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Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, in Nigeria: "Let us bring the joy of Christ to others."

Here are some highlights from the pastoral visit to Nigeria by the Prelate of Opus Dei, Monsignor Fernando Ocáriz, who was there from July 19 to July 26. Opus Dei began its work in Nigeria in 1965.

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Thursday, July 26

July 26th was the last day of the one-week trip of Monsignor Fernando Ocariz, the Prelate of Opus Dei, to Nigeria. In the meditation he preached before celebrating Mass, the Prelate reflected on the day's feast of Saints Joachim and Anne, the parents of the Blessed Virgin Mary. He considered how the feast helps us understand that Our Lord's Incarnation is a historical event, and he concluded by encouraging all those present to pray to Mary for help to become people who sow hope in all those around them.

The Prelate then went to visit the Archbishop of Lagos, His Excellency Archbishop Alfred Adewale Martins. On his way to the Archbishop, Monsignor Ocariz made a brief visit to greet Jesus in the Blessed

Sacrament at the Lagos Catholic Cathedral. Archbishop Martins welcomed him cordially, expressing his joy at meeting him. The meeting lasted for about half an hour.

In the early afternoon, the Prelate had a last informal get-together with some faithful of the Prelature. When one of those present asked for some messages to take away from his days in Nigeria, the Prelate highlighted three ideas: the need to make Jesus Christ the center of one's interior life; the need to live charity with one another, which is shown in close-knit unity; and the need to recover interior freedom whenever one loses it. At the end, he blessed all those present.

Upon arrival at the airport in Lagos, the Prelate was pleasantly surprised to find more than five different families waiting to spend some more time with him before his departure.

Wednesday, July 25

On July 25 in the morning, Monsignor Ocariz visited the Institute for Industrial Technology (IIT), a social welfare project set up to provide technical skills to out-of-school young people. IIT was set up in 2002 to mark the centenary of the birth of Opus Dei's founder, Saint Josemaria.

Monsignor Ocariz was given a tour of the school, through the mechanical workshop and the automation laboratory where he met students working on assignments. He also visited the chapel where he said a short prayer.

Olumide Akinjo, Director of IIT, told the Prelate about changes they had made in the training curriculum, in order to include subjects such as work ethics, values, marriage and

family life. This has had a positive impact on the students, he said, as testified by parents and, in some cases, even spouses. Most of the alumni retain close contact with the school upon graduation, and many of them wanted to be there to greet the Prelate. Some of them shared testimonies about IIT and how the spiritual formation they received helped their professional, spiritual and human development. In turn, the Father wrote some commemorative words on the artwork presented by the alumni.

The Prelate thanked the patrons, staff and management for their work at the school. He encouraged the staff to foster among the students a concern for the common good, which will help them to make an impact in their respective communities. “Apart from acquiring technical values, the students need to acquire human values as well,” he said.

From IIT, Monsignor Ocariz went to pray at the Ikoyi Cemetery, where some of the departed faithful of the Prelature are buried.

Before the day ended, the Prelate had two informal meetings with Opus Dei members, where he listened to some stories and personal testimonies.

Tuesday, July 24

On the sixth day of his pastoral visit to Nigeria, Monsignor Fernando Ocariz traveled to Enugu, a city in the middle of the country, about 700 kilometers from Lagos. There he met with a group of diocesan priests and seminarians, with whom he spoke of the beauty of the priestly vocation and of responsibility given the mission that God had entrusted to them. One priest asked the Prelate for suggestions on how a parish

priest, in spite of his busy schedule, could arrange matters without neglecting his spiritual life. The Prelate encouraged him to give priority to personal prayer, to focus on Jesus in the Eucharist and to have a “plan” for the day that he tries to follow in an orderly way.

Following the encounter, Monsignor Ocáriz made his way to the Niger Foundation Hospital (NFH), a health center whose spiritual attention is entrusted to priests of Opus Dei. After a warm welcome, the Prelate met with the hospital staff. One of the more veteran doctors, Dr. Regina Akosa, who has worked at this center since its beginnings, spoke about how grateful the patients were for the quality of the medical care as well as for the spiritual assistance they receive. She said that for many patients, the hospital’s chapel is their “center of gravity,” as both Catholics and non-Catholics go there to find

solace before Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament.

Later on the Prelate had two get-togethers with faithful of Opus Dei at The Base Conference Center. He reminded everyone that God depends on them to bring the fruits of His Redemption to the world.

“Prayer and the Eucharist give us the strength to put Christ in the center of our lives, thoughts, work and relationships with others,” he affirmed. “Don’t be discouraged by any difficulty because God is with us,” he added. He recalled how Saint Josemaria was especially moved by that teaching of St Paul: “If God is with us, who is against us?”

The Prelate encouraged them to look at Christ as they sought to carry out their work, family duties and prayer. “At such moments, we should focus on Jesus Christ, recover our freedom, and carry out these responsibilities

because we want to, for the love of God, and not because we are being forced to do them. Thus we will find the strength that comes from the love of God.”

