christian Hope to Sufferers

83. St. James instructs the faithful in these words, “Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick. The Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven” (Jam 5:14-15). The Church owes it as a duty to accompany the sick in their travails through visits, words of encouragement and prayers. It is an age-old practice of the Church that emphasizes, among other things, the ecclesial communion that unites all the faithful together in their share in the ecclesial good, which cannot be prevented by physical ailment, weakness, age, or even death. Through it, the Church also bears witness to the closeness of the Lord to the sick and the aged, especially those in danger of death, and offers them hope.

84. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the benefits of the Sacrament of Anointing, which is one of the seven sacraments of the Church instituted by Christ, are fourfold: through it the faithful receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, by which they are strengthened to overcome the difficulties associated with ageing and sickness; it helps the sick and the aged to unite their sufferings with the passion of Christ; it is also a means of growth in the communion of the Church and a means through which the communion is expressed and lived for the sanctification of the Church; and lastly, it helps to prepare the faithful for their final journey to God, if it pleases him to call them to Himself.¹⁸

In effect, the gains of the Sacrament are enormous and must be utilized for the good of the faithful. The faithful are advised to always invite priests for this sacrament. So many wait at the point of death before they could invite the priest. This practice is too restrictive of the potentials of the Sacrament and its benefits. Some entertain the unfounded fear that, once they receive the Sacrament, death becomes imminent. In fact, from the moment we become ill, we are often weak to pray and fight temptations. That is why we need to be strengthened bodily and spiritually by the Sacrament to become stronger in our struggle against temptations and the allurements of the devil.

85. As regards visitation of the sick and the elderly so many pious associations in the Church are famous for this, like the Legion of Mary, Catholic Charismatic Renewal, St. Vincent the Paul, etc. We need to intensify

¹⁸ Catechism of the Catholic Church, nos. 1520-1523

these visits. It makes the weak appreciate their oneness with us and strengthens them in their suffering.

Setting the Pace in Our Diocesan Health Services

86. Awka Diocese already has some hospitals and health centres that it manages. If we fail to use this medium to evangelize the people, then, we are grossly failing in our responsibilities. How we treat patients in these facilities must be geared towards making them see the face of Christ in us. The staff should be willing to see their work as a vocation through which patients come closer to Christ, know Him more and more, and prepare themselves to meet Him whenever He calls. This could be seen through their tenderness to the sick, dedication to duty, punctuality, humility, docility, and most importantly, their spirituality.

Even though these facilities should be able to pay its staff and be maintained through the income they generate, the main purpose for their establishment is not monetary, just as other private ones, but for proper care for the sick, the elderly and the poor. Therefore, its medical bills must be moderate, especially when it comes to the poor and the needy. In the diocese, we already take these into consideration, and through careful and diligent investigation, we usually write off bills of indigent patients. This has made many of them to grow in their faith and hope in God.

87. The diocese has also launched a Community-Based Health Insurance Scheme, Ahuike Health Scheme, to assist low-income earners and their families to access health facilities much more easily. We appeal to wealthy individuals in the society to help the Church in this regard, so that our apostolate to the sick will bear the face of the crucified Christ who suffered that the weak may get strong and the damned gain salvation.

Establishment and Maintenance of Structures for Charity

88. I have so often called on our philanthropists both privately and in public to start establishing foundations aimed at helping the poor, the sick and the aged. This practice is more entrenched in the West, where people devote certain percentages of their yearly earnings to charity purposes, especially the funding of foundations they establish to help the indigent members of their society or the poor people of Africa and elsewhere. Many of such people provide for the poor in their wills through the Church. In those developed climes, such donations are usually deducted in the taxes to be paid by the donors. Our people should learn from this. Many of our people who spend millions of Naira to conduct funeral services of their deceased relatives can channel these resources to the creation of foundations in honour of the dead. Through it, many poor people could be helped to receive quality education and healthcare, establish businesses and be economically independent. Through it, the aged could also be helped to age with grace.

89. Even though our people are more inclined to having their old parents catered for in their homes, experience has shown that many of the old people

do not receive the appropriate care they need, especially if they are from very poor families. Because of the inability of their children and relatives to provide them with enough food, some of them suffer from malnutrition and groan in great pains. Further, some of the elderly are homeless and sleep in our streets, because they have nobody to care for them. If the Church and the society are able to establish nursing homes, these elderly people can be adequately cared for, and given quality care they need at their stage in life. The diocese is already constructing one at Igboukwu. We hope to finish it once we get enough funding for it. We should see this as our collective responsibility.

90. For this to function effectively, the government should put effective legislation in place for the construction of nursing homes in all Local Government Areas of the federation. Here well-trained medical personnel can give the elderly a more decent and closer attention. With these facilities in place, the elderly people who do not have people who can afford to give them adequate home care could receive the needed care in the community of fellow elders. Their stay together in the facility as a community will help them to avoid the loneliness that accompanies their situation in some of their homes. The families should not allow the elderly to feel they are simply dumped in these nursing homes. They should be part of the process by constant visits and encouragement to them. People should also not see it as a way of getting rid of their “troublesome” elders, but as a way of offering them a more dignified care under the hands of professionals trained for it, especially when certain conditions make it impossible in their respective homes.

