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Cardinal Arinze Meets with Nigerian Students in Rome

During their recent visit to Rome for the Holy Week and Easter celebrations, some university students from the Pan-Atlantic University, Lagos, visited the Nigerian Cardinal His Eminence Francis Cardinal Arinze, at his private residence in the Vatican.

06/13/2025

Rome, April 2025. During their recent visit to Rome for the Holy Week and Easter celebrations, some university students from the Pan-Atlantic University, Lagos, which has affiliation with Opus Dei, as the latter protects the Christian identity of the university, visited the Nigerian Cardinal His Eminence Francis Cardinal Arinze, at his private residence in the Vatican. In an audience with his guests that lasted for over an hour, he spoke to them about many issues ranging from the importance of finding and living one's vocation well, to defending the institution of the family, civic responsibility, the sacredness of the liturgy and the symbolism of sacred images for prayer and worship.

The 92-years Cardinal and former Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments reminded his audience that everyone has a vocation from

God and challenged them to discover their vocations and live it well.

“Every one of us has a call (vocation), what God wants of you and his plans for you. At your age now, 17, 20, 25, or 30 years of age, is a golden time in your life because you are still setting the patterns for your life. You don’t know how many years God will give you and I pray he gives you long years on earth, but God has called you to do something and each one has to find out exactly that which God wants of him, through prayers and consulting with your spiritual director and your parents” the Cardinal tells his audience.

He recalled that Nigerian born Blessed and the first West African to be beatified, Blessed Cyprain Iwene Tansi, was instrumental to his finding his own vocation. According to him, the exemplary life of Fr. Tansi, who baptized him in 1941, heard his first confession and from

whose hands he received the first Holy Communion, stirred in his young heart the desire for priesthood. He reminded his audience that wanting to follow God's call might meet with opposition even from one's own parents as was with him. His father objected to his bring priest.

“You will not become a priest because if you do, you wil not marry and you will be hearing all the bad things people do with your two ears (referring to the sacrament of Confession) and that is not good for you. As a priest you will be eating only banana and egg (referring to the White missionary priests who were always gifted banana and eggs by their parishioners) and that is not how an adult should be living” his father counselled him.

The old but still very eloquent cardinal reminded his audience that

every circumstance of their lives can be a means to answer God's call. "So, wherever you are, law, music, engineering, university life, whichever it is, that's where you will answer God's call", he said. He warned them against the new heresy in society today, which is living as if God does not exist. According to him, people don't even take the trouble to deny the existence of God. They just go on living without considering God.

He enjoined his guests to share the good news of Jesus Christ with other people, stating that that is what evangelisation means. And one area that must not be forgotten is marriage and family. Because God has arranged that people will come into this world through having father and mother. You must respect the institution of marriage and challenge those who do not respect it, so that it will not be made a joke of. When you consider it calmly, "you can see that

divorce hits at marriage to divide it while prostitution makes a joke of it and regard the human body as object for trade. On this, having the right ideas is important to help, especially for you young people who live in the midst of others today. “You may not be a Pope or professor of moral theology but if you see those making joke of marriage or family, you must challenge them”, he told you the young people listening to him with rapt attention.

On the importance of being God citizen of Nigeria, Cardinal Arinze challenged his audience to live an honest life. “Imagine in Nigeria, that everyone respects the property of others and that everyone’s Yes, is their yes, and their no, no!, including the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), that what they announce after election is actually what happened, and the courts and judges, that they are true in their

judgements. Some people ask, what is wrong with Nigeria, did God curse us? No! He did not. It is Nigerians who have to arrange and rearrange our country according to how God wants it”, he said.

Celestine, a lecturer at Pan-Atlantic University and one of the coordinators of the trip, asked the cardinal how he could help his students overcome the wrong idea that responding to God’s call will make them to lose out on the “good things of life”. The 92-year-old Cardinal Arinze responded that the definition of the good things of life by standards of those people can be summed up, as the evangelist, St. John wrote into three things: lust of the eyes, lust of the flesh and pride of life. True happiness does not consist in those. “We human beings try to carve out our own happiness by getting things that are against the way God made us. You must make

the effort to direct your heart according to the way of God” he concludes.

One of the students, Victor, asked him about sacred images in the church and how he can respond to his friends who think that Catholics worship idols by keeping those images. The cardinal pointed at a huge painting of Blessed Iwene Tansi in the sitting where they were having the audience and recounting the connection he has with the blessed as the first Catholic priest he knew, one who helped him discover his vocation. He went further to explain that human beings are made up of body and soul and images help us to pray because, by our nature, we move from the visible to the invisible. By the visible, we, mean what we can see, feel, smell, hear, touch or taste.

“The Greek philosophers and later on Aquinas told us that there is nothing in the intellect that was not first in the senses” he quoted Aquinas. He then explains that beyond this anthropological usefulness of images and statues for prayer and in worship will be engaging in idolatry, like the Israelites did when they made a golden calf off their jewellery and worshiped it in the wilderness on their way from Egypt to the promise land. He concluded by saying that good images like that of the Blessed Virgin Mary, help us to pray, by moving our senses from the visible to the invisible.

Responding to another question by Joshua on how to preserve the sacred liturgy from abuse, given that in some Catholic Churches in Nigeria, some priest tend to invent the style of worship of Protestants, the cardinal frowned at the actions of some priests who try to invent things

into the liturgy and who by doing so banalise and commercialise the liturgy. “The mass is for adoration, contrition, thanksgiving and petition” he said. He thus urged the priests to show the people of God good leadership in this regard, and called on the bishops to take up their difficult task of convincing their priests not to add or remove from the liturgy as everything about the liturgy is complete and not even the church adds or removes from the liturgy. “Inculturation is not a license to invent anything you want into the liturgy”, the former Prefect for the Congregation of Divine Worship and discipline of the Sacraments advised.

In appreciation, the students gifted the cardinal with a gift of their university’s branded bag and a book on Human Dignity edited by one of the university lecturers in the audience and published by the Pan-Atlantic University Press. He

expressed his appreciation for the gift and in return, he gave the students prayer cards with the image of Blessed Iwene Tansi and some books he authored on the role of the laity in the new evangelisation. He imparted his apostolic blessing on his audience and thanked them for their visit.

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