

Pope tells Nigerian priests accept bishop or be suspended

VATICAN CITY — Pope Francis is giving priests belonging to the Diocese of Ahiara, Nigeria, 30 days to write a letter promising obedience to him and accepting the bishop appointed for their diocese or they will be suspended.

The papal text in English was posted June 9 on the blog of Archbishop Ignatius Kaigama of Jos, president of the Nigerian bishops' conference. Cardinal John Olorunfemi Onaiyekan of Abuja told Catholic News Service the same day that the text was what Pope Francis said. The Vatican press office released the text June 10.

Nigerian church leaders had met Pope Francis June 8 to discuss the situation of Bishop Peter Ebere Okpaleke, who was appointed bishop of Ahiara by then-Pope Benedict XVI in 2012, but who has been unable to take control of the diocese because of protests, apparently by the majority of priests.

Initially the Vatican issued only a short communique on the meeting with the pope, describing the situation in the diocese as “unacceptable” and saying the pope “reserved the right to take appropriate measures.”

The protests were motivated by the fact that Bishop Okpaleke is not a local priest.

In the full text posted later, Pope Francis told the Nigerian leaders, “I think that, in this case, we are not dealing with tribalism, but with an attempted taking of the vineyard of the Lord.” The pope also referred to “the parable of the murderous tenants” in Matthew 21:33-44.

“Whoever was opposed to Bishop Okpaleke taking possession of the diocese wants to destroy the church. This is forbidden,” the pope said.

Pope Francis said he even had considered “suppressing the diocese, but then I thought that the church is a mother and cannot abandon her many children.”

Instead, he said, every priest of the diocese, whether residing in Nigeria or abroad,

is to write a letter to him asking for forgiveness because “we all must share this common sorrow.”

Each priest’s letter, he said, “must clearly manifest total obedience to the pope” and indicate a willingness “to accept the bishop whom the pope sends and has appointed.”

“The letter must be sent within 30 days, from today to July 9th, 2017. Whoever does not do this will be ipso facto suspended ‘a divinis’ and will lose his current office,” the pope said, according to the posts.

“This seems very hard, but why must the pope do this?” Pope Francis asked. “Because the people of God are scandalized. Jesus reminds us that whoever causes scandal must suffer the consequences.”

Bishop Okpaleke, the contested bishop, also met the pope and was joined in Rome by other Nigerian bishops and a handful of priests making an unusual kind of visit “ad limina apostolorum” (to the threshold of the apostles) in early June.

While “ad limina” visits usually are done in national groups, the Vatican communique described the Ahiara diocesan visit using the same term. It noted that the nine-person delegation prayed at the tombs of St. Peter and St. Paul and in the Basilica of St. Mary Major.

They also participated in a private celebration of the Mass June 8 with Pope Francis. The Vatican did not say if the pope gave a homily.

Later in the day, the pope held a private audience with the group. Members also had met with Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Vatican secretary of state, and with Cardinal Fernando Filoni and other top officials from the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples to examine what the Vatican called the “painful situation of the church in Ahiara.”

When Bishop Okpaleke was appointed to the diocese, the announcement was met by protests and petitions calling for the appointment of a bishop from among the local clergy.

Nevertheless, he was ordained a bishop in May 2013, although the ordination took place not in the Ahiara diocese, but at a seminary in the Archdiocese of Owerri.

Ahiara is in Mbaise, a predominantly Catholic region of Imo state in southern Nigeria. Bishop Okpaleke is from Anambra state, which borders Imo to the north.

A petition to Pope Benedict launched by the “Coalition of Igbo Catholics” said, “That no priest of Mbaise origin is a bishop today ... is mind boggling. Mbaise has embraced, enhanced the growth of and sacrificed for the Catholic Church, has more priests per capita than any other diocese in Nigeria and certainly more than enough pool of priests qualified to become the next bishop of the episcopal see of Ahiara Diocese, Mbaise.”

According to the Vatican, the diocese has close to 423,000 Catholics and 110 diocesan priests.

Trying to calm the situation, in July 2013 Pope Francis appointed Cardinal Onaiyekan to serve as apostolic administrator of the diocese, and the following December he sent Ghanaian Cardinal Peter Turkson, then-president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, to Ahiara to listen to the concerns of the diocesan priests and local laity.

Cardinal Onaiyekan joined Bishop Okpaleke on the “ad limina” visit to Rome, as did Archbishop Anthony Obinna of Owerri and Archbishop Kaigama. Three priests, a religious sister and a traditional elder also made the trip.

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