Vatican



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Pope Francis has removed a Nigerian bishop whose 2012 appointment sparked years of protest from the diocese's priests, backing down from a confrontation eight months after threatening to suspend the priests should they continue to agitate.

In a short note Feb. 19, the Vatican said the pontiff had accepted the resignation of Bishop Peter Okpaleke, head of the southern Nigerian diocese of Ahiara, and put neighboring Umuahia Bishop Lucius Ugorji in charge as apostolic administrator.

Okpaleke was appointed to his post by Pope Benedict XVI but was never able to take possession of the diocese because of the widespread nature of the protests. Francis wrote to the priests of the diocese last June, giving them 30 days to accept their bishop or be suspended from ministry.

The priests had complained that Okpaleke was not from Mbaise, the region surrounding their diocese. They said it is unfair that there is no Catholic bishop in Nigeria originally from their region, long known as one of the country's most Catholic areas.

Francis' removal of Okpaleke represents the second notable about-face the pontiff has made regarding a local bishop in three weeks, following his Jan. 30 decision to send Maltese Archbishop Charles Scicluna to investigate accusations against Chilean

Bishop Juan Barros Madrid.

The pope had previously called allegations that Barros was witness as a priest in the 1980s and 90s to sexual abuse by Fr. Fernando Karadima "calumny" and said there was no evidence against the prelate.

In a June 9 letter to the priests of the Ahiara diocese, Francis told them "whoever was opposed to Bishop Okpaleke taking possession of the diocese wants to destroy the church."

The pontiff then ordered every priest of the diocese, including those living elsewhere in the country or even abroad, to write him a letter apologizing for the protest and asking his forgiveness.

"Whoever does not do this will be ipso facto suspended *a divinis* and will lose his current office," Francis told the priests then.

In a statement Feb. 19, the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples said 200 priests of the Ahiara diocese had written to Francis to apologize but that others "pointed out their psychological difficulty in collaborating with the Bishop after years of conflict."

The congregation, which holds competence over dioceses in Nigeria, said the pope "decided not to proceed with the canonical sanctions" against the priests who did not apologize.

The statement said the dicastery "urged every priest to reflect on the grave damage inflicted on the Church of Christ and expressed hope that in the future they will never again repeat such unreasonable actions opposing a Bishop legitimately appointed by the Supreme Pontiff."

The Fides news agency, an outlet of the Vatican congregation, also published Feb. 19 a pastoral letter promulgated by Okpaleke Feb. 14, in which he announces his resignation from the Ahiara diocese.

"I am convinced ... that my remaining the Bishop of Ahiara Diocese is no longer beneficial to the Church," the prelate states in the letter. "I do not think that my apostolate in a diocese where some of the priests and lay faithful are ill disposed to have me in their midst would be effective."

"I invite any dissenting priests to re-examine their initial motivations for becoming priests in the Catholic Church," he continues. "Repentance and reconciliation are very urgent!"

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