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Words of the Holy Father to the Members of the Delegation of the Diocese of Ahiara (8 June)

The following are the words the Holy Father Francis addressed to the members of the delegation from the diocese of Ahiara, Nigeria during the audience held on 8 June:

Words of the Holy Father

I cordially greet the delegation and thank you for coming from Nigeria in a spirit of pilgrimage.

For me, this meeting is a consolation because I am deeply saddened by the events of the Church in Ahiara.

In fact, the Church (and excuse the wording) is like a widow for having prevented the Bishop from coming to the Diocese. Many times I have thought about the parable of the murderous tenants, of which the Gospel speaks (cf. Mt 21:33-44), that want to grasp the inheritance. In this current situation the Diocese of Ahiara is without the bridegroom, has lost her fertility and cannot bear fruit. Whoever was opposed to Bishop Okpaleke taking possession of the Diocese wants to destroy the Church. This is forbidden; perhaps he does not realize it, but the Church is suffering as well as the People of God within her. The Pope cannot be indifferent.

I know very well the events that have been dragging on for years and I am thankful for the attitude of great patience of the Bishop, indeed the holy patience demonstrated by him. I listened and reflected much, even about the possibility of suppressing the Diocese, but then I thought that the Church is a mother and cannot abandon her many children. I feel great sorrow for those priests who are being manipulated even from abroad and from outside the Diocese.

I think that, in this case, we are not dealing with tribalism, but with an attempted taking of the vineyard of the Lord. The Church is a mother and whoever offends her commits a mortal sin, it is very serious. However, I decided not to suppress the Diocese. Instead, I wish to give some indications that are to be communicated to all: first of all it must be said that the Pope is deeply saddened. Therefore, I ask that every priest or ecclesiastic incardinated in the Diocese of Ahiara, whether he resides there or works elsewhere, even abroad, write a letter addressed to me in which he asks for forgiveness; all must write individually and personally. We all must share this common sorrow.

In the letter

1. one must clearly manifest total obedience to the Pope, and
2. whoever writes must be willing to accept the Bishop whom the Pope sends and has appointed.
3. 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.

This seems very hard, but why must the Pope do this? Because the people of God are scandalized. Jesus reminds us that whoever causes scandal must suffer the consequences. Maybe someone has been manipulated without having full awareness of the wound inflicted upon the ecclesial communion.

To you brothers and sisters, I would like to express my sincere thanks for your presence; and also to Cardinal Onaiyekan for his patience and to Bishop Okpaleke, whose patience and humility I admire. Thank you all.
