

**“The Lord Hears the Cry of
the Poor”**

*OBIORA: The Known, the
Knowable and the Unknowable*

Homily in Honour
of
Monsignor Prof. Obiora Ike

by
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at
Ofuobi African Centre, Enugu

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The Lord Hears the Cry of the Poor

The Known

On 7 April 1956 in the Northern part of Nigeria in a place called Gusau a little boy gasped and cried as the freshly polluted air of corrugated and convulsive world of indescribable trepidation hit his undefiled, divine face. His bright eyes darted left and right as he was struggling to comprehend the strange spatio-temporal setting spreading before him like an impenetrable ocean. I am convinced that if Laurence Sterne (the author of The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy) were to pen down a narrative with this boy as a main character, he would begin from the libidinal action of the parents which must have been so remarkable that it resulted in the birth of such a unique child. Obiọra, as he was named, revealed many signs of singularity from the very first encounter with our strange world (He must have been thinking like Zuma in Peter Abraham's Mine Boy: These people are strange). His father recalls that already at his birth he was a boy on the go: " On the night he was born, his mother underwent a brisk labour, and had a quick and safe delivery in the palour of our Gusau home at exactly 9:40 PM even before the arrival of a birth attendant." Up until today, Obiọra has continued his unstoppable speed in getting things done. At his baptism he was to be given the name Obuọha (meaning heart of the people, which later became "Onitshanized" into Obiọra). But the missionary priest refused and insisted on adding Francis and the boy as if in protest released a flush of his baby urine on the face and clothes of the

stubborn missionary priest.

Obuḡha (or Obiḡra) and Ihanacho are in fact semantically related. There is an implicature (to borrow Grice's term) of desirability, of being sought after, of a man of the people. Obiḡra is indeed a man of the people (drama).

Obiḡra is pretty at home with every class of people, every ethnic group, every race, every gender, religious affiliation, cultural group, academic bent, political idiosyncrasy, psychological disposition, spiritual state, or vocational interest. We are talking about a man who has shaken hands with the most powerful on earth and also eaten with the so-called "wretched of the earth", traversing the world landscape like a troubadour, from Buckingham Palace to the inviolable high walls of our Kirikiri maximum security prison. I do not know any country in this world that Obiḡra has not visited. I do not know any prominent person in the world he does not know. Yet Obiḡra is in love with the poor, orphans, the downtrodden, the hoipoloi, the pauper, the subjugated, the sick, the humiliated, widows and widowers, the imprisoned, the lame, the blind and all levels of the physically challenged. Obiḡra is at home with all shapes and colours of humanity. Like his name's patron, Francis, he echoes in his life the words of the psalmist in today's responsorial psalm: the Lord hears the cry of the poor.

I will never forget my experience during the Lenten season when he invited me to see the new orphanage and school he built for the orphans. A beautiful school indeed! A delight of the human eye! After entertaining my eyes and feeding my seemingly insatiable curious soul, he took me to the orphanage. Like a horde of bees, the little boys and girls zoomed to him, jumping up and down, clapping, shouting and climbing on all parts of his body. I looked at his face and he appeared to be in a kind of prophetic ecstasy. The beauty of his face and the sparkle of his eyes at the moment defy appropriate description. (If you want to see how handsome Obiọra is, go with him to one of his orphanages.... Nwoke maran di anyi, nothing even sixty years has changed anything). He broke into songs, hopping up and down with the little children, their eyes glittering like stars on cloudless nights. You could pay anything in this world to watch such a live drama. This is Obiọra.

Obiọra has never been imprisoned (at least not to my knowledge) but ironically he has never stopped visiting prisons. He is a regular visitor in all shapes and sizes of prisons, with different degrees of punitive arrangements and human misery and degradation. In all such visits he is highly motivated by the desire to ameliorate the sufferings and cries of the poor and the helpless which he hears in the deepest recesses his soul. Besides, for many years he has worked as a prison chaplain. I believe it is one of the ex-convicts whom he had helped but who was among those sent to assassinate Obiọra that actually saved him from being slaughtered during the Chimaroke administration.

In addition, because his ears are very sensitive to the cries of the poor, Obi has sent innumerable children to school, knowing full well that the shortest road to abject poverty is epistemic emptiness. There is a boy in his house. He took this particular boy from his village. When he met the boy he asked him whether they were being taught at school and the boy's reply was: *ee, mana nd' nwa enehewe akuziri anyi oyibo*. Obi took the boy, brought him to his house and sent him to school. In fact Obiọra has saved many families from poverty by making education possible for their children. In Munich, Germany, is a top Nigerian medical doctor from Umumba Ndiagu. Obiọra took him from his wretched family background, brought him to his house and paid his fees until he became a medical doctor. Ikechukwu, as he is called, is now, in Germany, a top medical consultant. The number of those empowered by Obi through education is legion. If you ask those who have been empowered by Obiọra in this holy gathering to raise their hands, you will be surprised to see the number of hands up. Obi identifies ignorance (*iti* and *itibọrịbọ*) as a form of poverty and has done a lot to annihilate it, building schools, teaching and delivering lectures. He is a professor of our university, Godfrey Okoye University, which is now his academic home. (I hope all those inviting him will always acknowledge this.) His publications which he uses to battle against ignorance span over 117.