Monsignor Ocariz repeated his requests for prayers for the Pope, assuring his listeners that these prayers always bear fruit.

An 81-year-old widower (a supernumerary member of Opus Dei), who had been married for 55 years before his wife died a few weeks earlier, was visibly moved and in tears as he asked the Father how he could practice presence of God with the memory his late wife. Monsignor Ocariz, who was also moved, consoled him. He said he prayed for her soul as well as for the family when he received the news of her death in Rome. “Speak often with your wife, convinced with hope

based on faith that your wife is in heaven with God.”

A father of eight children, one of whom was adopted, asked the Father to comment on openness to life. The Prelate spoke about the need to have faith in the value of each human life. “All human life is created by God,” he said. “The soul is great, loved by God and worth more than any material thing. Each soul is destined for eternal happiness with God,” he added. A young man also asked a question about vocation. The Prelate told him to ask God for light in prayer with an open mind. While assuring him of his prayers, he encouraged the young man to also seek help in spiritual direction.

Monday, July 23

On Monday, July 23, Monsignor Ocariz visited the main campus of the Pan-Atlantic University. The first activity was the blessing of a new

grotto of Our Lady of Perpetual Help. The Prelate encouraged all those present at the brief ceremony to have great devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary and to present to her all their needs.

Following a brief tour of the university, the Prelate met with the senior leadership of the school. The Prelate spoke to them using the analogy of an ice-capped mountain. When the sun appears, the ice melts and waters the valleys below.

This is why, he said, it is important to provide adequate formation to those who occupy high positions in society, business and government. When people are formed humanly, professionally and spiritually, when they are taught to be concerned about the problems of society, it affects all aspects of their lives. They learn to contribute to the common good.

He added that while a project like the Pan-Atlantic University is inspired by the Christian conception of man's dignity, the formation given there should respect the everyone's freedom.

He spoke about how best to educate people in freedom. Teachers should help those they educate do everything inspired by love, because only love can surmount the most difficult situations. He explained further that freedom is not the absence of constraints, nor of limitations and is not the ability to do whatever one feels like doing. True freedom is about choosing what is objectively true and good.

The Prelate's next port of call was the Iroto Conference Center, Iloti, in Ogun State (43km from the university). Many people from Iloti and neighbouring villages came to the streets to welcome him, dancing

and singing to the tune of Ekabo (Yoruba for “welcome”). On his arrival, he went to pray briefly before the statue of Our Lady in the garden of the conference center. There was more singing and dancing as he went into the conference center building.

He began by reminding all those present that serving and helping others brings joy to everyone. He advised teachers to be true friends of their students despite age differences. He encouraged people to develop deep friendships and to be truly concerned about the good of others.

In response to a question about the meaning of suffering, the Prelate said that salvation was wrought through the Cross and that it is a mystery that we do not fully understand. “One can find peace, even in the midst of

sufferings, when one unites them to Christ's Cross," he said.

Several people present recounted interesting and funny family events and asked him to pray for their families and friends. The short get-together was livened with a folk song for warriors sang to the accompaniment of some local drums.

At the end of the get-together, and before blessing those present, Monsignor Ocariz reminded everyone to pray for the Pope. He was asked to return to Nigeria soon and was seen off with more Nigerian songs and instruments, thus ending the visit on the same vibrant and festive note with which it began.

Sunday, July 22

The auditorium of Lagoon School, in Lekki, Lagos, in southwestern Nigeria, was the venue of a get-together on Sunday, July 22.

Undergraduates, schoolgirls and friends were visibly excited to meet with the Prelate and speak to him. They welcomed him heartily, asked questions and even made requests for new centers to begin in other states in Nigeria.

The Prelate emphasized the centrality of the person of Christ: He encouraged the audience to realize that they are not just following a beautiful doctrine or a theory but a Person, who is very close to them in the Holy Eucharist. “A Christian’s life is one of love—loving Our Lord and identifying our lives with His. And how does one come to love Christ? By getting to know him. By meditating on the Scriptures, entering into the scenes of the Gospel, and taking the plan of life seriously, one can love

Christ and keep alive a relationship with him.”

When asked what he expected of students who attend the means of formation in centers of Opus Dei, the Prelate said, “Apostolate is a necessity. It’s necessary because the desire to help others meet Christ stems from love of God and the joy of being children of God. Joy is attractive, and that is why we fulfill the apostolic command of Christ with a lot of cheerfulness, affection and good example while also respecting the freedom of others.”

The Prelate took the opportunity to talk about the importance of mortification. “Life might seem mortifying enough on its own. But actively seeking to unite oneself to Christ’s cross through little mortifications is of great value in a Christian’s life,” he said.

