



Archdiocese of Southwark

A Pastoral Message from Archbishop John Wilson to Catholics from Nigeria, or with Nigerian Heritage, in the Archdiocese of Southwark

Praised be Jesus Christ!

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ

I am so pleased to share with you a pastoral message following my recent visit to Nigeria, the birthplace and inheritance of so many people in our Archdiocese of Southwark. This was my first ever journey to the African continent and to the Federal Republic of Nigeria, often called the 'Giant of Africa.' My trip included visits to the capital city of Abuja, and the adjacent territory of Gwagwalada. For the first time I tasted *moi moi* (made from beans), and drank Nigerian *Goldberg Beer*, both of which I can recommend.

There are many lay people, consecrated religious, and clergy, living and working in our Archdiocese, who either come from Nigeria or have Nigerian heritage. Some Nigerians have made a permanent home in the United Kingdom and our Archdiocese, while others are here temporarily. This includes priests from Nigerian religious congregations and dioceses, and Nigerian religious sisters, who all serve in our parishes, schools, and chaplaincies. To all Nigerian Catholics in our Archdiocese - the clergy, consecrated religious, and lay faithful - I want to thank you for making your home here. I want to affirm what a blessing you are to the Catholic Church in Southwark. During my visit I was delighted to experience just a little of the landscape and culture of your homeland. Most especially, I witnessed first-hand the joy and fidelity of Nigerian Catholic faith and the liveliness of its worship. I am grateful for the ways in which Nigerian Catholics make these gifts present in our Archdiocese.

The Missionary Society of St Paul of Nigeria (known as MSP) invited me to Nigeria to ordain ten new priests on 29 June at their National Missionary Seminary in Gwagwalada, Abuja. I have never ordained so many priests at the same time before. It was extremely moving to witness the generosity and dedication of those ten young men. They will soon be sent out on mission, including to countries from which, in years gone by, missionaries were sent to Africa. Now we are the recipients of mission,

all in faithfulness to the command of the Lord Jesus to go out to all the nations, preaching the Gospel, making disciples, and baptising in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. (See Mk 16:15; Mt 28:19)

The ordination liturgy was resonant with profound faith. This year, the MSP celebrates its fortieth year of priestly ordinations. When Pope St Paul VI visited Uganda in 1969, he acknowledged the great work of evangelisation that missionaries from overseas had achieved for the Church in Africa. Cherishing that foundation, he nonetheless called the African Church to be 'missionaries to yourselves.' In response, Cardinal Dominic Ekandem, latterly Archbishop of Abuja, founded the MSP in 1976 with the collaboration of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria. Assisted initially by the St Patrick Missionary Society (known as the Kiltegan Fathers), the first MSP candidates began formation in 1977. Since the priestly ordination in 1985, MSP priests have been ordained every successive year and sent on mission across Africa, Europe, and North America.

The first MSP priest came to the Archdiocese of Southwark in the year 2000, and we continue to benefit from the service of MSP priests in our parishes today. In addition, there are priests who serve in our Archdiocese from other religious congregations and dioceses in Nigeria, and from other African countries. Their presence is a blessing, as are the many lay people and families from Nigeria and other African countries in our parishes and schools. Catholics from across Africa and the entire world enrich our Church, bringing to life in our communities a beautiful and richly diverse mosaic of God's creation.

Since returning from Nigeria, people have asked what I have taken away from my visit. While I am still reflecting on my experience, three things immediately come to mind.

The first is that I have never been to a place where so many people use the word 'welcome' so frequently. Whether at the airport, the MSP General House and Seminary, the pro Cathedral, various churches and parishes, or around the city, the first word spoken was always 'welcome' - by ordinary people, and to me, a visitor, a stranger. There is a powerful lesson here in hospitality, from which we can all learn - in our homes, families, parishes, and schools. We are to be always, each of us, people of welcome. Our Church is to be a place of welcome.

The second thing is the depth and power of faith in Christ, and from this a love for his Church, for the Mass and Eucharistic adoration, for the Holy Rosary, and for service to those in need. Few can say 'Amen' with the conviction of a Nigerian disciple of the Lord Jesus. Celebrating Sunday Mass in St Paul's Catholic Church, Gwagwalada, was an experience of the Acts of the Apostles alive today. God's people gathered attentive to his Word, to the Breaking of the Bread, and to prayer. (See Acts 2:42) The faith was tangible. The participation and thanksgivings brought the 'Amen' of belief to life.

Third, amidst various greater and lesser challenges and contrasts, I witnessed a paramount trust in God's providence among the Catholics of Nigeria. Whether the sun is shining, or the rain is falling, faith endures. In a beautiful song and dance, the women of the *Zumutamata* choir of St Paul's Catholic Church sang words that translate 'I am boasting in the name of Jesus.' No matter what, that Holy Name, the name and person of our Saviour, is the centre and focus of life.

The generosity of welcome, the depth of faith, and the endurance of trust; these remain with me as I recall the faces of so many wonderful people, none of whom I had met before, but with whom I am united in the richness of our Catholic faith.

My brothers and sisters we are one body in Christ. We each have different gifts. We each have a specific contribution to make in sharing and living the saving Good News of God's love made known in the life, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. We need your welcome, your faith, and your trust so that, together, we can continue to grow as a missionary Archdiocese.

Beside the construction site of the new cathedral for the Archdiocese of Abuja is the elevated covered platform where Pope St John Paul II celebrated Mass during his second visit to Nigeria in 1998. I climbed the steps he climbed and stood at the altar looking out. The Pope ended his visit with the words 'God bless Nigeria and all Nigerians! God sustain all the peoples of Africa!' To this, I add and God bless all Nigerians, and all the peoples of Africa, and those descended from them, present here in our Archdiocese of Southwark.

With the assurance of prayers
Yours devotedly in Christ

+ John

The Most Reverend John Wilson
Archbishop of Southwark

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*For communication to parishes, schools, and chaplaincies in the Archdiocese of Southwark.
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especially for members of the Nigerian community.*