The idea of Umuchinemere Procredit Microfinance Bank, which he co-founded, came from a soul attuned to

hearing the cries of the poor and finding solutions. This particular bank, with over three billion naira asset and 22 branches, is one of the most successful community banks in Nigeria. Only God knows how many people have been raised from the ashes of horrendous poverty and social misery and subjugation and helped to smile again among their fellow humans through the services of Umuchinemere Community Bank.

Love of the poor is Obi's greatest motivation for the founding of CIDJAP. Since its foundation 30 years ago, it has been involved in over hundreds of development projects: hospitals (including our Ntasiobi Ndị nọ n'Afufu), low cost housing (for example Nwanne Dị Na Mba), schools, orphanages, thousands of scholarships, etc.

So the Obiọra we know is our brother, friend, father, teacher, priest and benefactor, motivated by the cries of the poor in his countless social, economic, political, religious, cultural and academic actions.

The Knowable. The Obiọra we can know

Obiọra's loquacity is unmatched. Obi is also an orator. He talks about everything. Sometimes you wonder whether he has any secrets. I'm sure that if he was married, his wife would always put her feminine fingers cross

his mouth to prevent him from verbally drowning the social setting (as the wife of a friend of mine would always do if his words zoomed off like Usain Bolt). You can know Obiọra because Obiọra talks. If you like you can call him the “talking Obi”. So you can understand why his best name is Okwurọha (which I adjusted a little with my linguistic licence to be Okwurụwa). Obiọra talks. I once said to him: I believe the first part your body that God blessed is your mouth (Austrians have a proverb: a man a word, a woman a dictionary. Obi is indeed an exception). Recall the famous speech at the lying-in-state of Ojukwu at Okpara Square, which Prof. Wole Soyinka acknowledged was a masterpiece. But the only part which our politicians got in the speech was (*Ojukwu likelụ ihe di nma*). One day Obi prayed during a traditional marriage ceremony. Do you want to know how he concluded that prayer: *Chukwu bọọ chi*. (I laughed out my heart and said to him: Obi you've reached the apex of human loquacity). Because he talks we can trespass his linguistic space to reach our destination of his spiritual cum philosophical space. We can know him because he talks and reveals himself in his talking and speeches.

The Unknowable

One interesting thing about Obi is that the more you think you know him, the more you are slapped by unknown hands of abysmal ignorance. If the rushing liquid of his linguistic adventures leads you to his wide pneuma-philosophical space, you may get lost in the space. You feel like one of the astronauts landing on the endless

space of an uninhabited moon. Sometimes you having the feeling of knowing the man, then again you're left wondering at yourself and the quantum of your ignorance like people after Socratic philosophical drilling. How can you know a man who appears not to know the distinction between day and night? How can you know a man who often forgets his food and needs to be reminded he has not eaten anything? How can you know a man whose reasoning speed does not find a match among his human peers? How can you understand a man who knows a lot about you and pretends or behaves as if he does not know you well? How can you know a man who knows how to give every discussion a twist of continuity, even the driest of human discussions? How can you know a man who will have breakfast with you in the morning and in the next moment he is telling you, "mọwụ o, anam mbana." How can you know a man whose smiles and laughs have remained the same for sixty years, unchanging with or without the falling prices of oil and no working budget? How can you know a man whose speed of reading is reminiscent of the German word "Blitzkrieg"? How can you know a man who knows how to wriggle out of any human problem and entanglement? How do know a man who moves with politicians without catching their political ebola? How can you understand a man who finds a way of communicating with everybody in the world, using all imaginable forms of human language, inventing some and transmogrifying the rest without losing human communicativeness? How can you know a man who when you think he is retiring goes to Geneva to head one of the biggest intellectual bodies and becomes the first black person to hold such an enviable position as the overall boss of Globe Ethics? How can you know a man who has lost track of his numerous titles, awards and recognitions? How can you know such a deeply spiritual man who during his ordination tells Jesus: *It is now between you and me; we either stand together or fall*

together? How can you know a man who is not just a human being but an extraordinary expression of humanity? How can you know such a man?

At sixty Obi remains an enigma. The world will one day say: Here was a man very well known, pretty knowable but somewhat an enigma.

Celebrating today is a man whose life continues to remind us of the power of the gospel and holy stubbornness of the Christian believers. The apostles were humiliated and warned not to refer to Christ. Yet they refused to be cowed down. On one occasion, they even rejoiced that they were considered worthy of suffering because of him. Not even the assassination attempt on his life would make Obi stop working, no accident, no amount of suffering; at sixty nothing has changed about him, ever dynamic, smiling (the peculiar Obi smiles) and walking briskly. Nothing can stop us from preaching, not Boko Haram, Fulani herdsmen, kidnappers, fuel scarcity, rising dollar. Obi once said to me: if your car gets damaged, jump into another car or vehicle and continue your journey or business.

As today's gospel says: "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life." Obi, your life is a living testimony that you believe in Christ. When you tell Christ at your ordination: It is between you and me. We either stand

together or fall together; you express such a faith that is rare in our world. Whoever is close to you realizes the value you attach to the Eucharist and the rosary. You will never be on the road without saying your full rosary. You believe in Christ and because you believe in Him, eternal life will be your reward after a long life on earth. You will live very long because you come from a family of those who are not in a hurry to leave this world. God bless you!

Christian Anieke

VC of GO Uni