He advised them to have a lot of fortitude because a constant relationship with Christ is demanding. On the question of vocational discernment, he urged the audience not to be afraid, but to take courage if a person sensed that God was asking her for more, realizing that God does a great favor to the person who corresponds to His call.

Monsignor Ocariz, the third successor of Saint Josemaria, ended by asking all present to pray a lot for the Pope: "The Holy Father relies a lot on the prayers of everyone." The young people gave their joyful assent with the lyrics "You can count on me like one, two, three, and I'll be there," the chorus of a popular song by Bruno Mars.

Saturday, July 21

On day three of his visit to Nigeria, the Prelate of Opus Dei had get-togethers at the Lagoon School and at the Lagos Business School.

People came from cities and towns from west to east and central Nigeria: Lagos, Ibadan, Iloti, Nsukka, Enugu, Benin and Abuja. Between the two main events of the day in Lagos, the Prelate was able to greet more than 1,000 people.

At the Lagoon School, Monsignor Ocariz, reflecting on the Gospel of the day, commented on the Pharisees' disapproval of Jesus healing on the Sabbath day. He compared this to the difficulties we experience daily. He encouraged the faithful to spread the Gospel and increase their confidence in God despite these challenges.

Recalling Pope Francis' words about faith making us see as Christ does, the Prelate stressed the need for us to center our lives on knowing Christ

who is present in the Eucharist. He urged everyone to ask the Lord to help them see their lives as God does. He emphasized the need for fraternity shown in serving, understanding, forgiving and valuing others.

He went on to say that apostolate is not merely human but also supernatural: it is not so much about increasing the number of people as about helping them to know and love God better.

Responding to a question on the vocation of one's children, he advised parents to trust in God. "Prayer, maturity and spiritual direction are crucial for discerning a vocation," he said.

When asked how domestic work should be viewed, Monsignor Ocariz explained that Opus Dei teaches sanctification in ordinary life both within and outside the home. The

ambiance, beauty and orderliness in the home facilitates affection and development. “It makes a lasting impression on people,” he said, adding that, “domestic work is the backbone of the family atmosphere in Opus Dei.”

On the question of emigrating from Nigeria due to economic difficulties, the Prelate pointed out that every country has its challenges. He said that although emigrating may not always be the best option, sometimes it is. But he advised the audience to improve themselves professionally and work for the common good.

Speaking on the role of cooperators in Opus Dei, the Prelate said cooperators support the Work with their prayers, time and financial contributions. He encouraged cooperators to work with the faithful of the prelature to support Opus Dei as their personal circumstances and

time permit. In the afternoon, Monsignor Ocariz went to the Lagos Business School. He was received there by the entire management board of the school led by the dean, Dr. Enase Okonedo. He met briefly with them and several members of staff before proceeding to a meeting with more than 400 young people who had come from different parts of the country.

This latter meeting took place at the business school's auditorium. The Prelate encouraged those present to be dedicated to the means of Christian formation, which helps them get closer to God. "Christ is the focus and person you receive through the meditations, talks and other means of formation," he said.

He also spoke about living virtuous lives amid a decline in morals and sexuality. "Don't be surprised when you're tempted; and when you fall,

the solution is to rise and begin again,” he said.

Monsignor Ocariz ended his time at both gatherings asking all to pray for the Pope and the growth of Opus Dei in Nigeria.

The Prelate was later able to receive some families that wanted to greet him. Some came from far away cities like Benin. At the end he gave his blessings, asking them at the same time to remember him in their prayers.

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Friday, July 20

Friday, July 20, was the first full day that the Prelate of Opus Dei, Monsignor Ocariz, spent in Nigeria. He celebrated his first Mass in Nigeria at 8 a.m., and then had some

informal meetings with several Nigerian members of Opus Dei.

Monsignor Ocariz expressed on many occasions his happiness at being in Nigeria, saying how much he had longed to come. He described Nigeria as a country with great potential, saying that its most important resource is its more than 170 million people.

The many Nigerians he met shared their stories and expressed their joy at welcoming him to Nigeria.

Monsignor Ocariz encouraged them to remain as friendly as they are, and to love very much the freedom of other people. An important expression of this love for freedom, he said, is the need to listen actively to other people.

The Prelate encouraged those who occupy positions of authority to remember that authority is service. Therefore, those who are in charge of

others should not be afraid or ashamed to ask for forgiveness when they make mistakes. Asking forgiveness does not undermine, but rather strengthens their authority, he said.

The Prelate's words about vocation were particularly poignant in a country that is half Christian and half Muslim. He said that everybody has a vocation, including non-Catholic Christians as well as Muslims. As God does not abandon anyone, the question people should ask themselves is not whether they have a vocation, but rather what is God asking of them.

The apostolic work of Opus Dei began in Nigeria in 1965. Bishop Javier Echevarría, Monsignor Ocariz's predecessor as Prelate, had visited Nigeria in 1999.

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