91. The Church also needs to reinforce our Justice, Development and Peace Commission and other avenues through which the indigent are helped. We already have MASDEVAN Farms for training people in agricultural entrepreneurship, and other technical institutions. What we have is not enough. More efforts should be made to make care for the poor central in our mission in the diocese. This was one of the issues that came up strongly in the just-concluded diocesan synod (5-11 November 2017), the *Acta* of which is expected to be out by 17 March 2018, the Feast of St. Patrick.

Dismantling Structures of Injustice and Corruption

92. We cannot continue to fight the symptoms of sickness, poverty, and exploitation of the weak in the society without getting to their root causes. Much of the suffering we undergo as a nation are man-made, and the situation can only be ameliorated when all of us, especially the public office holders, realise that their offices are for service to the people and nothing else. If they strive for the common good of the people they serve, we would not get into the mess in which we are today. This involves collective effort of all. The Church, the State, public and private sectors, must all be involved. If our hospitals are well equipped, jobs created for the masses, public utilities and facilities well maintained, education made cheap and affordable for the poor through grants and scholarship, the corruption in the public service reduced to the minimum, we must have done our bit. What we have today in our

society must be completely overhauled if we want our people to live decent life befitting them as human beings.

Is There a Poor, a Sick, or an Aged Person near You? (Cf. Jas 5:14; Deut 5:17; Prov. 16:31)

93. Dear brothers and sisters, I want to round up this reflection by asking that each of us looks around himself or herself and take notice of people in one form of suffering or another. We should not just take notice and do nothing. With the spirit of the Lenten season, do something to help him or her, no matter how little you may think it is. That brother or sister of yours and his or her children who find it difficult to have three square meals a day, can you not offer them some foodstuff from your house? Can you not save some money from your Lenten fast to assist? What of your neighbour who is jobless? Can you offer any help? What of your neighbour or relation who has been in the hospital for a while? How many times have you visited him or her? What contributions can you make to make his or her situation better? How many hospitals have you walked into simply to see those in pain? Do you only visit when your relation or friend is there? Your aged parents, brothers, sisters and other elderly relatives of yours need your presence and support. How often have you spared some time to keep them company or to offer them succour? Do you have elderly parents? How do you personally care and support them?

94. Lent is an opportunity for us to find out ways to help these people; a help that surges from the heart and can be sustained after Lent. Praying for them, offering them gifts, clearing the hospital bills of the poor or pay school fees for their children are all noble actions to undertake. What about those clothes, shoes, bags, etc, that you have not used for a long time, can you not offer them up for charity? We can no longer ignore these responsibilities and claim to be one body in Christ. The plight of any of us must be our own plight. I leave you with these words of St Basil of Caesarea, “When someone steals another's clothes, we call them a thief. Should we not give the same name to one who could clothe the naked and does not? The bread in your cupboard belongs to the hungry; the coat unused in your closet belongs to the one who needs it; the shoes rotting in your closet belong to the one who has no shoes; the money which you hoard up belongs to the poor.”¹⁹

¹⁹ Robin Gill, *A Textbook of Christian Ethics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 223.

CONCLUSION

95. May we utilize this season of Lent to intensify our prayers, our fasting, and our almsgiving, in order to journey with Jesus on the road to Calvary. These ancient practices help us to die to sin, increase in virtue, and be prepared for the glorification of Easter.

96. The economy of our country is so bad that many have lost hope in the system. The endemic corruption in the public service has left many without jobs, hungry, and sick. Many of our elderly men and women lack the necessary care to enable them age with grace. In imitation of our Lord, we must accompany those who suffer in one way or another, assist them to understand their sufferings in the light of faith, unite it with the passion of our Lord, restore their hope, and do our best to make their situations better. Insofar as the suffering of a Christian has some merits for both the sufferer and his or her neighbours, we should not be passive in the midst of suffering. During His earthly life, Jesus was close to those who suffered and did all in His power to better their situations. Likewise, we must join hands to eradicate the sufferings of our brothers and sisters, through love, care, and support.

97. In doing so, we should respect each other's dignity as a creature created by God in His image and likeness. No amount of suffering can rob us of this dignity. No amount of help that we offer to the other should make us deprive him or her of this. It is inalienable and cannot be compromised.

As we ask God during this season of Lent to touch our hearts, may we be united with one another in our moments of joy, sorrow, hope, despair, success, pain, and suffering.

I implore the intercessions of our mother Blessed Virgin Mary on our behalf, as I impart on you my paternal blessings.



†Most Rev. Paulinus C. Ezeokafor
Bishop of Awka

Given in Awka, at St. Patrick's Cathedral, 14 February 2018, Ash Wednesday.