

## *A message from Fr. Bernard Ukwuegbu of the Diocese of Orlu, Nigeria*

Beloved sisters and brothers in the Lord,



We have just listened to two readings from the Scriptures, both of which admonish us on the need to re-examine our priorities and to make the right choices in life. When told by God to ask for whatever he wants, Solomon refrained from asking for those things on account of which we expend so much labour and energy. Rather, he asked for a heart that should enable him to distinguish between right and wrong, and the courage to choose and do the right thing. In the gospel, Christ told a parable about two men who chanced upon some great treasures; and then sold all they have to buy them. God's kingdom, Christ teaches us, breaks into our lives in large and small ways. It may be a life vocation, or it may be a need that briefly crosses our path. Whether the event becomes a share in the Kingdom does not depend on the size of the treasure, but on the response of our heart. Today's gospel invites us to be alert for the surprise of the Kingdom; and when it appears, to pursue it with all our hearts.

In a way, these Readings serve as a wonderful prelude to my message to you today. In normal times I would be addressing you in person. But these are not normal times. The COVID 19 Pandemic has changed our life as we have lived it for over a century. But it has not taken away from us the opportunity to be Christians and to do the Christian thing. The Mission Office of your Archdiocese realized this more than any other. A letter I received from Rev. Monsignor Arthur Rodgers and Michelle Meier, the Director and Administrator respectively of the Mission Office, reads in part: ***"We understand that you and your missionaries rely primarily on the MCP and the collection. Please know that we will work hard to ensure that this year can be a success at our parishes."*** My addressing you through this medium is part of their hard work. We remain very grateful to them and through them to your Archbishop. Our gratitude also goes to Fr. Joe, your Pastor who, not only offered me hospitality in the rectory, but also allowed me to address you today through this medium. May the good Lord be their reward and blessings!

My name is Fr. Bernard Ukwuegbu, a diocesan priest from the Diocese of Orlu in Nigeria. My diocese Orlu is located at the outskirts of the South-eastern Nigeria. Created in 1981, the Diocese has grown in number and strength; from 350,000 (40% of the total population) in 1981 to over 625,000 (70%) today. Unlike the church in many parts of the world, ours is still a very young and dynamic church. Our pews are filled to the brims on Sunday and our formation houses are still thriving with young men and women willing to answer the call to priestly and religious life.



Despite this growth in number, we remain a poor and dependent church. A typical Parish in my diocese consists of 1000 families. But of this number, over 20% live below the minimum standard of living. 5% of all infants born in the Diocese do not live to celebrate their first birthday on account of high infant mortality. 10% of those who do have no opportunity of school education. And of those who manage to go through the public education system, 30% end up with no job. In most cases, they end up roaming the streets in child-labour; and especially with young girls, in commercial prostitution.

It is among this people that we work as a Church. Because they have lost hope in the State, they look upon the Church as their last resort. They come to us for everything and for anything. They fill our churches every Sunday to listen to God's Word and share in the Sacraments. But they also fill our social service centres to seek

for things as basic as food and water. For sometimes now we have been doing our best to respond to their needs. For the past five years, our signature project has been to drill water wells, in strategic places in our diocese, to help solve the problem of drinking water.



My dear friends, if you are used to turning the tap and getting water, you may not appreciate how precious a commodity water can be. But for most of our communities, getting drinking water can be a very arduous task. Sometimes they wait for rainfall. At other times, they must carry their pots to streams several miles away from home, a job that is most often reserved for women and children.

Thanks to our regular participation in the MCP of your Archdiocese, we have succeeded in drilling over ten water wells in different parishes in my diocese, with each serving a community of over 50 families. During the commissioning of one of our water wells, Mary, a little girl of 11 walked up to me, looked me straight in the eyes and asked: ***“Fr. Bernard, does it mean that after today, I will no longer have to wake up 5 A.M. every morning to go to the stream before going to school? And I replied: Not***

***anymore! Not if this thing we are doing here today works.” She said, “Thank You father!” And you could feel the joy in her innocent eyes as she ran away to re-join the rest of her peers.***

It is for the sake of Mary and other kids of her age that we are constrained to embark on all this project. But it costs money. It costs about \$7500 to drill a functional borehole. This includes the costs for drilling around 500 feet below the surface, erecting the Tank stand and water reservoirs and generating the energy to pump the water from below the ground to the reservoirs. It is to enable us continue this wonderful work that we once more appealed to the Mission Office of your Archdiocese; and this year it is our lot to make a direct appeal to you.



So, on behalf of the Church in my Diocese, I address a personal appeal to each and all of you. Today, a special second collection will be taken up on our behalf. Whatever you put into that basket will help us to continue our mission of providing to an entire community something as basic as drinking water. As you draw out your bills and sign your checks, I want you to remember that for whatever you put into that basket, the likes of Mary may



no longer have to wake up 5. AM every morning to go to the stream, before they can go to school.

These are trying times for all of us, I know. With the COVID 19 Pandemic, most of you are out of job; and many wonder where the next meal will come from. But I also know that you can respond to a genuine need when you see one. As a matter of fact, the COVID 19 Pandemic has added a sense of urgency to our mission of providing drinking water to our people. ***I was shocked one of these days to observe a little boy drinking from the reservoir containing running water meant for washing of hands at a public square. There and then I realised the folly in giving a child water to wash his hands, when he lacks water to still his thirst.***

By helping us to continue this mission, you will be responding to the summon of the kingdom in a very concrete and practical way. You will be making choices, the consequence of which will reach to eternity; just like Solomon did in his prayerful request, and just as the two men who were praised in today’s gospel did. I know you can do this; and I am very confident that our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, who is never outdone in kindness and generosity, will surely bless and reward you.